
Narratives about Labour Market Transitions

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ABSTRACT In European Union policy, Denmark is often referred to as a model country in terms of its flexicurity model and provision of financial support and access to education and training during periods of unemployment, i.e. during transitional phases in a working life. However, in the research on flexicurity and its implications for labour market transitions, little attention has been paid to the views and experiences of the individuals concerned. The aim of this article is to connect the grand narrative with individual narratives about labour market transitions in the Danish flexicurity system. On the basis of narrative interviews with skilled workers, this article explores how labour market transitions are experienced by the individual and the role played by national support structures in the individual narratives. The article shows how, for the individual, a transition may prove to be a valuable learning experience during which radical career decisions are taken, and how support structures may work to the detriment of such learning and of the principles behind flexicurity. The article points to a reconceptualisation of transitions as important learning opportunities during which (more) adequate support structures could be provided.

Introduction

At a time where many stakeholders across the fields of policy making, education, career development and research agree that transitions between jobs and in and out of the labour market are likely to become more frequent, the way we conceptualise and experience 'transitions' becomes equally important. It is said that people can no longer be expected to stay in the same or a handful of jobs throughout their entire working lives (Muffels et al, 2002, p. 2). Nor can they be expected to have linear careers where they work their way from the bottom to the top within a specific occupation or sector. Transitions have become increasingly individualised and 'individual lifecourses are characterised by increasing variety and range of transition routes' (Ecclestone et al, 2010, p. xviii). Politically, there is a call for people to be mobile and make transitions from one sector to another, from one occupation to another, and from one geographical region to another in order to secure labour market attachment (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2013, p. 21). The individual's engagement in lifelong learning and guidance is perceived as a prerequisite for managing labour market transitions (Council of the European Union, 2008).

In labour market studies, the term 'transitional labour market' has been coined as a political strategy for how to handle the changes taking place in the labour market. The idea is that policy makers should create a transitional labour market which provides 'opportunities ... for people of making transitions *within* the domain of employment itself'. The studies point to the fact that labour market policies have remained focused on the 'reintegration of people who have already dropped out of the labour market'; policies should instead focus on creating 'transitory states between paid work and gainful non-market activities' in order to support people through difficult transitions in their working lives (Muffels et al, 2002, p. 2, original emphasis).

The idea of valuing transitions and creating a 'transitional labour market' which supports citizens during their working lives will be explored in this article. On the basis of the research project 'Learning for Career and Labour Market Transitions' (European Centre for the

Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop]), we look into how labour market transitions are narrated and how support structures are experienced as playing a role (positive or negative) in facilitating learning and transitions in a working life. Our analysis points to a schism between individual narratives of transitions and public support structures in Denmark. The support structure of public employment services (PES), in particular, is presented as inadequate in the narratives. Our aim is to discuss critically how the idea of meaningful 'transitory states' could inform public policies on support structures.

We will begin by outlining the article's background in a research project examining individual narratives of transitions in five European countries and connecting these individual narratives with the 'grand narratives' of different labour market and lifelong learning systems. In the second section, we move onto the 'grand narrative' of the Danish 'flexicurity' system and look into how transitions are conceptualised within employment policies in Denmark. We describe how employment policy has changed from the early 1990s until today, limiting the possible support schemes during transitions. In line with Wilthagen (2005), we argue that current labour market policies focus primarily on rapid integration into the labour market and less on education, training and 'gainful non-market activities'. From the grand narratives, we then consider the individual narratives, briefly outlining the concept of 'iconic' narratives before turning to the narratives of three skilled workers. The individual narratives illustrate how careers [1] are navigated in the interface between individual agency and public support structures. In the final section, we connect the grand and individual narratives and discuss the implications for our understanding of transitions and support structures.

Research Background: learning for career and labour market transitions

The article draws its data from the study 'Learning for Career and Labour Market Transitions', which looked into the role of learning and adult career guidance in labour market transitions in five European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Spain). The study was initiated by Cedefop and reflects an increasing interest in transitions, both politically and scientifically. The choice of narrative method to research transitions was to 'showcase the value and potential for use of individual biographies to illuminate key issues in learning for career and labour market transitions' (2014, p. i).

In order to understand the role of transitions in working life, narrative interviews were conducted with skilled workers in intermediate and low-managerial positions. In the Cedefop study (2014), the analysis of the narrative interviews focused on identifying how the interviewees had engaged in different forms of learning and career guidance and how this had influenced their careers and contributed to transitions during their working lives.

A central finding in the final report was the identification of opportunity structures in which the individuals operate. Opportunity structures were defined broadly in the study as structures facilitating lifelong learning and include: workplaces; continuing vocational education and training (CVET) systems; accreditation systems; unemployment benefits; occupational structures; and support structures, such as family, networks, public and private employment services, career guidance, public funds for continuous training, etc. (Cedefop, 2014). In the report, support structures are directly linked to transitions and support the individual's decision-making during transitional phases in his or her working life.

In the Danish part of the study, 21 persons were interviewed. The sampling was partly purposive, partly opportunistic as interviewees were recruited through the outsourcing company AS3 (transition from unemployment to employment), eGuidance (experience with support), and through Facebook (random). The Danish country analysis report centres on three main themes: (1) Support structures – opportunity or barrier for learning?; (2) Learning for and from radical changes in the labour market; and (3) Learning from labour market transitions (Cedefop, 2014). This article focuses on transitions and how transitions are narrated by the interviewees. The concept of support structure constituted an analytical backdrop for the interviews, as the themes of career guidance and engagement with public employment services were part of the interview guide. In some cases interviewees directly addressed support during a transitional phase; in other cases it was the 'silence' in the interview about support structures in place which came out in the analysis. The

concept of 'support structure' seeks to encapsulate how people in transitions may draw on support from networks (family, friends, and colleagues), professional associations, educational institutions, job centres, and public funds. With regard to public structures, these have been set up with the purpose of supporting transition from a state of unemployment to a state of employment and for up-skilling and re-skilling purposes, i.e. occupational or sectorial transitions. In this article, we exemplify the role of support structures through three narratives focusing on the transition from unemployment to employment and the role played by the PES, public funding for competence development, and trade unions.

One of the strengths of a narrative approach is that it highlights the role of agency in transitions and how narratives are embedded within specific national structures:

Connecting disparate social phenomena and personal experience and weaving understanding between them in new and sometimes surprising ways characterizes ... a great deal of biographical research. (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 2)

In this perspective, people are not just determined by external structures, but actively create and give meaning to their lives (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1). We are able to situate the narratives within structural conditions, and narrative research hereby opens for an understanding of the dialectics between individual agency and support structures in transitional phases. Support structures may be narrated as barriers to or as facilitators of transitions in the labour market, or they may be altogether absent from a narrative. These silences are also telling for our understanding of the flexicurity system. Careful consideration of the narratives within the wider social, political and cultural contexts can in this way shed light on transitory states during a working life trajectory.

Can we generalise on the basis of our data?[2] The answer is no, but what we can and will do is to use the narratives to problematise the role of existing support structures in labour market transitions and substantiate our argument on the basis of other studies within the field.

The 'Grand' Narrative of Flexicurity and the Transitional Danish Labour Market

The Danish flexicurity model has since the 2000s been promoted as a case of good practice by the European Commission (see, for example, Council of the European Union, 2007; Flexicurity Pathways, 2007). A central trait of the flexicurity model is that it eases transitions both within an enterprise, i.e. internal flexicurity, and 'from job to job between enterprises and between employment and self-employment (external flexicurity)' (Flexicurity Pathways, 2007, p. 11). During transitional phases of unemployment, people are secured through financial support and access to education and training. In terms of establishing a 'transitional labour market', Denmark has to some degree been perceived as exemplary (see, for example, Larsen, 2010); however, as we will show in this section, focus has gradually shifted from offers of adult education and training to job activation and rapid reintegration into the labour market (Bredgaard et al, 2009), leaving the system less supportive of the individual in transition.

According to Larsen (2005), the Danish flexicurity model arose from historical circumstances rather than as a deliberate strategy of establishing a 'transitional labour market'. The central role of the social partners in regulating wage and labour market conditions through collective agreements and the tripartite arrangements have led to a consensus-based system where interests are negotiated among stakeholders and compromises found. In regard to labour market transitions, the flexicurity model has rested on three factors: low job security (to the benefit of the employers); high compensation levels during periods of unemployment (to the benefit of the employees); and an extensive system of activation policies and possibilities of adult education, i.e. re- and up-skilling (to the benefit of both employers and employees).[3]

Due to the flexicurity system, the Danish labour market is characterised by a high level of mobility compared to other countries. Each year, approximately 700,000, or approximately 25 % of the workforce, change their job: 'Danish wage earners have on average had more jobs in the course of their working lives than their counterparts in every other EU country' (Voss et al, 2009, p. 13).

Andersen and Svarer describe the Danish labour market as characterised by 'high flows into and out of employment', even in times of recession (2012, p. 1). Due to the high mobility, unemployment spells are on average short and the main challenge is to avoid an increase in long-

term unemployment. This can be achieved by supporting people in different ways in transitional periods.

According to the theory on transitional labour markets, policy makers can draw on a range of arrangements in order to create adequate support structures during transitions: job rotation; temporary part-time work; leave schemes; career guidance; lifelong learning, etc. (see, for example, Schmid, 1995; Larsen, 2005; Gazier & Gautié, 2009). These arrangements cover different transitional phases: from unemployment to employment; from unemployment to education and training; from education to employment; from one occupation to another; from employment to retirement, etc.

Public Employment Service (PES)

In Danish employment policy, the main focus is on the transition from unemployment to employment. This transition is perceived as problematic whereas other transitions receive less public attention. The main public institution [4] to support the transition from unemployment to employment is the PES, in Denmark called job centres. Their objective is to provide incentives for the activation of the unemployed and match unemployed people and enterprises in need of qualified workers. The job centres have a dual role in relation to unemployed people: on the one hand, they are to support the unemployed person during the transition and ensure that he or she gets a job; on the other hand, they are to control that the unemployed abide by the many rules regulating the area.[5] According to a recent survey conducted by the independent think tank Mandag Morgen, case workers spend more time on bureaucracy and administration advising citizens as employment is the most meticulously regulated policy area with more than 20,000 pages of laws and regulations (Reiermann, 2014).

The support offered by the job centres includes: individual interviews; activation schemes provided by municipalities, educational institutions or private providers; the right to six weeks of (relevant) education; flex-jobs for people who cannot handle a full-time job; wage subsidies during internships, etc. The implementation of active labour market policies in the 1990s saw the introduction of a wide range of initiatives aimed at supporting transitions: various leave schemes, such as one-year sabbaticals, parental leave, education and training leave, and job rotation combining initiatives for the unemployed with training of the employed (Larsen, 2005, p. 16). These schemes created publicly supported opportunities for transitional phases during a working life; however, many had been abolished or significantly reduced by the end of the 1990s. In the 2000s, the political discourse on unemployment changed: instead of understanding unemployment as a lack of qualifications or a structural problem, employment policies came to rest on 'the premise that the unemployed lack motivation and incentives to take a job (i.e. are *unwilling* to work)' (p. 18). Consequently, focus changed from re-skilling and up-skilling to measures aimed at motivating unemployed people to work, primarily through the threat of sanctions, preferring the stick to the carrot. One implication of these policy changes is that periods of transition are perceived as wasteful and something which should be minimised.

Today, unemployed citizens still have the right to six weeks of relevant education, but according to Andersen and Svarer (2012, p. 6), only 13% took this opportunity in 2011, a fairly low figure. In general, almost 70% of the employed population participates in some form of further education or training during the course of a year (Danmarks Statistik, 2013), whereas the figure among the unemployed is 58% and only 24 % for those classified as outside the labour force (United Federation of Danish Workers (3F), 2012). It may appear somewhat of a paradox that those furthest from the labour market, and therefore presumably most in need of some form of up-skilling or re-skilling in order to regain a footing, are the least likely to participate in further education or training, but this can be explained by the shift in employment policies to an increased focus on quick reintegration into the labour market rather than education and training as a means of strengthening the employability of unemployed people. The background for this shift was criticism of the effectiveness of the latter approach (see, for example, Bredgaard et al, 2009, p. 114).

The 'transitional labour market' in Denmark was further undermined in 2011 when the maximum period of eligibility for unemployment insurance benefit was halved from four years to two (Madsen, 2011, pp. 14-15). At the same time, the conditions for re-earning the right to

unemployment insurance benefit were increased from 26 weeks to 52 weeks of eligible activity. The underlying political assumption is that the fear of losing unemployment benefits may motivate unemployed people to apply for jobs outside their field of qualification and to become more geographically mobile. This implies that unemployment has become a question of the individual's lack of employability and, not least, willingness to adapt to a changing labour market. It also implies that transitions have become more insecure.

In recent years, the Danish job centres have come under heavy criticism for sending unemployed people on meaningless courses with the sole purpose of securing the individual municipalities the maximum share of the available government reimbursement. As a result, funding schemes were altered in order to increase the stimulus for job-oriented activation and for helping the unemployed into mainstream education and training. At the same time, fees for job retraining programmes were increased.[6]

Lifelong Learning and Career Guidance Opportunities

In terms of lifelong learning and supporting transitions from job to job or sector to sector, Denmark has a longstanding tradition for publicly provided further and continuing education and training. As can be seen from the figures above, a considerable share of adult education and training is undertaken by people in employment which means that the participation in education and training may not be seen as a transition per se, but as a possibility for future transitions. The social partners also play an important role in the adult education system, both through their participation in national committees and councils on adult education and adult career guidance, and through the collective agreements in which provisions for competence development and access to career guidance are stipulated.

An example of the role of the social partners in the provision of adult education relates to the competence development funds which were established as the result of a collective agreement among the social partners in the industrial sector. The aim of the competence funds is to support workers' participation in competence development and education in accordance with the collective agreements. Employees and businesses can apply for grants for courses, training and education. Furthermore, the funds are to provide the opportunity to apply for grants for self-directed and self-selected competence development, and motivate an increase in education and training activities. Each employee can receive funding for up to two weeks a year on courses, education and training.[7] The courses must be relevant to the employees' work and continued competence development.

An example of access to career guidance is the collective agreement of the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) [8] in 2014 which aims to secure that, if made redundant, members are entitled to two hours paid leave for guidance either at the union office or the unemployment insurance fund. In Denmark, while adult career guidance is provided through many sources, including the national eGuidance portal, the main public funded access is through 13 adult education and training centres (VEU centres) (Euroguidance Denmark and Danish Agency for Universities and Internationalisation, 2012). As a result, access to career guidance for adults has been described as opaque and partial, with career practitioners pointing to their conflicting roles of supporting people's free choice of education, while simultaneously selling the courses provided by the institution (private or public) that employs them (Pedersen, 2010). The main target group for the VEU centres is small and medium-sized companies and their employees. They focus on providing guidance regarding adult education and training, and not necessarily on the broader aspects of career guidance, as defined, for instance, by the European Union (EU) as a 'continuous process that enables citizens ... to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life trajectories in learning, work and other settings' (Council of the European Union, 2008).

A Changing Perception of Transitions in the Danish Flexicurity System

The flexicurity model has established a system in which the transition from unemployment to employment is supported through unemployment benefits to those who are insured, and where

the job centres play an important role in supporting and controlling the unemployed person during the transition. However, in recent years, there has been a change in focus within employment policy and a wide range of possible support arrangements, including education and training, have been down-scaled in favour of control mechanisms aimed at rapidly reintegrating the unemployed person into the labour market. The disciplinary element of the policy has grown stronger. The leave schemes introduced in the 1990s have been abolished or reduced, making transitions from employment to education and training or to a period of child leave more difficult. The early retirement scheme making it possible for people aged 60 to leave the labour market has likewise been drastically reduced. Transitions are to be minimised as they are cost-intensive and unproductive. This policy was driven by a concern expressed by many, both policy makers and researchers, about the future supply of labour due to demographic change; a concern which was predominant in the period from the early 2000s until the onset of the global economic downturn in 2008 (see, for example, Smith et al, 2003). While the sharp increases in unemployment resulting from this downturn softened some of the political rhetoric regarding the unemployed, the general thrust of policy remained as evidenced by the previously mentioned changes to unemployment insurance benefit from 2011.

The conceptualisation of transitions has changed from the 1990s to the 2010s. Transitions are today perceived as problematic and expensive; policies are therefore aimed at minimising transition periods.[9] As a consequence of the changes in employment policies, elements in the flexicurity model have been downscaled (the right to education and training, the possibility of leave, the possibility of early retirement), and the efforts to move people into employment have been intensified through increased incentive structures (primarily through policing). However, policies and the institutions set up to support labour market transitions are but one side of the Danish flexicurity system; how they are experienced by the citizens dependent upon them is another. Through individual narratives on working life and the various transitions experienced during a working life, we are able to shed light on the dialectics between agency and structure. As will be shown in following, from the individual's perspective, transitions are experienced as a learning opportunity during which the need for support may arise in order to make the transition successful.

Iconic Narratives of Labour Market Transitions and the Role of Support Structures

We now turn from the grand narrative to individual narratives of labour market transitions. From the interview material we have selected three iconic narratives, i.e. narratives that are 'telling' for the themes encountered across the 21 interviews conducted. 'Telling' in the sense that the meaning attributed to a working life in a flexicurity system ran across the narratives (see Reid & West for a discussion of 'Telling Tales', 2011). In the article, we present selected 'coda', i.e. the narrative fragments dealing with labour market transitions during which the individual is either in contact with or attempting to draw advantage of public support structures.

In each narrative, the interview person talks about his or her desire to engage in learning activities in order to make transitions in the labour market. We focus on how support structures and learning possibilities interact and how the dialectics of agency and structure, i.e. the dynamic interplay between individual labour market transitions and support structures, unfold in the narratives.

The three narratives illustrate different transitions. The first two narratives show working lives with many transitions and experiences with public support structures. They illustrate the role of agency in navigating the transition from unemployment to employment. The third narrative shows how making a radical career transition in mid-life is difficult in a labour market system based on well-defined occupations. All three narratives illustrate the roles of both individual agency and public support structures in transitional phases.

Managing a Multiple Transitional Working Life: strong agency, weak support

The first narrative presents a multiple transitional working life in which the narrator is in contact with support structures on multiple occasions during transitions in and out of employment.

Mette is a 41-year-old woman who has been trained as a legal secretary, but who has had a lot of different jobs during her life: airport security, human resources, at an amusement park, working with cargo at a navy base in Greenland. The frequent job changes were explained by Mette as a quest to:

find out what I liked. It has always been ... it's been a search for what I wanted to do. There's no doubt about that. And I have been very conscious of that.

At the time of the interview, Mette is doing an internship at an acupuncture clinic and trying to set up her own business as a massage therapist.

During her working life, Mette has been in contact with the PES on several occasions. She talks about meaningless activities and the PES as a kind of 'job' where she has to perform different activities in order to receive her unemployment benefits. She uses phrases such as: 'You have to show up – then they will leave you in peace' and 'If you do something yourself, you are in the fast lane, they can't pester you'. These phrases illustrate that Mette does not find the PES particularly supportive, but also that she expects to be supported in the transition.

In her transitions, Mette has tried to take a proactive approach towards her needs for support as she experiences them. She has said to the case workers and job consultants: 'I want to work with something else, can you please help me?'. In response, she was told that she could apply for admission via the mainstream education system and for a state education grant 'like young people do'. This reply disappointed Mette as she expected the people working in the PES to be familiar with various grant schemes and training activities, and to be able to guide her to relevant adult learning opportunities that could support her labour market transitions.

I think that 40% of the people who are in the same situation as me, they are there because they want a change of work. They don't want to work in an office ... they [PES] are so eager to get us back into the offices instead of asking: Could we re-educate you to do something different?... They are so busy trying to fit us back into the same job that we are trying to escape.

According to the rules, Mette is entitled to six weeks of relevant education. As she was trying to change career direction, she applied for a course in hygiene; however this was not perceived as relevant to her current occupation and her application was denied. Determined to make the transition into a new sector, Mette ended up paying for this adult vocational training course herself. The same thing happened when Mette enrolled in a massage therapy programme, which is a private, unregulated course in Denmark: she paid for it herself. However, she took part in the course while receiving unemployment benefits, well aware that this is against the rules of labour market availability. Mette defends her position by saying:

They [the PES and the unemployment insurance fund] don't do anything to help me get a job ... It's a hopeless system. If they find a job for me, they make themselves redundant.

Mette has learnt to navigate the system and to tackle the barriers for making the transition into a different occupation and sector. She is critical of the system which she describes as being flawed. In Mette's experience, the system is organised as if unemployed people are not interested in finding a job. It is based on control and monitoring, instead of supporting those who are motivated.

When career guidance is defined as a process that supports people in managing their lives, it becomes interesting to look at the narratives and identify the points, times and situations in life where an individual potentially could have benefitted from career guidance because they at that point, time or situation experienced a transition related to work and to their engagement with the labour market and made decisions about their career, e.g. when Mette enrolled in and completed office training at a vocational college, got a work-related injury and was eligible for sick leave, dropped out of upper secondary education, found herself in periods of redundancy, etc. At each of these points, Mette was in contact with public support structures which could have provided career guidance.

Mette's narrative reflects a desire to find the 'right' job, trying out different possibilities in the process. She is active and seems to constantly put herself in new situations in order to learn about herself and what makes her life meaningful. There is a strong agency in Mette's narrative and an interesting dialectic between agency and structure as she progresses, both due to and in spite of the structures and rules of the employment policy. She receives unemployment benefits and is hereby

able to continue to pursue her dream job, but on the other hand, she has to navigate in a complex system with many rules regulating what she is and is not allowed to do as an unemployed person.

Lost in Transition: the lack of support in a multiple transitional working life

The second narrative shares a number of similarities with Mette's narrative, but, whereas Mette is driven by a desire to find an occupation that she finds meaningful, Anna is driven more by external circumstances, such as stress from a 'bad' working environment, company reorganisations, and the economic recession of 2008. In both narratives there have been many points of contact with public support structures with the potential for career guidance. One significant difference is that Mette has actively sought support, while Anna has not.

Anna is 46 years old and, like Mette, has had a working life characterised by many transitions in and out of employment, primarily in low-skilled functions (receptionist, data entry operator, sales assistant, storage worker). Many of the transitions in Anna's working life have been forced upon her and at the time of the interview she had been unemployed for nine months and was registered with the job centre with the prospect of being placed in job activation within the next couple of months.

In terms of her many transitions, Anna has never looked for support beyond her friends and her feelings:

I discuss it with myself, I think: what do I want? What is my gut feeling? Is this what I want?

From an outside perspective, there seem to be at least three transitions in Anna's life where support in the form of career guidance might have been helpful:

1. Anna's transition from basic schooling to Gymnasium. In retrospect, Anna feels that she chose the wrong route. The question is whether she could have benefited from being guided into a vocational education and training (VET) programme as the Gymnasium qualifies for further and higher education, not for entry into the labour market.
2. Anna returned to the VET system after having worked in a bank and a period of unemployment, with the goal of qualifying as a medical secretary. However, she dropped out due to the lack of adult apprenticeships. This seems to be a critical turning point where support from a vocational college or a job centre might have helped her to complete the programme instead of dropping out, especially a kind of advocative guidance which actively served the interests of the adult students and played an active part in marketing the more mature students to help them secure the apprenticeship that is necessary in order to complete their education.
3. Her current situation as unemployed where she runs the risk of falling out of the unemployment benefit system within six months due to the changes in the legislation (see section on flexicurity). Despite two activation courses, Anna did not report on support from the PES which was helpful in allowing her to realise her own barriers for learning, her own potentials and her space of possibility in order to make a career change, something which could have been identified, e.g. through a narrative guidance interview.

Although there are many differences between Anna's and Mette's respective narratives, when it comes to the PES, they are strikingly similar. During Anna's first period of long-term unemployment she was connected to the job centre (PES). During this period, she felt that unemployed people were treated in a condescending and humiliating manner. She compared the job centre to the union and concluded that the unions were better at supporting their members. At the job centre, career guidance sessions turned into mass meetings and the possibilities for receiving individual support were limited.

At the time of the first interview, Anna was once again unemployed and was to be placed in job activation in accordance with the Act on Early Activation. In a follow-up interview, she talks about the activation course and her experiences with it. The course was aimed at developing Anna's competences in completing job applications. It was the fifth course she had been sent on regarding the job application process and she was critical of the course and its outcome. She suggested that it would be more meaningful if she could have a job with a wage subsidy.

Anna described the course as part self-study, part exercises and part interviews. The course was primarily based on self-study, i.e. the participants applying for jobs during the course and the

teachers helping them with writing the application and teaching them how to answer a telephone, an element which seems irrelevant in Anna's narrative as she has worked in telebanking. The participants included recipients of unemployment insurance benefits, social security claimants, and those eligible for help because they had fallen outside the unemployment system. If the participants did not show up, they would lose their unemployment benefit, but, according to Anna, they were not particularly motivated and many spent the day playing cards. The participants were not offered career guidance, but had to ask for interviews with the teachers. Although Anna is critical of the content of the course, she still considers it helpful. It provided a structure in her everyday life and the possibility of meeting other people. Especially, the relationship with the other participants and the possibility of talking to other people in the same situation was described by Anna as helpful as it offered something meaningful to do while unemployed. However, it did not facilitate the transition into employment.[10]

Compared to Mette, who shows resilience and determination and who uses her agency to navigate the system in order to achieve what she wants, Anna is more passive and focused on barriers. When talking about her 'dream job', Anna says that she would like to work for a humanitarian organisation in a job split between clerical and social work. However, this is presented as unachievable:

you have to start working as voluntary help and you cannot be sure you will be employed afterwards.

The various activation schemes that Anna has attended have not been able to facilitate the transition from unemployed to employed, despite the fact that the employment policy targets rapid reintegration into the labour market through early activation.

Making a Radical Transition: the need for support in mid-life

In the third and final narrative, Hans outlines how a period of unemployment led to a radical transition and the implications of making such a transition.

Hans is 45 years old. He is married and lives with his wife and two children. Hans has a vocational background in sales and has worked as a salesman for eight years for three different companies. Like Mette and Anna, he has had many transitions in his working life, however primarily from job to job.

In 2008, Hans was made redundant from his job as a salesman due to the general recession in Denmark. During Hans's period of unemployment, which lasted for six months, his daughter made a thought-provoking remark which led to a radical transition in his working life:

When I stopped in the key account manager job, my daughter said: 'I've got a totally different father now, a kind of father that I have never had'. And then I sat down and thought about what to do and which way to go from there. There should be a serious change of job.

The remark was meant positively, signalling that Hans was more relaxed and more involved in his family's everyday life. The remark made Hans reconsider the importance of work and family. He decided to make a radical change. As part of the decision-making process, Hans consulted his wife and decided that he would like to work with children. Hans and his wife have a son who is autistic, and he felt that he could use his experiences in a future job.

Hans did not feel that he received support from the PES in the process, but was supported in his decision by his union which represents sales personnel. His decision to work with children was positively received by the union representatives at a meeting in the union. After the meeting, he found out that out of twelve unemployed salesmen in the room that day only two of them would take a key account manager job again. Similar to Mette, Hans experienced that there were many people who would like to make changes and try a new line of business. However, the decision was not easy to carry out. Hans tells that he applied for around 100-200 jobs without success. He had positive feedback on his applications, but no job.

Hans finally landed a job in an after-school care facility at a primary school. The transition from sales to social care proved challenging for Hans. As an example, Hans tells of an activity at his new job called pedagogical day where all the staff are gathered in order to learn from each other:

It was a great challenge for me, because we had to interview other people and ask for other people's views and opinions and weren't allowed to comment ourselves. Previously I was in control of the agenda, which was all about selling stuff; now what matters is to ask the right explorative questions to get other people to open up.

He came from a job where he felt he was in control and competent to a job where he has to adapt to the community and where he feels less competent. After working as an assistant to a primary school teacher for a while, Hans had a break down. He describes the stress resulting from the change of working environment, from working alone to working in a team. Furthermore, Hans experienced problems separating work and family life. He had been given the responsibility to care for a boy with autism and he cannot maintain a 'professional' distance:

I tend to get boys with problems, but it has been hard on me, because I took it personally. I've brought the problems to bed at night ... It all culminated here in December. I was locked up in myself and had major concentration problems and all in all I felt very bad.

During the interview, Hans talks about his desire to become a social worker. He is aware that he needs certain additional competences to handle his new working life; however this is difficult, financially speaking, as the family cannot afford the significant loss of income if Hans were to study full-time. Instead, he considers starting an online course as a pedagogical assistant.

Hans makes a radical transition from sales to social care. It is a transition which is triggered by a need to establish work-life balance. He is unemployed when he decides to make the radical change; however he does not experience the PES as a source of support in the process. His union, on the other hand, supports the decision despite the fact that it will mean having to transfer to a new union. This differs from Mette's experience where the union was opposed to her change of occupation. The unions' role in supporting people's transitions in a transitional labour market is a central topic for further inquiries as many unions in Denmark have begun to market the availability of career guidance as one of the advantages of being in a union.

Hans's narrative shows that making a mid-life transition is a challenging learning process. It challenges the person's identity and requires new skills. In this respect, further education might play an important role in making a radical transition. Hans's private experiences with autism do not suffice in the professional interaction with an autistic boy who needs special care. Hans might have benefited from a course in special education, however, the competence funds which are tied up in collective agreements within specific occupations and sectors do not reach the people who want to make a radical change in mid-career or mid-life. Furthermore, Hans perceives the financial aspects as a major obstacle in making the transition into a new occupation.

Transitions between Individual Agency and Supportive Structures

The individual narratives shed light on how transitions are experienced in a working life and how they are dealt with at an individual level. Brown et al (2010) study the changing patterns of work-related learning and career development in Europe and talk about negotiating careers within different opportunity structures. Both Mette and Hans demonstrate agency and manage to navigate radical changes in their working lives reflecting their individual aspirations. Anna, on the other hand, has got stuck in long-term unemployment and has not benefitted from the support of the PES. In the narratives of Mette, Anna and Hans, the transitions in and out of employment have been a constant part of their working lives. Access to financial security in the form of social benefits is perceived as an institutionalised right; at the same time some of the support structures set up to ease the transition from unemployment to employment seem to be experienced as a barrier rather than support, even though it was set up to be supportive from a policy perspective. A key absence across the interviews is the absence of access to public professional career guidance during transitions.[11] The narrators have a certain degree of expectation that the PES should offer more than activation activities. This is part of the 'social contract' established between the employers, employees and the state (Sultana, 2011).

The Invisibility of Lifelong Learning Support Structures

In Denmark, there exists a wide array of funding schemes and possibilities for recognition of prior learning. The narratives do not reflect these possibilities. A significant silence is that the participants mention neither competence funds nor the possibility of having prior learning recognised despite the fact that they have been in contact with the PES during periods of unemployment. Radical mid-life career changes seem to be especially difficult. Entering a new line of work around the age of 40 requires individual resilience and determination as the support structures inhibit rather than promote radical career transitions (see also Ecclestone et al, 2010, p. xx). In the narratives, the role of the PES seems dubious and information about lifelong learning possibilities does not seem to be readily available. This is in line with the conclusions of a survey on the PES in the EU pointing to the fact that ‘few PES have the capacity yet to take up this lifelong guidance challenge’ (Sultana & Watts, 2006, p. 45).

Transition as a Basic Condition in a Working Life

The narratives support the understanding of transitions as a basic condition in a working life – at least in the case of Denmark. It is a condition which is not only externally enforced upon people, but which is also part of an internal quest to construct meaning in a working life and to progress in a career or start a new one. Both Mette and Hans are trying to create a meaningful (working) life, whereas the transition for Anna seems to turn into a deadlock situation. As stated at the beginning of this article, a change of occupation during a working life is becoming more common:

Changes in the world of work mean that more people now make several changes of career direction in the course of their lives, and have to learn new competences in order to do so. Increasingly therefore, learning and work are intertwined, on a lifelong basis. Careers are commonly not ‘chosen’ at a single point in time, but ‘constructed’ through a series of interrelated learning and work choices throughout life. (Watts, 2014, p. 243)

These changes reflect both individual agency (the search for meaningfulness, career advancement, etc.) and structural conditions (recession, technological change, changes in the work organisation, etc.). However, the support structures which should support the narrators in making successful transitions, to some extent contribute to a reduction of their space of possibility, and thereby become another barrier to making the transition into another career (other barriers include financial situation, lack of agency and self-esteem, family responsibilities, etc.)

The Unsupportive Support Structure of the PES

In the literature on transitional labour markets, the conclusion is that Denmark is a country that ensures a transitional labour market through its flexicurity system (Larsen, 2010). However, as the narratives show, there is a schism between the support structures and the individual experience of being supported when making transitions in the labour market. The role of the PES as a support structure is especially questioned in the narratives. The interviewees tell the story of a bureaucratic system which has no regard for individual needs for career guidance. This is in line with the analysis of public employment services in Europe carried out by Sultana and Watts (2006).[12] They point to the PES being more focussed on the short-term goals of moving unemployed people into employment and ‘thus off benefit’ (p. 30). Consequently focus is placed more on job seeking and job-matching, leaving career guidance as an underdeveloped service (p. 35). They recommend that the PES personalise their services and facilitate lifelong learning policies as a central element in career development.

Despite a well-developed career guidance policy in regard to educational transitions (from basic schooling to youth education and from youth education to higher education), adult career guidance is not high on the political agenda in Denmark. In the commissioned work on adult career guidance provision in Denmark, the chairman of the National Council for Adult Guidance, Professor Ove K. Pedersen, concluded:

Career guidance and counselling should be based around the individual and his/her needs for competence development and employability throughout life. The future adult career guidance system should be founded upon the assumption that individuals have the responsibility to ensure lifelong attachment to a dynamic labour market, as well as the right to receive support through economic incentives and an adult career guidance system which focuses on the various target groups and their different needs. (2010, p. 6, our translation)

The schism between the PES as a support structure and the individual experience of being supported can be explained to some extent by the changes in labour market policy at the end of the 1990s, changes which took place in the majority of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The focus in labour market policies shifted from education and training to the 'fastest possible route back into employment' (Larsen, 2010, p. 491). The underlying assumption was that unemployed people lacked the incentive to get a job, whereby the responsibility for making the transition into employment became the individual's. With the shortening of the unemployment benefit period, the stress in the flexicurity model was placed on flexibility and less on security:

Flexicurity, as we have seen, tends to redefine the notion of 'security' in particular ways, shifting the focus away from notions of redistributive solidarity towards an emphasis on the 'responsibilisation' (Ball, 2008) of individuals whose enjoyment of security is not guaranteed qua citizens, but in terms of their willingness to internalise a set of dispositions, including that of adapting to change (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Darmon & Perez, 2010)' (Sultana, 2012, p. 12)

The reduction of the transitional labour market arrangements set up in the 1990s has impeded transitions from unemployment to education and training, parental leave, sabbaticals, early retirement, etc. Instead a regime of controlling and disciplining unemployed people has been introduced in the PES with the aim of reintegrating unemployed people as quickly as possible into the labour market. The change of policy is partly based on a fear of labour shortage due to demographic changes. Up until the crisis in 2008, many labour market researchers wrote about the risk of labour shortage (Smith et al, 2003), and in Denmark a vast array of policies (also after 2008) have had this risk as an underlying assumption; reduction of access to early retirement, raising the age of retirement, shortening of the unemployment benefit period, and reduction of social benefits, to mention just a few. However, the change in employment policy is also an ideological change reflecting neo-liberal values of employability, competitiveness, and human capital. It places the main responsibility for unemployment and re- and up-skilling on the individual who has to constantly strive to maintain his or her market value in relation to the changing demands of the labour market.

Conclusions

In conclusion, how the problem of transitions is represented in policy is important for how transitions are facilitated in practice. With the current problematisation of transitions as wasteful and cost-intensive, they become something to be smoothed over and minimised. However, the individuals in transitions may be looking for learning opportunities that support their future aspirations for work and life. For them, transitions may provide a valuable (and hard) learning experience during which the economic support provided via the flexicurity model needs to be supplemented by access to professional career guidance.

As such, although transitions in the Danish labour market are made more secure through the unemployment benefit system, there still seems to be work to do to improve the support for people who are in a transition – voluntarily or involuntarily. In the narratives presented in this article, the job centres have not been successful in supporting people through transitions. Career guidance seems to be absent from the job centres where there is a narrow focus on pushing people into any available job. This has led to calls for the establishment of a more elaborate adult guidance system (Pedersen, 2010), targeting employed people in line with many other countries in Europe (Sultana, 2008), and, we might add, also the unemployed. In the United Kingdom, for example, career guidance has increasingly been seen as an important component of active labour market strategies (Hooley et al, 2012). The establishment of a comprehensive, coherent and professional

lifelong guidance system in Denmark requires an integrative approach to policies on adult education, employment, and career development. In a flexicurity model country this integrative approach can only be reached as a result of an agreement amongst the social partners, and this article argues that one way of advancing such discussions might be a reconceptualisation of transitions as important learning opportunities during which access to (more) adequate support structures could lead to a better use of the resources set aside for lifelong learning.

Notes

- [1] Career should not be understood in the traditional sense as a linear progression moving people up and down, and in and across organisations, but as the individual navigation in and meaning-making of work, learning and private life. A navigation which takes place within specific sociocultural structures. See also Merrill (2001).
- [2] To some degree it is not a relevant question as it draws on scientific ideals underlying more positivist research traditions. The main concern in the study reported in this article has been to understand individual narratives and the meaning attributed to learning and guidance in working life transitions, and to afterwards situate these individual narratives in the wider social and historical context.
- [3] The financing of the unemployment insurance system is to some degree borne by the individual who can choose to be member of an insurance fund creating a polarised system between insured and uninsured citizens. Approximately 25% is financed through membership fees the rest through the 8% labour market contribution income tax (*Arbejdsmarkedsbidrag*). Members pay the administration themselves.
- [4] Besides job centres, transitions can be supported through a national online career guidance service called eGuidance and through the adult education centres called VEU-centres.
- [5] Sultana & Watts point to the fact that blurred role differentiation in the PES tends to shift focus from career guidance to job seeking and job matching. Denmark is specifically mentioned as a case of blurring distinctions between the roles of guidance counsellor and placement officer (Sultana & Watts, 2006, pp. 34-35).
- [6] The entire employment policy is currently under scrutiny by an expert group lead by the former Minister of Taxation, Carsten Koch. The background is the many resources poured into the system (Danish Krone [DKK] six billion annually) and the poor results.
- [7] Many funds are administrated by kompetencefonde.dk. At the website, kompetencefonde.dk, employees and enterprises can find information on courses, training and education subsidised under the competence fund. These are first and foremost adult vocational courses, business degree courses, and courses that strengthen employees' literacy and numeracy. The employee can apply for subsidies related to participation fees, materials to be used in the course, subsidy pay and transport. In 2013, the annual contribution to the competence funds per employee varies in the collective agreements from DKK400 up to DKK820 per full-time employee. Employers pay for all full-time and part-time employees with more than nine months seniority who are members of the unions and therefore covered by the collective agreements.
- [8] The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) is the largest national trade union confederation in Denmark.
- [9] This counts not only for employment policies, but also for policy initiatives within education, for instance the latest *fremdriftsreform* that aims to fast-track students within higher education into the labour market by minimising the possibilities for gap years used on work experience, exchange programmes and internships.
- [10] Anna is not alone with her criticism of the Danish activation system. At the moment the system is heavily criticised from different perspectives (see, for example, the ironic description from the perspective of an unemployed: Aaen, 2012), including the Minister of Employment (<http://bm.dk/da/Aktuelt/Pressemeddelelser/Arkiv/2013/02/Ny%20beskaeftigelsespolitik%20skal%20sikre%20ledige%20en%20bedre%20indsats.aspx>).
- [11] It should be noted that the interview persons in the higher positions drew on privately provided career guidance in the form of coaching.

- [12] Sultana and Watts (2006, p. 31) describe the four main functions of the PES as: job broking, providing labour market information, administration of labour market adjustment programmes, and administration of unemployment benefits.

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