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## **'In reality, I motivate myself!'**

'Low-skilled' workers' motivation: between individual and societal narratives

### **Introduction**

'Education, education, education' (Blair, 2001) has been the mantra in transnational and national policies since the mid-1990s. Informed by human capital theory and the expected correlation between education and economic growth, governments around the world have perceived investments in human capital in a lifelong perspective as a panacea to staying afloat amid global competition. In the European Union, the Member States have agreed that:

Efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe's strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of the Lisbon strategy, at the same time as promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship (Council Conclusions, 2009).

An overarching aim of lifelong learning (LLL) is to ensure that learning is a continuous process throughout the lifespan: '*a seamless continuum from cradle to grave*' (Commission of the European Communities CEC, 2000, p. 7). For national governments, this means that learning opportunities should be made available, supporting citizens in continuously updating and upgrading their skills: '*People need to want and to be able to take their lives in their own hands – to become, in short, active citizens*' (CEC, 2000, p. 7).

However, in this quest for economic growth and social cohesion through LLL, those groups in society who do not participate in LLL become a social problem (Bacchi, 1999, p. 37). Williams (2013) describes LLL in the UK context as a dividing practice, which constructs the '*socially*

*excluded as disadvantaged due to psychological character traits*' (p. 27). Brine (2006) likewise points to the construction of two categories of learners in EU lifelong learning policies: the high knowledge-skilled learner (HKS) and the low knowledge-skilled learner (LKS). Whereas the HKS is classified only on the basis of his or her educational achievement, the LKS is defined '*in terms of social class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship*' (p. 662) with the common feature of being low skilled. In EU policies, these groups are defined as 'inactive' and in need of activation. Hence, it is necessary '*to develop lifelong learning, with a particular focus on active and preventive measures for the unemployed and inactive persons*' (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p.1, our emphasis).

'Low-skilled' workers, defined as those who have not completed a qualification beyond basic schooling or only completed a short vocational qualification insufficient to ensure their employability in a volatile labour market, constitute a risk – not only for the individual, but for society (Brine, 2006). Somehow, they need to be made active lifelong learners.

In EU (and national) policies, motivation is perceived as central to the transition from inactive to active citizen. The EU Memorandum (2000) states: '*Individual motivation to learn and a variety of learning opportunities are the ultimate keys to implementing lifelong learning successfully*' (CEC, 2000, p. 8, our emphasis). Hence the solution to non-participation in LLL is to identify the origins of this lack of motivation and the psychological and social barriers that hinder participation in LLL. This is also the case in Denmark, where numerous research projects have been initiated addressing 'marginalised' or 'inactive' low-skilled learners: for example, their barriers to learning; their lack of motivation and resistance to learning; the socio-economic conditions impeding their participation in learning (see e.g. Illeris, 2006; Klindt & Sørensen, 2010; Rosdahl et al., 2013; Wahlgren, 2010). The research points to motivation as a key factor for the engagement of low-skilled workers in

education, but also indicates that motivation is rarely straightforwardly positive or negative, instead seeming to be a mixture of encouragement and barriers (Illeris, 2003, p. 15).

The data upon which this article is based likewise stem from a project focusing on low-skilled adults and the barriers to their participation in LLL (Cedefop, 2016). This project was aimed at uncovering the potential of low-skilled workers '*prone to the risk of unemployment and social exclusion*' to '*re-engage in learning and become socially upwardly mobile*' (Cedefop, 2016). A focal point for the interviews undertaken in this research project was the interviewees' 'lack of engagement' with learning. The authors of this article conducted the interviews in the Danish context, and during the interviews it became evident that the interviewees *were* engaged in various kinds of learning, be it formal, non-formal or informal. In fact, there was no lack of motivation for learning. Rather, the 'social problem' was the orientation of their motivation, which was not always directed towards learning defined politically as useful; i.e., learning which can be accredited, which leads to a qualification and which can be put to use in the labour market (see Honey, 2000). Hence, the problem lay less with the interviewees and more with the assumptions underlying research and policies addressing the learning of low-skilled. Ahl (2006) describes this as a relational problem where the problem does not necessarily arise with the low skilled (the recruited), but with the policymakers (the recruiter):

[...] motivation problems arise in the relationship between the recruiter and those who do not want to be recruited. If the recruiter's interest was not there to begin with, there would be no reason to talk about motivation problems. One could assert that the motivation problem belongs to the recruiter, and not to the prospective recruited (Ahl, 2006, p. 13).

In an article on adult education, Illeris (2003) likewise points to the fact that adult education has assumed a character of compulsion rather than being a voluntary activity. The problem of ‘motivation’ is created in the interplay between public policy and individual agency. Our findings made us reconsider the concept of motivation and how motivation turns into a ‘governmentality’, pathologising those groups in society who do not participate in LLL and, thereby, in the perpetual renewal of their human capital to meet the demands of the labour market. We were struck by the discrepancy between the political construction of the ‘inactive’ low-skilled worker and the people we interviewed; our interviewees seemed far from inactive and unmotivated. We, therefore, decided to revisit our interviews in order to explore how our interviewees talked about motivation in their work life stories. In this way, we hoped to provide a more complex picture of motivation than the binary of *being* or *not being* motivated. For this purpose, we chose to draw on self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which focuses on the degree to which an individual’s behavior is self-motivated and self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

The aim of this article is to investigate motivation in a work life through the SDT lens. We explore the orientation of motivation and argue that what characterises the interviewees is not a lack of motivation, but orientations towards other areas of their lives. The interviewees strive to construct meaningful work lives by integrating their interests or values into their work life. Furthermore, we argue that motivation has to be understood not only as something ‘innate’ or ‘relational’, but also as a societal concept reflecting social and not least political narratives<sup>i</sup> about motivation. We show how policies influence the orientation of the interviewees and may contribute to the creation of ambivalence in their work lives. In line with Ahl (2006), we argue for the necessity of critically considering the power embedded within the concept of motivation and the implications of a more nuanced understanding of the concept for practitioners in adult education and career guidance – and for ourselves as researchers.

## **Self-Determination Theory**

As our theoretical framework, we have chosen to work with Ryan & Deci's self-determination theory (1985), which has been developed within the tradition of psychology. Contrary to earlier psychological theories of motivation, SDT does not only focus on the individual, but situates the individual within a context and considers the role of the relations within this context for his or her motivation. SDT is concerned with '*differentiating the concept of motivation – that is [...] exploring different types of motivation that underlie intentional actions and differ in the degree to which they are the basis for self-determination*' (Deci 2004, p.3, our emphasis).

### **Insert here: Figure 1 Self-determination theory. Taxonomy of human motivation**

Through the SDT lens we are able to gain a nuanced understanding of extrinsic and intrinsic factors that regulate motivation. It provides us with a framework for analysing how the interviewees' motivational orientations vary in relation to different activities.

Interestingly, while some perspectives view '*extrinsically motivated behaviour as invariably non-autonomous, SDT proposes that extrinsic motivation can vary greatly in its relative autonomy*' (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p.71). Thus, there are 6 types of regulations that vary in the amount of autonomy that a person has and in the amount of internalisation of the motivation. Internalisation describes the degree to which a person has accepted the value of an activity. The less autonomy a person feels when engaging in an activity, the less internalised is the motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is relevant when analysing low skilled peoples' motivation for work life and learning associated with work life.

In our analysis, we explore the regulatory styles of motivation that surface in the narratives provided by our interviewees, and which span from external to integrated styles that are part of *extrinsic motivation*; i.e., the activity is not perceived as an end in itself, but as a means for something else (see figure above).

In relation to extrinsic motivation, the theory distinguishes between four regulatory styles a) external, b) introjected, c) identified and d) integrated regulation. *External* and *introjected regulation* forms work as a kind of external pressure where the individual is motivated by the response of the surroundings and can be characterised as social control/influence. *External* motivation works through punishment/reward systems and *introjected* through ego stimulation via praise or the avoidance of shame. Further along the continuum, we find *identified* and *integrated regulation*, which are extrinsic but more autonomous forms of motivation because they are driven by identification with values and role models and the integration of values encountered in learning processes. *Identified* and *integrated* regulatory styles give the individual a sense of self-determination and volition. The last regulatory style along the continuum is *internal*; i.e., when people are intrinsically motivated and play, explore and engage in activities for their inherent fun, challenge, and excitement (ibid). Intrinsic motivation can only occur for activities that hold intrinsic interest for people. To understand the motivation for activities that are not experienced like that, ‘*we need to look more deeply into the nature and dynamics of extrinsic motivation*’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.60).

We also analyse the psychological needs expressed by the interviewees. SDT specifies three fundamental psychological needs - autonomy, competence and relatedness – which, if fulfilled, will

enhance ‘*self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being*’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p.68):

SDT suggests that people are inherently motivated to feel connected to others within a social milieu, to function effectively in that milieu, and to feel a sense of personal initiative while doing so. Without these experiences [...] people will suffer some negative psychological consequence (Deci, 2004, p.9).

SDT is not a sociological theory; it focuses on the individual and the interplay between the individual and a specific learning context. In this article, we take the theory one step further and argue, in line with Ahl, that motivation and motivation theory are embedded within a social and political narrative. Education and employment policies rest on assumptions about motivation and the lack of it, as described in the introduction to this article. These assumptions become institutionalised as part of practice in, for example, LLL and career guidance. Hence the individual narratives have to be analysed within the context of broader societal narratives in order to understand that some types of motivation can be perceived as a ‘*euphemism for direction and control*’ (Ahl, 2006, p. 1).

## **Methodology**

This article is based on research carried out by the Danish team within a research project funded by Cedefop about learning for career and labour market transitions (Cedefop 2016).<sup>ii</sup> In the Danish context, 18 narrative interviews were conducted, and for the purpose of this article, these interviews were revisited. Based on the categories of the SDT model (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.61), we explored how the interviewees talked about motivation and how this was connected to different regulatory styles related to learning, work and other activities. This coding focused on identifying experiences



and situations that the interviewees described in their work life stories and relating these descriptions to the varied concepts of motivation within SDT. In the narratives, experiences and situations are often difficult to separate, but the model allows for an analytical separation, enabling us to identify motivation as a complex issue related to many different activities and life situations.

Based on our coding, we decided to select three telling examples. They are *telling* in the sense that they provide an insight into the complexity of motivation throughout a lifespan, and into the interrelation of individual and societal narratives of motivation (see Reid & West, 2011). The three narratives illustrate three low-skilled male workers born in three different decades (1960s, 1970s and 1980s), who all currently work in the social sector as either unskilled educator assistants or unskilled kitchen assistants<sup>iii</sup>. Although we identified interesting gendered differences, for example in the orientation of motivation<sup>iv</sup>, we determined that a vertical analysis of three men in similar positions and with similar family status, but at different stages of life and having had to deal with different structural conditions, would provide a valuable basis for our understanding of motivation and the intricate interplay between societal and individual narratives. The structural conditions refer to the time periods represented: The period from the 1980s, when the first interviewee entered the labour market, to 2000 marks a radical change in employment and education policies, from welfare to workfare, with education becoming a civic duty and unemployment a problem of individual motivation (see Cort, Thomsen & Mariager-Anderson, 2015).

The article combines SDT with narrative analysis with the aim of understanding the individual narratives within a broader socio-historical context (Merrill & West, 2009). One of the strengths of narrative analysis is that it brings out the complexity of motivation during a work life, the links that people make between learning, work and life, and not least the connections between individual agency and societal structures. Although the findings cannot be generalised to the entire Danish cohort of low-skilled workers, the narratives add to our understanding of the complex phenomenon

of motivation and in this sense offer a contribution to the ongoing public debate about ‘low-skilled’ workers and their motivation for learning.

### **Telling Examples**

In the following, we present the work life narratives of Lars, Henrik and Jonas with a focus on how the interviewees narrate their motivation for engaging in learning, work or other activities.

Afterwards, we discuss the narratives with a focus on life goals and psychological needs.

#### ***Lars: ‘In reality, I motivate myself!’***

Lars (49 years) is a telling example of a work life driven by integrated and intrinsic motivation.

Lars’ work life history shows how the orientation of a person’s motivation on the one hand changes over the course of the lifespan and, on the other hand, how Lars’ values and sense of self play an important role in the way he moves in and out of jobs and learning activities. His work life history also shows how external conditions play an important role in work life trajectories. Although Lars is intrinsically motivated by his job, money – not surprisingly – plays an important role in the choices that he makes, or rather has to make, to earn a living.

#### ***Lars’ work life narrative***

Lars starts his work life narrative in 1984 when he completed general upper secondary education [gymnasium]. At this point Lars describes himself as ‘not a high achiever’. His motivation was primarily oriented towards youth political activities.

Lars had a dream of becoming a journalist, which was tied up in his childhood experiences and a subsequent drive for ‘changing the world’:

I grew up in an allotment garden<sup>v</sup> in Copenhagen where they launched an urban renewal programme [without involving the people living there]. I felt really driven to send debate articles to the newspapers, articles which were never published. So you have to do your own thing, one way or another. I did my thing by writing, being [politically] active, and taking part in rallies and demonstrations. And that has had its price.<sup>vi</sup>

As the entrance exam to study journalism is demanding, Lars took a six month course at a folk high school<sup>vii</sup> in 1985, attending the media line. He met many new people who introduced him to the politically active youth environment in Copenhagen. Upon finishing the course, he became involved in the production, editing, distribution and sale of an underground newspaper.

Strongly motivated by his political convictions, Lars did voluntary work for most of the remainder of the 1980s, producing and distributing various grassroots magazines, radio and TV programmes while receiving social benefits<sup>viii</sup>. However, when active labour market policy and activation schemes were introduced in the late 1980s, Lars found employment as a kitchen help at a children’s summer camp. For some years, he only had this summer job in which to earn money, while concentrating on grassroots activities the rest of the year. But gradually his motivational orientation changed from journalism to cooking:

I got tired of all this journalist stuff, because it was too much drinking, too much getting high. I found out that I didn’t want to continue living like this for the rest of my life. I enjoyed cooking so I kept doing it, first at a grassroots level, but later I got my first job as an [unqualified] chef at a social centre for the homeless.

Although externally motivated by earning a living, Lars related this job to his values of ‘changing the world’ by way of integrating his interests in organic food and sustainable farming. In this way, he managed to experience a greater sense of self-determination and ‘alignment’ with his sense of self and his job. At first, Lars catered for companies which had emerged from the grassroots environment. Some of these companies grew bigger, and eventually Lars was no longer moonlighting, but employed on official contracts. At the end of the 1990s, he started his own company and enjoyed the freedom this gave him. It satisfied his need for autonomy. In 2006, Lars lost his best customer and had to close his business. He subsequently did temp work within the catering business for some years until a bad experience with a bullying superior made him quit. Shortly afterwards he was offered a temporary position at a ‘night’ kindergarten, where he began cooking for children and enjoyed the feedback that he got:

In reality, I motivate myself! Every day I see the kids and I am happy. I don’t stay in the kitchen. I serve them their food and get invaluable feedback from the children: ‘it tastes good’. So in reality I’m keeping myself happy.

In the kindergarten, Lars also managed to relate his political beliefs to his job. He assisted in planning activities for the children and brought his political awareness into these activities, e.g. planning a study visit to a greenhouse producing tomatoes. *‘We’ll be going during the winter where you can almost see how the heat radiates; it’s such a waste of energy, and I want to teach the children about this’.*

### *Life goals and psychological needs*

The values of ‘social justice’ and ‘making a difference’ permeate Lars’ working life. He needs to be able to integrate personal values within his work life or he will quit: *‘I’d rather be happy than have*

*a stomach ache when I go to work. I can always find a new job*'. Lars prefers 'learning-by-doing' and has a negative attitude to formal education. His narrative shows how this attitude stems from a negative feeling associated with external regulation in formal education:

I could train as a chef. In 1 ½ years in fact [due to the possibility of validation of prior learning], but I feel that people are happy when I cook. And why should I go through schooling where I'm told: "you have to do your Thai casserole *this way*". No, no, no.

Lars perceives formal education as extremely regimented and, with the need for autonomy in relation to work and other learning processes running as a central theme throughout his narrative, Lars resists such external regulation of his behaviour. He values planning his own work and engaging in learning relevant to his job and interests. When asked about the difference between non-formal and formal learning, Lars responds:

It's interest! I like to work with other people. Many of the voluntary workplaces [where I've worked] have been run collectively, so you could take part in the decision-making. You were part of the development and the decision-making. That's it: I like to be in charge.

Interest, community and autonomy are central factors in Lars's narrative about his working life. He has an internal locus of control, believing that he is in charge of his (working) life and following his own interests as far as possible.

***Henrik: 'It's not like I work because I can't help myself'***

Henrik (38 years) is a telling example of a work life driven by extrinsic motivation. He works to earn a living and his motivation is primarily oriented towards other activities in his life: fishing,

outdoor life, chess and homepage design. Henrik seems somewhat apologetic for this prioritisation, saying that he does not *'just work for the money'* but that work *'is not a calling, it never has been'*. However, it is also evident from his narrative that he strives to integrate his interests within his work life, and in this way create a sense of self-determination and volition.

### *Henrik's work life narrative*

Henrik starts his work life narrative with his experiences after basic schooling; he moved between different youth education programmes related to outdoor life and fishing at technical college, but ultimately dropped out. He jokingly states that he had *'a dream of being unemployed'* for a period:

I wanted to be on the dole, but that wasn't possible. They sent you into activation at some job centre, and I knew that was something that I didn't want to do. So I struck a deal with the municipality. They would pay for a folk high school stay. Afterwards I, in exchange, would take the higher preparatory examination programme (HF). After completing HF I had lived out my dream of being unemployed.

Henrik's narrative reflects the change of regime during the 1990s. The requirements were tightened, especially for young unemployed people, and Henrik did not have the same opportunity as Lars to pursue his intrinsic motivation for fishing and outdoor life during a longer spell of unemployment. However, the quote also reflects that this is a transitional period where there is still some room for negotiation within the structures.

After completing HF, Henrik found a job as an unskilled educator assistant. Henrik's main motivation was to have some time away from the educational system in order to figure out *'what I wanted to do. And then I got stuck for 9 years'*. Henrik was not particularly satisfied with the job,

but he *'had a good time'* and earned the money necessary to maintain his standard of living. He was not particularly happy with his colleagues either, but he managed to integrate some of his personal interests within his work activities:

I'm okay with a few of my colleagues. Most of them think I'm an idiot because we disagree about the activities that I initiate. They [colleagues] would rather sit and do bead plates, whereas I took the kids into the woods, built bivouacs and slept there.

After nine years, Henrik moved on. However, the choice is not described as self-determined, but rather based on societal values of *'doing something with your life'*. Being an unskilled educator assistant is perceived as a transitory job for young people before they decide on a *'proper'* career. Furthermore, Henrik, coming from an academic family, explains underlying expectations in his narrative of completing an academic degree. In order to move on, Henrik started up his own cleaning company, but this bored him within a year.

The decision to become self-employed was not born of a need for autonomy (as in the case of Lars), but rather prompted by the external motivation of *'having to move on'*. After closing down the company, Henrik took a job in a forest kindergarten, enabling him to combine his intrinsic motivation for outdoor life with a job. However, he soon fell out with the manager and was fired. At this point in his life, Henrik neither had a job nor a place to live, so he decided to move in with his girlfriend in another part of Denmark. Here, he found unskilled work at a school for children with mental and physical handicaps. At the time of the interview, Henrik had worked there for seven years.

Based on his previous work experience, Henrik's employer offered Henrik the chance to start the educator assistant programme based on accreditation of prior learning. Despite this encouragement, Henrik initially declined the offer. *'Then I thought about it for a couple of days and said to myself,*

*this is not the right decision: they'll pay for the programme and I'm not interested? So I thought: I'll do it*'. Henrik felt obliged to participate, externally motivated by paid participation and by not having to work for a period. However, during the follow-up interview Henrik described a number of positive experiences in the programme and thus seemed to have changed from extrinsic motivation to a '*regulation through identification*' (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 62). In one of the programme assignments, Henrik wrote about Sanfillipo syndrome, which one of his pupils suffered from, and through this developed a tool to improve communication with the pupil. Being related to his experience and practice, Henrik viewed this assignment as meaningful, and thereby fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. '*It was as though there was a circle I could complete on my own*'.

#### *Life goals and psychological needs*

Henrik is engaged in his work, but work is not his main motivational orientation. He is predominantly extrinsically motivated towards his job, but he is able to integrate activities that he enjoys, thus moving his sense of motivation from external regulation to identified and integrated motivation which gives him a sense of satisfaction and meaningfulness in his job.

Henrik was reluctant to enter formal education to qualify as a skilled educator assistant because of the fundamental extrinsic motivation he felt for the job. Thus, his main orientation (internal locus of causality) is neither towards his job nor towards education, but rather towards recreational activities:

It's not like I work because I can't help myself. I work because I need to earn a living, and then I do all the other stuff on the side. But those are just my hobbies. Like everybody else has a hobby.



This quote is interesting because it points to a central ambivalence in Henrik's work life narrative: how Henrik himself is unsure whether his main motivational orientation towards his hobbies can be justified, in a societal or cultural perspective, as they are 'just hobbies', not work or education. Henrik feels that he deviates from the societal norm of self-actualisation through skilled work and finds himself defending his choice of lifestyle.

***Jonas: 'My age, and the fact all of my friends have completed, or are about to complete, a master's degree. [...] It puts me under extreme pressure!'***

Jonas (26 years) is a telling example of a work life driven by extrinsic motivation and the societal mantra of 'education, education, education'. His work life history shows how (the orientation of a person's) motivation is complex and reflects the interplay between individual and societal narratives. Hence, while Jonas seems content with and motivated for the job as an unskilled educator assistant that he presently holds, external conditions, such as (his understanding of) societal norms of education and work life, influence him to a point that he decides to leave the job in order to pursue a university career – and consequently fulfil his idea of 'the good life'.

#### *Jonas' work life narrative*

Jonas begins his work life narrative at the point when he finished lower secondary school. Inspired by his father's occupation as a graphic designer, Jonas started the graphic design programme at a vocational college. He dropped out, partly out of disinterest, partly because he did not thrive in the student environment where the other students were older than him. He worked a temporary job in a supermarket before entering HF. Upon completing this programme, Jonas decided to take a gap year, working as an unskilled educator assistant in a youth club. He imagined the job as an easy way

of earning money, for example playing football with the children. However, he was soon actively involved in many of the tasks of the skilled staff, participating in their meetings and weekend courses, annual competence development courses etc. Though apparently satisfied with his job, where his competences are acknowledged, Jonas' feelings are ambiguous:

I love my job, I make good money, I like being here, and I think I do a good job for the kids. [But] I don't think that the educator profession is recognised as it should be. People think, well, you just take care of children. People would be stunned if they see what we do.

Jonas has been encouraged to pursue the profession as educator, but has declined and instead applied for admission to several university programmes. His highest aspiration is journalism, in order to pursue his intrinsic motivation for football by becoming a football commentator. However, Jonas has not been able to meet the admission requirements. His motivation to attend university is closely related to keeping up with his friends: *'All of my friends have completed, or are about to complete, a master's degree. I have a friend who is a lawyer and who has bought a big flat. It puts me under extreme pressure'*.

Jonas perceives a university degree as a prerequisite for living the 'good life'. He is not dissatisfied with his job as such, but he feels a strong need to match his friends in terms of social status, education and wages. This is his (introjected) motivation for pursuing a university degree.

### *Life goals and psychological needs*

A central theme in Jonas' narrative is 'time'. At the age of 26, he already has a strong sense of lagging behind his friends. In recent years, successive Danish governments have addressed the

problem of Danes completing university at a relatively high age, 29, compared to other OECD countries (The Danish Ministry of Education, 2008). This has resulted in a series of reforms emphasising efficiency and rewarding quick completion of university degrees. Jonas has internalised this value and not living up to it makes him feel like a failure. Jonas' narrative shows how societal and cultural factors influence the individual's sense of volition and initiative. The motivational regulation at play in Jonas' narrative seems to be external rather than internal, as apparent in the way he pursues a career which will give him esteem, access to the upper middle class and a higher standard of living than would be possible as an educator. Although he strives to reconcile the intrinsic motivation he has for football with his career choice, he is to a great extent oriented towards societal and educational norms.

Jonas has a strong need to feel competent, which he never felt in formal education. When speaking of his present position, he expresses feelings of competence, relatedness and autonomy, thus fulfilling the basic psychological needs to experience a high level of motivation for the job. However, because Jonas identifies strongly with external norms, the orientation of his motivation is external and regulated by a focus on approval from others (introjected motivation).

According to SDT, fulfilment of these psychological needs leads to intrinsic motivation. However, there is a high degree of ambivalence in the case of Jonas due to the lack of esteem of his current job. This lack of esteem is explained by Jonas as both related to societal values and to the perceptions of his peers/friends. Although Jonas feels recognised in his job, he strives to gain recognition within a more esteemed profession. This points to the intricate interplay between different regulatory styles and that these are tied up in societal values and norms.

**Discussion: 'Low-skilled workers' motivation: between individual and societal narratives**

There are several things we can learn from the analysis of work life narratives in the light of SDT. First of all, the analysis makes it obvious that motivation to learn is present in the work life narratives of these three low-skilled male workers, although motivation may not always be linked to education or work, but rather oriented towards other areas of their lives. This was common to all of the interviews in our sample.

What is common to the three narratives is an endeavour to reconcile intrinsic motivation, be it for outdoor life, football or social justice, with choice of career. Both Lars and Jonas have a dream of becoming a journalist in order to live out their passions; Henrik also chooses to enter vocational training programmes related to his intrinsic motivation, but is deterred by the actual job functions. This endeavour continues in their work life stories where all three persistently try to construct a meaningful work life by integrating their interest within their current job, in some form or other.

The telling examples demonstrate how motivational factors are intricately connected, complex and dynamic. The telling examples of Lars and Jonas make it very clear that not only the level of motivation, but also the orientation of that motivation vary significantly throughout life. While Lars has a strong internal locus of control which is tightly connected to his personal values, Jonas has a somewhat external locus of control. Despite his apparent willing and satisfactory participation in his job, he is strongly influenced by the values of others, of society and close friends, causing him to make choices enabling him to fit in with (his perception of) these external values and norms.

In his *current* work life, Jonas is regulated by the type of extrinsic motivation called introjected regulation, as he *'performs an act to enhance or maintain self-esteem and the feeling of worth [...]* Although the regulation is internal to the person, introjected behaviours are not experienced as *fully part of the self and thus still have an EPLOC [external perceived locus of causality]*' (Ryan &

Deci 2000, p. 62). Lars is regulated by the more self-determined types of extrinsic motivation: *identification* and *integrated regulation*. He identifies with the personal importance of a behaviour and ‘*the more one internalises the reasons for an action and assimilates them to the self, the more one’s extrinsically motivated actions become self-determined*’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.62).

### ***The embeddedness of motivation***

The telling examples of Lars, Henrik and Jonas demonstrate the embeddedness of individual motivation in societal narratives. Motivation is a concept which has been integrated in the societal narrative of job and education. Ahl notes that motivational theories have privileged ‘*self-actualization through work*’ and that ‘*adults have motivation problems*’ when it comes to participation in adult education (Ahl, 2006, p. 11 & 13). This was also the point of departure for the Cedefop research project on which this article is based: it is necessary to identify the barriers for low-skilled workers’ participation in adult education with the underlying assumptions that they are not motivated and need to be(come) motivated for education and work. These societal narratives of having an inherent motivation for your job and/or for education are reflected in the narratives of Henrik and Jonas.

Henrik feels a need to justify his attitudes to his job, narrated mainly as a means to earning a living, and the fact that he is oriented towards ‘his hobbies’, which are his driving force. In fact, Henrik has been striving to integrate his hobbies throughout his work life, although it has at times been a battle, particularly to convince colleagues of the value of outdoor activities for children. Jonas’ work life history also reflects dominant narratives about education and the importance of completing a university degree, preferably a master’s degree, as quickly as possible. Jonas has internalised the

values of efficiency within Danish education policy and feels pressure, having postponed his studies until the age of 26.

The assumption of paid work as the central activity in a work life was also reflected in the way our interviews were conducted: we did not ask about other activities that the interviewees might be engaged in. This assumption was highlighted when, at the end of an interview, an interviewee asked: *'Don't you want to know about the other activities I engage in?'* It turned out that the interviewee was involved in an extensive barter economy, exchanging 'work' with friends and neighbours. This questioned our own assumptions about what constitutes 'work' but also our own ingrained value of work as essential to our identity. In the subsequent interviews, we paid more attention to other perceptions of work as to broaden our understanding.

### ***The role of support structures***

The narratives of Lars, Henrik and Jonas are situated within three decades of employment and education policy. Lars, who completed upper secondary education in 1984, entered a labour market with a high level of unemployment. However, at that time social benefits were not contingent on 'activation'. The case worker handling Lars' case estimated that Lars was self-directed and self-motivating, and allowed him to pursue his interests and engage in grassroots activities while receiving social benefits. This practice supported Lars in choosing activities in which he experienced high levels of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Although this was only made possible through a lenient public benefit system, it supported an internal locus of control whereby Lars had a feeling of self-determination. Through participation in voluntary activities, Lars developed skills, gained experiences and developed networks which had profound consequences for the way his work life developed.

Henrik, who entered the labour market during the 1990s, becomes part of an active labour market policy implemented in Denmark. This policy emphasises the rights and duties of the unemployed in order to receive social benefits. The policy also marks a change in the overall narrative about unemployment: from a Keynesian welfare state narrative, in which unemployment is due to structural conditions, to a neoliberal workfare state narrative, in which the individual is responsible for ensuring his or her own employability through LLL (see Cort, Thomsen & Mariager-Anderson, 2015). The workfare narrative implies a notion of extrinsic motivation, making it a duty to engage in education and a self-deserved/stigmatised position to be unemployed. Through these policies, specific conceptualisations of motivation have been integrated in both employment and education policies, and hence embedded in public institutions and practices. External motivation, i.e. motivation through external reinforcement such as gaining rewards or avoiding punishment, and introjected motivation, i.e. external approval/disapproval, have become dominant. Hereby, the locus of control is connected to external regulation, allowing for a low degree of autonomy. This change of regime was cemented with the liberal-conservative government in 2001, and when Jonas enters the labour market in the 00s, his possibilities are limited compared to Lars.

### ***Implications for adult education and career guidance as motivational interventions***

The analysis of work life narratives in a SDT perspective helps us to understand that motivation as a concept needs to be decentred and nuanced. Motivation is not just extrinsic, as conceptualised in employment and education policy; nor does motivation necessarily have to be intrinsic in order for people to engage in an activity. Last but not least, the orientation and level of motivation changes over the lifespan. People who are not interested in formal education in their teens may engage in a formal education programme at a later stage in life. Adult educators and career guidance

practitioners therefore need to consider and explore, working alongside participants, the orientation and styles of motivation.

Our analysis also helps us to understand how the three interviewees are motivated, and to see how the changing nature of this motivation is situated in a specific time in life and history and related to different activities. Historical circumstances, such as employment policies and higher education reforms, provide different spaces of opportunity for the interviewees to act. But adult educators and career guidance practitioners themselves are also situated and hereby have different spaces of opportunity within which to construct their practice. In a system based primarily on external motivation, career guidance counsellors may end up in a controlling rather than facilitating and guiding role. Career guidance practitioners also need a space of autonomy in order to engage with a person's complex web of life roles (Niles & Harris-Bowlsby 2009), and thereby connect him or her to an understanding of his/her motivation for new possibilities. Niles & Harris-Bowlsby (2009) go as far as to state that:

Theories and interventions that are not sensitive to this basic fact address a life situation that does not exist. Life roles interact and influence each other so that the same job holds different meanings for two individuals who live in different contexts. (Niles & Harris-Bowlsby 2009, p.31).

Furthermore, it is important for practitioners to critically consider the concept of motivation, its (often political) underpinnings, and how motivation is a complex phenomenon. The individual may be motivated for something, but this motivation has to be understood in relation to an activity and a context. Furthermore, motivation has to be understood within the broader societal context. If we perceive motivation as innate, the problem of being unmotivated is connected to the individual. If motivation is understood as a social construct, the problem of not being motivated is connected to



support structures such as activation schemes. Hence, we need to draw out the assumptions underlying understandings of low-skilled workers' 'problems of motivation'. One way to do this is to look for alternative understandings and be critical of systemic categorisations of people, especially when they are categorised as 'unmotivated', 'inactive', or as 'non-learners'.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of work life histories in this article shows that people are active, engage in many different activities, and try to make sense of their (work) lives. They want to feel that they are able to determine their own work life trajectories and the learning that they engage in. Although adult education and career guidance are meant to be helpful interventions for the low skilled, offering the prospect of a better life, if people feel that this is externally imposed upon them, they may find it difficult to embrace what is offered. Furthermore, the middle class meritocratic values underpinning the educational system and the view of work as a calling clash with other sets of values in which family, friends, interests and political engagement are placed above work and education (Young, 1958). If we only ascribe value to paid work and formal education, people end up being labelled as unmotivated and practitioners end up being part of a dividing practice. SDT provides us with a lens for understanding different types of motivation when adults enter education or career guidance. As an analytical tool, it offers a more nuanced understanding of motivation which can be valuable, also for practitioners.

Adult education and career guidance has a potential in being helpful stepping stones in low skilled workers' lives, however it needs to be a practice that acknowledges that there is not *a* good life, but rather a variety of 'good lives' and, there is a multitude of motivation in relation to the activities that make up good lives for the individual.

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i The concept 'political narrative' is our own concept used to describe the narratives implied in public policy.

ii In the Cedefop project, barriers and drivers for the learning of low-skilled workers were studied in seven European countries (Denmark, Germany, France, Poland, Czech Republic, Italy and England). The interviewees had to meet the following eligibility criteria: aged between 25 and 40; employed, or unemployed for less than one year; minimum five years of working experience; unskilled or low skilled; of ethnic minority origin.

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<sup>iii</sup> The job as an educator assistant is specific to the Danish context. As both parents usually work full time, Denmark has an extensive childcare system for children aged 0 to 5 years (preschool). The personnel in preschool childcare consist of skilled educators (bachelor programme), skilled educator assistants (vocational education and training programme) and unskilled educator assistants. The job as unskilled educator assistant is often a temporary job for young people, male and female, in transition in the education system.

<sup>iv</sup> Many of the women in the sample had a motivational orientation towards family. The male interviewees did not express the same level of orientation towards family.

<sup>v</sup> Allotments in Denmark are small houses with gardens located in the cities where people can reside either all year or during the summer.

<sup>vi</sup> All quotes are translated from Danish to English by the authors

<sup>vii</sup> The Danish folk high schools offer non-formal adult education. Most students are between 18 and 24 years old and the length of a typical stay is 4 months. You sleep, eat, study and spend your spare time at the school. There are no academic requirements for admittance and there are no exams - but you will get a diploma as a proof of your attendance. (<http://www.danishfolkhighschools.com/about>)

<sup>viii</sup> In the 1980s, youth unemployment in Denmark was high – around 13 % - and Lars was never activated (to use the common term of the 1990s) or offered education and training.