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A Relational Approach to Understanding Welfare Recipients' Transitions from Long-Term Unemployment to Employment and the Role of Case Work

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1 Introduction

Despite the increased efforts of employment services in Germany, the German Federal Employment Agency has noted that "long-term unemployment is becoming entrenched" in the country (Statistics of the Federal Employment Agency, 2018, 2019). To overcome long-term unemployment (mostly) associated with long-term welfare recipience, promoting transitions to work, especially for "difficult" clients, is a major concern of social policy. As in most Western countries, the German basic income security system follows a strategy based on a work-first approach that attaches conditions to benefits (van Berkel et al., 2017) and prioritises quick labour market integration. Especially regarding vulnerable groups of benefit recipients, this strategy of rapid labour market integration and accompanying labour market policy measures, often associated with coercion and financial sanctions, has largely failed (Caswell et al., 2015; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). By primarily aiming at quickly overcoming material need for assistance by creating marketable human capital, the aspect of social stabilisation for vulnerable groups of people is neglected (Bussi, 2014). Stabilisation is the strategy of the "life-first" approach, which aims at improving adverse individual life situations and fostering skills in relation to social contexts (general labour market conditions, institutional frameworks, social networks) (Walker et al., 2016). As this paper reached its final stage, a transformative reform took place in Germany. The introduction of the "Citizen's Income" seeks to prioritize the vocational training and ongoing education of individuals receiving benefits, emphasizing a compassionate and personalized approach in casework. In this respect, this article explores valuable insights from history, paving the way for a potentially brighter future.

Germany's previous strategic orientation for overcoming long-term unemployment often also influences the orientation of the counselling and job placement services provided by placement professionals. To achieve the highest-possible placement rates as quickly as possible, such professionals concentrate on easy-to-place clients while neglecting ones who pose special problems for the labour market, in a tactic known as "creaming" or "parking" (Greer et al., 2018). Assuming that the clients of Germany's job centres are passive and primarily need to be motivated to become "active welfare subjects" (Wright, 2016) standardised approaches are applied to ensure activation on a greater scale (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016). However, in many cases of long-term unemployment amongst clients with special needs for support and counselling, lack of motivation maybe one, but not necessarily the chief obstacle. The normative, motivation-focussed effect of the work-first approach can even be observed in special programmes to support such vulnerable individuals (Johnson et

al., 2021), reflecting a certain perplexity about not only the quasi-ontological characteristics of welfare recipients as lazy and away from work but also about how to manage them in casework.

In this article, we respond to that dilemma by examining the successful transitions of long-term welfare recipients into employment, with special focus on how such transitions succeeded. Viewed as part of a life trajectory (Danneris, 2018), those transitions are considered from a process-oriented perspective to determine which conditions and steps led to gainful employment. In exploring our discoveries regarding casework in counselling and assisting long-unemployed welfare recipients, our primary emphasis lies in enhancing the effectiveness and significance of interventions by customizing them to each client's unique circumstances.

First, in Section 2, we summarise previous findings reported in the literature on the barriers of the long-term unemployed to secure employment. Such obstacles clearly represent a boundary condition that has to be overcome for transitions into the labour market to succeed. They challenge jobcentre staff and generate mistrust among employers. Since the main focus then is on (constellations of) individual characteristics located in the person, Section 3 next introduces relational sociology as an alternative perspective which focuses on social embedding and forms of situated identity within social networks. Accordingly, individual transitions into working life can be understood as a process involving various actors and contextualized identity dynamics that should be studied longitudinally across a sequence of stages. By extension, Section 4 presents our study's sample and data and discusses our methodological approach to qualitative case studies as accounts of the social, i.e., relational, and contextual, dynamics propelling transitions into employment. After that, Section 5 presents a paradigmatic case analysis and delineates core characteristics of the studied transitions to work, which can inform placement-oriented casework for long-unemployed welfare recipients. Last, we discuss what our findings imply for the case-based counselling of such individuals.

2 Long-Term Unemployment and Barriers to the Labour Market

Although countless reasons can explain a person's unemployment, most of them are associated with the overall economic situation of the labour market (Heidenreich, 2015; Hornstein & Lubik, 2016; Scandurra et al., 2021). In Germany, however, where demand for both skilled and unskilled labour has been high for years (Statistics of the Federal Employment Agency, 2019; Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), long-term unemployment appears to be a supply-side problem. In response, strategies to overcome the problem have focused on improving individual employability (Fugate et al., 2004) by activating the long-term unemployed. Those strategies nevertheless have limits for long-unemployed welfare recipients whose overall characteristics negatively affect their opportunities on the labour market (van Belle et al., 2018). Indeed, such individuals typically fail to overcome those barriers.

Data from the Panel Study Labour Market and Social Security (PASS) (Trappmann et al., 2019), a population-representative longitudinal survey conducted by the German Institute for Employment Research, show that, along with long-term unemployment and welfare recipience, the most common obstacles to transitions to work are insufficient education and/or vocational qualifications, poor health, migration background, language deficits, being older

than 50 and family care obligations (Beste & Trappmann, 2016; Trappmann et al., 2019).[1] Long-term welfare recipients experience at least two of those barriers, and each additional barrier halves the likelihood that they will exit benefit recipience by becoming employed. For people with three or more of the characteristics, the likelihood veers dramatically towards zero (Beste & Trappmann, 2016) despite efforts undertaken by the Federal Employment Agency to enhance their job placement.

Assuming that unsolicited applications generally indicate strong motivation for employment (Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2012), job centres often push their clients to submit such applications but to little success. If pursued, then institutional attempts at direct job placement often fail as well (van Belle et al., 2019). Those trends suggest that the long-term unemployed face problems in looking for and finding suitable jobs and in successfully executing application procedures. However, those difficulties are not solely attributable to the work of the job centre's staff or the job-seeking welfare recipients, as employability and transitions to work are relational phenomena (Hirseland et al., 2008).

Even so, when the focus shifts to employers, it becomes clear that applications from the long-term unemployed are accepted only reluctantly. Because recruitment is a process characterised by incomplete information and the risk of bad decisions (Akerlof, 1970), employers seek to reduce those challenges by interpreting what applicants are signalling (Spence, 1973, 2002). Thus, the "posting" of the long-term unemployed by the employment service is interpreted to signify the applicant's low motivation and willingness to work (van Belle et al., 2018, 2019), especially in combination with the other characteristics mentioned above. Beyond that, distant and impersonal applications tend to increase existing insecurities. That trend explains why most German employers report filling jobs not via formal application procedures but through social contacts (Brenzel et al., 2016), which increases trust in applicants and reduces costs.

Thus, often driven to achieve high placement rates, staff at job centres tend to focus on the most promising clients while neglecting ones facing personal barriers (Perkins, 2008). With their focus on what is seen as purely personal obstacles and their orientation towards quick placement, these placement officers tend to neglect the fact that the transitions of their target group are embedded in multiple relationships between different actors and their social environment. These transitions also involve a dynamic of self- or identity adjustments that may take time. As our analysis will show, transitions into work should be viewed as part of a biographical trajectory, which arises, not least, from the practical overcoming of structural problems in action. A brief justification for this view is provided in the next section.

3 Identity, Networks and Transitions: A Relational Heuristic

According to Elder (1994, p. 5), transitions are short-term episodes between personal states within the overall life course, which itself is determined by institutional structures and available individual resources. In that way, the past shapes current situations and personal states of the life course (Bernardi et al., 2019). In the case of transitions, the "whole story" can best be understood longitudinally, starting from a basic assumption of relational sociology that "individual persons … are inextricably linked to the transactional contexts in which they are embedded" (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 287). Doing so involves accounting for the interactions

[1] PASS was conducted because comparable German surveys do not sufficiently cover long- unemployed welfare recipients in their statistical analyses.

and transactions in the social, institutional, and situational contexts that form the life course and the processes that it requires. Therefore, a transition is indeed an event from one external state to another but one that requires agency in changing contexts. In that light, it involves an internal transformation of the person undergoing the transition, with the methodological implication that a "'person' should be a construct from the middle of the analysis, not a given boundary condition from the beginning" (White, 2008, p. 129).

As transactional processes are embedded in networks of various actors, transitions always imply a change in identity. From the perspective of phenomenological network theory (Fuhse, 2015), networks constitute the social life and the respective actors' identities through stories, defined as meaningful narratives that create structures of relevance driven by a desire to avoid chaos, achieve orientation and set the groundwork for identity and positioning—in White's (2008) words, "control"—within society, viewed as being composed of different network domains or "netdoms" (pp. 1–4). Identities are thus contextual, for they emerge through personal encounters and/or mental references into diverse, shifting networks held together by shared stories, themes, and complex, multi-layered, sometimes contradictory relationships in the past and present. By extension, contexts, identities, and transactions are prerequisites for any transition or the respective conditions of possibility to materialise. Identities are not only actualised in present situations but rooted at the individual, personal level in the respective biography in which lives, and life situations are linked in meaningful ways to multiple netdoms and the stories that constitute them.

The transition from long-term unemployment and long-term benefit recipience to employment certainly represents a turning point in a person's biography, often starting from a position of entrenched marginalisation and exclusion and accompanied by feelings of resignation and hopelessness. Initiating a transition thus requires changes in various aspects, including identity work or the development of a viable future-oriented identity project that provides motivation and ideas about one's professional possibilities in the first place. This involves having a general orientation and belief that one is capable of pursuing such opportunities. Even though work-first strategies can theoretically achieve this effect via activation measures, this effect cannot be assumed without further ado.

Considering all the above, we first examined the development of effective forms of motivation in the context of biography and its social embeddedness. Next, we investigated the subsequent steps required to initiate and complete the transition to work: obtaining information about suitable job vacancies, applying for jobs, and convincing an employer to hire the applicant. Those stages form the basic heuristic structure of our analysis. At each, problems may arise and need to be solved, whether at the psychological (e.g., motivation and self-confidence) or social level (e.g., orientation, know-how and performativity). At the same time, according to the meta-theoretical framework outlined above, the transitions that we discuss cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the multilevel, often conflicting, sometimes impairing, sometimes supporting embeddings and interdependencies between intra-individual (i.e., psychological) dispositions and individual-level actions and their always contextualized (biographical) development over time. Understanding the transitions thus requires considering how they relate to and are embedded in social contexts consisting of interlinked lives, personal relationships and networks spanning different domains of life, provided that a corresponding opportunity structure exists, especially on the labour market – which will be worked out exemplarily in the empirical section.

4 Data and Methods

Following a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Hanson et al., 2005), this means enriching existing quantitative data with qualitative approaches, we selected cases of individuals from the PASS dataset (2014/2015) who entered the primary labour market despite experiencing at least three of the barriers to job placement mentioned in Section 1 and requested qualitative follow-up interviews with them (in 2015/2016). Statistically speaking, all were outliers, for in a year's time very few individuals (i.e., 66 of 1752, 3.76%) with the mentioned characteristics succeeded in entering the primary labour market. Of those 66 individuals, nine had dropped out of PASS, and we requested in-person interviews with the remaining 57 to be conducted at their homes. Ultimately, 33 of them—18 women and 15 men—were recruited. The interviews lasted on average between 90 minutes (with a range between 45 and 180 min).

The sample of interviewees did not differ from the population of statistical outliers in terms of statistically relevant personal characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and placement barriers). All interviews were conducted in person at the participants' homes except for three conducted in public places (i.e., coffee bar).

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Characteristic	***n***
Woman	18
Man	15
>60 years old	3
>50 years old	6
30–50 years old	18
20–30 years old	6
Migration background	11
Low or no qualifications	20
Poor health	15
Single mother	6
Total	**33**

The interviews provided data for case studies, which have the capacity to "clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences, [rather] than describing the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). To reconstruct the interviewees' transitional processes, we used the heuristic framework in Section 3 for "sensitizing concepts" that "merely suggest directions in which to look" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). As such, the method was able to cover longitudinal (biographical) aspects of the transition

process and how it proceeded at certain stages (i.e., practice), including the network-related aspects outlined earlier. In recent years, approaches have emerged that combine biographical and narrative methods with network surveys, either to clarify how networks function (Bellotti, 2015), the provision of social support in daily life (Altissimo, 2016) or types of supportive mechanisms in job searches (Vacchiano, 2021) or to explore the role of networks in the evolution of people's selves (Armitage, 2016). By extension, to reach our study's goal we adopted a three-pronged research procedure consisting of narrative biographical and problem-centred interviewing techniques (Scheiblhofer, 2008) as well as the use of data collection software for social network analysis (Gamper et al., 2012).

Biographical interviewing was conducted to gather information about the factors preceding the transitional processes under study. Once the interviewee's narrative reached the beginning of the transition, we switched to problem-centred interviewing to explore how the different stages of the actual transition (e.g., motivation, information gathering, application, and contract closing) unfolded. Following this, and for validation, we utilized network analysis software as an auxiliary tool to structure and evaluate the roles and connections between actors relevant to the transition. Instead of documenting complete ego-networks of personal acquaintances, as is common in unemployment research, our focus was specifically on those actors and their various impacts on the protagonist of the transition process (referred to as the transition-relevant network). Therefore, we asked respondents to identify all actors they considered influential in facilitating or hindering their transitions and position them on a software-provided graph. Reflecting on their specific impact on the protagonist's self-image, attitudes, and actions (identity) and/or their social environment created further narratives on these topics. To avoid subjective recall errors, the interviewers also asked follow-up questions as part of the in-situ data triangulation (Wald 2014) about other actors who were not spontaneously named in this context but had been mentioned in the previous parts of the interview or were assumed to have played a role in the transition process, such as employment offices, case workers, or employers. As a result, an overall picture of the relevant actor structures for the respective transition emerged.

The first step of analysis involved placing the data, case by case, in diachronic order and reconstructing the sequential development of each case and its embeddedness in social relations with recourse to the network data. Each of these sequences, representing a particular phase in the emergence of the transition, was then analysed synchronously. The focus was on the nature of the relationships relevant in this phase and their respective contribution to the development of the case history by generating motivations, (changing) identities, specific actions, and action strategies. Finally, those synchronic layers were connected to reconstruct the various stages of the whole process and their respective linkages that brought about the transition in terms of time and content.

Using the theoretical considerations outlined above as "sensitising concepts", the first step of the analysis was to put the respective case-related data into a diachronic order and reconstruct the sequential development of each case and its embeddedness in social relations by drawing on the network data. Each of these sequences, representing a particular phase in the emergence of the transition, was then analysed synchronously in terms of the nature of the relationships involved and their respective contribution to the development of the case history by producing motivations, (shifting) identities, and particular actions and strategies of action. Finally, these synchronic layers were in turn linked diachronically to reconstruct the different phases of the process that ultimately led to the actual transition in terms of time and content.

The combination of biographical trajectory reconstruction, the hermeneutic analysis of narrative and network data, and ongoing case comparisons provides detailed insights into those biographical phases and socially embedded processes, developments, and turning points and the individual patterns of action and thinking associated with them that promote or hinder the transition into employment (Herz et al. 2015). This look at the genesis of factors conducive or inhibiting labor market transitions - not only of the target group under consideration here - reveals more than would have been the case if the focus had been exclusively on immediate transitions (Nico, 2016).

5 Findings

As outlined in Section 3, reconstructing transitions from unemployment to employment requires consideration of how and under what conditions the different stages of the transition may unfold, considering the individual's biographical circumstances. To illustrate this dynamic, we present a comprehensive analysis of a paradigmatic case that reveals the "more general features" of the phenomenon being studied (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 80). Like the other cases, the one chosen here demonstrates that simply "flipping the switch" from one moment to the next is often insufficient. Applying the relational perspective outlined above sheds light on the complex processes and interactions involved in identity change, social or network influences, and practical steps taken to overcome barriers to labour market access. Similar processes are regularly observed in our sample and typically occur over extended periods of time. The analysis also provides information about at which points in time and with which positive or inhibiting effects on the course of the case institutional interventions, especially by employees of the employment office, have taken place. Finally, the analysis is extended by comparing it with other cases in our sample. Finally, the case analysis is expanded by comparing it with other cases in our sample.

The paradigmatic case is that of Diana, whose obstacles to placement were single parenthood, health problems, being more than 50 years old, long-term unemployment and welfare recipience. Born in East Germany (GDR) in the early 1970s and now a single mother, at the time of the interview she was working as a nursing assistant at a home for older adults following a 10-year period marked by illness, unemployment, and welfare recipience.

Diana had a sheltered childhood in a middle-class family. Her career aspiration after finishing school was to become a nurse, but this was denied her. In former GDR's socialist, centrist planned economy, no one remained unemployed, but there was only a limited individual choice of training and employment opportunities. So, she was directed to a vocational training as a warehouse logistics specialist that she completed. After Germany's reunification, which was accompanied by the GDR's economic collapse and a system change to a market economy – now including volatile labour market dynamics and a system of competitive applications she was not prepared for – she retrained as a salesperson and was employed until becoming a mother in the late 1990s. In the early 2000s, shortly before her daughter started school, she became unemployed amidst a general employment crisis, which hit especially the former GDR.

What followed was the beginning of what Diana called a "hard time" (33), one that soon precipitated her separation from her partner but initially seemed to have good aspects, namely because, as she put it, "I had time for her [my daughter]" (34). Diana's strong identification with her maternal role coupled with a generally bleak labour market prompted her gradual shift away from a labour market orientation. Although the shift initially went unnoticed,

Diana slipped into a decade of unemployment, welfare recipience and being the responsibility of a job centre. From her perspective, the job centre did not help her to overcome her social marginalisation, for her case hardly received any attention beyond standardised procedures:

> There’s also a lot of pressure when you express your wishes about what you want to do …. They [the job centre] don’t really take it into consideration. … It’s very unpleasant, the way that they deal with people. (178–181)

Feeling alienated, devalued and without influence on the actions of job centre, which she characterised as trying to control her life and identity, Diana was frustrated, especially as her persistent welfare recipience cast doubt on her self-image as a caring, nurturing mother. Facing financial pressures, she could not cover her growing daughter’s needs and was forced to continually tell her “No, we can’t afford it” (612). Despite considering herself to be “thrifty” and “really good with money” (604), Diana’s repeated denial of her daughter’s wishes made her uneasy in having to witness how the situation “caused her [daughter] a lot of trouble” (613). Overwhelmed by shame and guilt, she entered a downward spiral of social withdrawal:

> You really *dare* to go out. You somehow feel uncomfortable, and you don’t trust yourself to do much anymore. … It’s like a dome that comes over you and tightens more and more without you noticing it at first. (841–844)

Over time, Diana’s stress ballooned into a prolonged depressive episode combined with symptoms of diffuse food intolerance. Because her symptoms were not treated therapeutically owing to her distrust of the consulting doctors, her illness lasted for 5 or 6 years, during which her isolation only worsened. Diana described phases when the occasional trip to the supermarket was her only contact with social life, such that the cashier’s utterances of “Good afternoon” and “Here’s your change” were “the first, maybe the only words being said to me all day” (856–857). Her feelings of alienation and loneliness were compounded by the thought that her symptoms could be life-threatening, which made her deeply concerned about the possibility of having to leave her daughter behind. At that time, Diana was too occupied with her troubles to develop any plans for employment and ignored letters from the job centre, which had made her feel “smaller and smaller and narrower and [*inhaled deeply*]” (860). All in all, it seemed that the job centre would “discard” her case without further actions.

It was only by chance that Diana one day spotted an announcement for free *qigong* classes at a community centre near her and thought that she should give it a try. The moment proved to be the turning point out of her downward spiral. The classes’ instructors discovered her talent for taking care of older participants and encouraged her to assist with and eventually take over special classes for older adults. The appreciation she experienced laid the foundation for the development of a positive identity as a valuable person who, of she can contribute to society at least in one context, why not others? As Diana slowly reconnected with the outside world, she could imagine herself overcoming the downward spiral described above and even developing a more open attitude towards employment.

At this turning point, Diana's daughter and her ex-partner were the only people she said consistently stood by her and offered support, which was crucial for her reorientation in the labour market. Partly at the suggestion of the job centre staff, Diana had occasionally started looking for work, but she was unmotivated and uninspired, and her methods were haphazard. However, as her daughter - the reason why she did not give up during the hard times - grew

older, she began to exert more influence on her mother, exhorting her not to give up and to keep going. Her daughter became, as Diana put it, her "spur" to escape unemployment. For Diana, the initial withdrawal from the labour market seemed legitimate, as she initially identified with the role of a caring, child-centred mother. But as her daughter grew older, the mother-daughter relationship changed. Her daughter increasingly became an important significant other at eye level. She now confronted Diana with changing role expectations, especially that her mother was "different" from the mothers of many of her peers because she did not work - which challenged Diana's identity. Under this influence, the "stories" of Diana's communication with her daughter and ex-partner changed, and other issues came to the fore. She now became more interested in talking about opportunities in the labour market, drew new motivation, gained a new perspective on working life and ways to regain her footing. When asked in the interview how she came to work as a care assistant, she replied: "Through the father of my child. He has a colleague at work whose wife has my job [care assistant] and she said she liked it very much" (638-639).

This hearsay prompted Diana to tentatively identify with this kind of professional activity, which seemed promising to her not least because it somehow coincided with her original career aspiration of becoming a nurse. In contrast to earlier hints from employment agencies, stories and information about someone with whom she could compare and identify seemed worthy of serious consideration. For if the wife of her ex-partner's acquaintance could not only cope with the work but also enjoy it, why not her? Encouraged by her family - even her daughter told her, "Why don't you do it? I'm sure you'll enjoy it" (1404) - Diana found the initial spark for her re-entry into working life (646).

Although Diana now knew what she wanted—to become a nursing assistant—she had no idea how to accomplish her goal. Thus, despite reporting many unpleasant experiences with "condescending" (207), disinterested job centre staff, she filed a request for work at one of the regularly scheduled mandatory interviews with the centre:

> I asked at the job centre, and I had just a terrific advisor, and she said, "Yes, you should do that." She really supported me completely, so not all of them [job centre staff] are inhumane. She was really super. … And it gave me such, such strength to know that she was so, so nice and friendly, which encouraged me even more. (6256–6233)

Diana reported not only the caseworker's unexpected receptiveness to her wishes but also the friendly, understanding, encouraging nature of their interaction, which eventually fostered a working alliance able to move Diana's project forward. This time, she did not feel typecast as a passive welfare recipient who needed to be activated and controlled but identified as a self-determined woman and mother who deserves the support that she needs and who could motivate her caseworker to use her discretionary powers. At that point, the job centre invited Diana to participate in vocational training and several internships that would qualify her for her desired profession. Soon enough, she had not only completed the courses and training but also gained self-confidence, began identifying with the profession and became convinced that pursuing her ambition was the right thing to do.

After Diana had completed training, however, she did not immediately look for a job. Participating in training is different from organising a job search, applying for jobs and finally being hired because it poses the risk of rejection and/or ultimately not proving oneself in everyday professional life. Hesitant to move forward, Diana returned to the jobcentre but was assigned to another counsellor, a "bad man" (1388), who strongly identified with the

principles of the work-first approach and, as she complained, perceived himself to be responsible for securing work for her by exerting "pressure". Thus, Diana again felt as if she were an object being controlled from the outside.

Nevertheless, because her situation and possibilities had changed in the meantime, Diana now had an opportunity to escape her predicament and avoid reverting to her previous personal state. She had managed to overcome her period of illness and to re-embed herself in the social sphere by becoming involved in qigong and establishing a relationship with a new partner. Those developments, combined with the self-affirmation and recognition that she received from her training, helped her to develop a counter-concept to being stereotyped as a welfare recipient and falling back into that position. Now, she saw a clear path to connect to the netdom of work life and be recognised as the person whom she claimed to be. To reach those goals, however, she would have to mobilise her qualifications and secure employment despite lingering hurdles, especially finding a suitable job and applying for it.

When asked how she managed the task, Diana referred to her new life partner, an academic. Together with her daughter, he had not only provided moral support but more importantly looked for job opportunities for her and kept an eye on her efforts: "He actually printed out things [job advertisements], uh, where I should apply. And then I had to explain in detail why it didn't work out or why no one had replied yet" (1525–1527).

Despite having formal prerequisites, in general, applicants with a history of long-term unemployment cannot always gain employment without encountering further problems that make the ultimate achievement of their goals uncertain. Not only does obtaining references to worthwhile jobs require certain knowledge, skills and ingenuity, but deciphering what job advertisements imply and whether they suit one's skills and life situation. Having resilience against self-doubt also matters, especially if contact with working life has been lost due to long periods of unemployment and if the person's professional identity has not been consolidated. By recognising those realities, Diana's new partner helped her to overcome her hurdles, kept her focused on the results of her efforts and what the next steps were and encouraged her not to quit even if the immediate results were far from promising. In that way, he maintained her identity as a jobseeker seeking connection with an unknown world of employers.

Diana's job search also revealed that how to properly apply for jobs can become a problem in itself. After all, how to formulate and write applications, how to make content relevant and strike the right tone and how to present oneself during telephone and personal interviews is not self-evident. In Diana's case, her lack of know-how, her accompanying fear of making mistakes and her low self-confidence were all neutralised by her partner's support: "He helped me to write the applications, to formulate them. He's very good with language" (1545–1546). As a result, she was finally invited for a job interview at a retirement home. In most cases, the pressure to make a good impression in the applicant–employer relationship largely falls to the applicant, especially if they have a patchy history of employment. Apart from her qualifications, Diana's participation in qigong worked to break the ice, particularly in the context of older adult care: "She [the employer] was apparently very fond of me and read that I did qigong and heard something about it. And she thought that it was great, and all of that was to my benefit" (1624–1625). Thus, at long last, Diana got the job.

Diana's case represents features that generally characterise the structure of the other cases that we studied as well. Taking a longitudinal perspective reveals the social and psychological dynamics that determine the transitional processes in question. Therein, cracks in the life course and periods of downward spiralling seem to be the rule, and long-term benefit recipience becomes inseparable from personal crises such that barriers to placement are often only the tip of the iceberg. In Diana's words, "Describing the circumstances and what went wrong is difficult because it's not understandable. … You can't see it like you would a broken arm" (785).

Social withdrawal and/or isolation, reduced self-esteem, various fears, psychological overload and not knowing how to cope with any of those setbacks describe a frequently encountered situation for the long-term unemployed that affected not only the individuals that we studied but also many long-term clients of job centres who are perceived to be problematic. As Diana's case shows, many such clients feel overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them by the job centre's staff, who usually adopt an institutionalised (work-first) approach operationalised in standard procedures and do not provide the support that, in retrospect, their clients think would have been helpful. The feeling of being ascribed a negative identity as a failure, as hopeless and/or as delinquent only intensifies resignation and alienation towards the placement authority and the world of work that it represents. For example, Peter, a 63-year-old man who suffers from epilepsy and was placed in jobs unsuitable for him, lamented his experience of devaluation that resulted from the work-first approach: "Because of Hartz IV [the job centre's activation rules and practices], …, it's simply … a meat grinder" (A01, 526–527).

Our data also clearly demonstrate that assumptions that "any job is better than none" and that "clients can be placed at any time" are misguided. Because our cases represent success stories in the world of job placement, it is worth reconstructing how their success came about. Each success story began with a turning point, often inspired by in-network relations that pivotally motivated the individual to rise above their predicament. In both Diana's case and others, strong bonds and their inherent dynamics proved to be a powerful source for such motivation, especially able to bridge the gap between withdrawal and the labour market. Adolescent children in particular come to play an important role, for they hold a mirror up to their parents that invites comparison with other young people and their parents, becomes a projector screen for their life plans and holds them to account as parents:

> My son, he has something to do with the future. ... I said, "You have to create something sometime". I mean … when he sees a mother who doesn't work and a father who doesn't work, that's not so great. … Well, that was definitely also a motivation. (A03, 2882: male, mid-30s, low qualifications, addiction and partial child custody)

A similar function can also be performed by other significant people in one's life, including in-laws, good friends or adult children, sometimes in combination with self-esteem-enhancing forms of social participation, as in Diana's case. Along those lines, identity, work, encouragement and the confidence that there can be a suitable place in life that means more than being a passive welfare recipient or a burden are significant for social stabilisation and for actively aim for labour market integration. Beyond the general desire to return to work, the development of concrete ideas about sectors and activities, often rooted in one's biography, was decisive for defining desirable goals and not only in Diana's case:

> I think I was born to be a seamstress. … I liked to sew even as a child. (A14, 539: female, 50, poor language skills and single parent)

> And chimney sweep. I got a taste of it back then. I liked it. (A03, 130)

Some interviewees systematically scoured their neighbourhoods for suitable employers, while others proposed their ideas for qualifications, job desires and fields of activity at appointments with the job centre. Contacting the centre with clear ideas for their professional future generated relevant support in many cases, including funding for and placement in training for care professions, skilled-worker training or work in the logistics and security sectors. In retrospect, the job centre's professionals were thus no longer viewed as agents of a system that made incomprehensible, impossible demands but as enablers of self-chosen paths:

> The person who was sitting in the job centre, she was involved [in enabling the transition]. She made it possible for me to do it. (A20, 1282: male, mid-20s, low qualifications and broken home)

Our data additionally show, however, that job centres played only a minor role in securing employment, even if they are considered to be helpful, if not crucial, in promoting self-determined pathways to skills development and employability. In some cases, the centres were only indirectly involved in the placement process—for example, in the case of employment offices that organised job fairs at which applicants could meet potential employers. The opportunity to approach employers in person proved to be a successful strategy overall, though in most cases it was mediated by close relationships or based on direct and/or unannounced approaches. Bypassing formal application procedures proved to be successful especially in smaller, owner-managed companies previously identified as promising through the interviewees' "field observations", so to speak, and that obviously appreciated the applicants' courage and initiative. By the same token, establishing immediate contact with potential employers seemed to afford the employers a better understanding of the applicants' motives and motivation. For interviewees who did not take that path but attempted to gain employment via the usual channels—looking for advertisements for suitable jobs and writing applications—the problems that Diana experienced occurred. However, as in Diana's case, people with work-related competencies and with close bonds to the interviewees made it possible to overcome their challenges and uncertainties, if they did not also ultimately provide active support:

> Well, my mum was the one who really looked into where I and my husband should apply, and as soon as ... a job opened, she also told us where it was and who we had to talk to. She even gave us application tips ... . She drove us there; it was all my mum. Without my mum, it wouldn't have happened.

> I: What kind of support did your mother provide?

> B: The kind of support that the job centre is supposed to give. (A02, 1287: female, 30, low qualifications, mother and migration background)

6 Conclusion: The Importance of Case Work

Given the cases and stories considered here, the first question that comes to mind is how the state of long-term unemployment and long-term benefit recipience could have been prevented. Prevention is certainly the best way to avoid drifting into a socially marginalised position, for the benefit of not only the people concerned but also social security systems

(Spermann, 2015). However, many cases are past the point of prevention, and the daily work of a job centre’s employees typically includes attending to difficult cases, mostly with several barriers to placement. Our considerations therefore start at the point where things have already gone awry, and we aimed to draw conclusions for a problem-adequate approach to case management from the stories of successful transitions into regular employment considered in our analysis.

Our primary focus is on developing a meta-perspective that can serve as a basis for designing support programs for working with individual cases, rather than providing specific advice on how to handle difficult clients in face-to-face interactions. From the perspective of the relational approach, clients seeking career counselling are not simply "trait carriers," but individuals who exist and engage in various changing contexts that shape their identifications and identities and open up options for action. They are the result of their past experiences and biographies, their involvement in different networks and domains, and their respective narratives or discourses to which they are connected or disconnected by their current references and desires. Their identities are shaped by the genesis of their current life situations and their potential to develop new, contextualized identities in the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963).

Based on this theoretical framework and our data, it becomes clear that the life trajectories we examined were far from linear (Danneris, 2018). Specifically, our respondents were not always able or motivated to work at any given point in time; rather, certain circumstances had to occur or be created for taking up work to become subjectively a realistic possibility. This perspective challenges the prevailing ideology of the work-first approach, which often assumes an unconditional "readiness to work" at all times. When problems arise, it is common to hastily attribute "willingness" or "unwillingness" to the clients in a substantialist manner, which does not do justice to the subjective realities of life discussed here.

Not only in the case presented here, our data show that job centre caseworkers, as the institutionally responsible body for labour market integration, often missed the opportunity to support respondents sufficiently or - in view of case development - at the appropriate intervention point in overcoming those personal and structural barriers that stood in the way of a successful transition. In most cases, this was achieved through helpful contacts to third parties, especially those with insight into their respective life situation. The importance of acquaintances and networks for labour market transitions has been discussed for some time (Gee et al., 2017; Podolny & Baron, 1997). Thus, again, loose ties were found to offer different ways of accessing relevant information about employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973), but also that the support needed to take advantage of these opportunities came from strong or close ties. However, the successful transitions we studied did not follow the politically institutionalised maxim that "any work is better than no work". Rather, the successful transitions were characterised by the fact that fields and profiles of activity had to be in line with the specifics of the person's biography, often early career aspirations and current life circumstances. To take the step back into the labour market, employers had to be seen as empathetic and the respective work itself as meaningful and identity-forming.

This observation is certainly significant for the orientation of casework in the job centres. On the one hand, it suggests a different view of the clients as persons who are more in varying degrees of personal and/or social change processes with different speeds of development that can lead to a consolidation or - as is to be aimed for - overcoming of their marginalised social

position. Above all, it would be important to recognise the development potentials and dynamics that can result from their respective form of social embedding, to promote them and, if necessary, to support or improve them through opportunities for social participation. This is the basis for further, targeted action. In Diana's example, participation in a Qi Gong class proved to be a serendipitous event that opened the door to social participation and helped to draw strength and motivation as a prerequisite for reorienting oneself and tackling the project of taking up employment - a "risky" endeavour especially for the long-term unemployed with their often-vulnerable condition. Finally, this requires a healthy self-confidence based on previously experienced social recognition, as there is always the risk of hurtful rejection, as applications may be unsuccessful, or one may not prove oneself in a job. Even in client-centred casework, which initially puts pure job placement in the background, it therefore seems insufficient to focus exclusively on the treatment of obvious problems (e.g. illness and debts) without looking at the biography-related stabilisation of the individual and his or her participation in society, which contributes to the promotion of self-esteem and existing potentials.

Only when these preconditions were in place and the caseworkers recognised and accepted this reality, did the use of labour market-related support measures prove promising. In our case studies, the caseworkers paid little or no attention to the creation of the aforementioned psychological and social preconditions. Accordingly, requests to participate in support measures, to submit blind applications or any placement proposals without taking personal characteristics into account often came to nothing and tended to have a demotivating and disempowering effect. However, as soon as the necessary preconditions were created and the clients strived for a change of their own accord, the possibilities of the caseworkers to open up access to qualification measures or for example to further professional psychological support for their clients proved to be helpful and beneficial. Proposals and initiatives of the caseworkers were then recognised and accepted by the long-term unemployed as part of their own development path. As a result, this led to committed participation in support measures, independent job searches or, in a few cases, successful placement in work by Job Centre staff. Thus, the work of the job centres proved to be successful when little pressure was exerted, the interests of the long-term unemployed were taken into account and support for self-development was offered but not imposed. Accordingly, formal blind applications or participation in measures, which are demanded hastily and often with pressure, should be avoided. The case of Diana described here is an example of the problem of blind applications as the penultimate step towards employment, even if sufficient motivation has arisen. Here, too, job centres should offer practical support, or case managers should instead contact employers, arrange direct contacts between them and motivated long-term unemployed people, and follow up on the cases placed.

From our perspective, our findings advocate replacing work-first with life-first approaches (Walker et al., 2016) in the counselling and placement of the long-term unemployed. Long-term unemployed recipients of basic income support could particularly benefit from being integrated into diverse social networks that provide social stabilisation and orientation, whether regarding participation in the labour market or not (Lévesque & White, 2001). In this sense, Larsen and Caswell (2022) have called for a combination of, on the one hand, reduced pressure on vulnerable and unemployed individuals, and on the other hand, services developed jointly by labour authorities and third parties that engage clients with employers and NGOs, among others, in developing strategies to overcome the factors that stand in the way of employment. A long period of case management, including a post-employment phase,

improves outcomes and sustainability of integrations into work (Danneris & Caswell, 2019; Kellard, 2002; Rangarajan, 2002; Spermann, 2015). Therefore, it would be important to introduce the job centre as an actor with a positive connotation in the networks of the often vulnerable and socially disconnected long-term unemployed, offering support in terms of not only eliminating deficits in human capital but also proving to be a helpful institution for stabilization in life. Linked to this is the promotion of access to expanded, new network contacts with labour market relevance – "network participation" – to enable connectivity to the positive benefits of plural networks and the information they provide, relevant for one's own life as well as labour market orientation. In short, the aim is to overcome isolation and sociophobe tendencies, as a first step, strengthen self-esteem, and foster sociability before employability.

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