

Imagined Independence

Institutional Conditions and Individual Opportunities
in European labour markets

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Abstract

The studies presented in this thesis examine perceived labour market opportunities and conditions for labour market mobility for European employees. The European labour market strategy has created an opportunity-oriented employability-logic that emphasises individual characteristics and individual responsibility for employment. Within this logic, individuals are active job seekers and should continuously develop their employability skills, a one-dimensional focus on employability. In contrast, this thesis argues that the current employability discourse fails to account for two further relevant and interdependent dimensions of employability, namely the institutional context and the local recognition of employees' resources at the workplace. Thus, individual characteristics, institutional conditions and local recognition for resources are vital for employment. The institutional context influences individuals' access to education and employment, as well as employers' mode of recruiting employees. The resources held by individuals are also relational in the sense that they are influenced by everyday practices of recognition and workplace situations.

The thesis draws on both survey data and interview data. The first part of the thesis (**Paper I-II**) combines individual-level data from European Social Survey (ESS 2004 and 2010) with country-level data measuring national variations in terms of employment protection legislation, labour market policies and education systems. The second part of the thesis (**Paper III-IV**) analyses conditions for intra-European labour market mobility by examining a rather privileged group of labour migrants, namely highly skilled Swedish migrants with a university degree from Sweden and employment in Germany or the United Kingdom, with whom in-depth interviews were conducted 2014-2015.

Paper I examines the influence of European countries' specific institutional contexts, such as labour market policies, education systems and employment protection legislations, on employees' perceived labour market opportunities. The results show that employability is a multifaceted concept. The detected interdependence between individual characteristics and the institutional context is further investigated in **Paper II**, which focuses on the effect of economic conditions on perceived employability amongst native-born and foreign-born individuals by comparing data prior to and during the aftermath of the economic crisis in 2008/09. The findings show a potential mismatch between employees' opportunity-perceptions and their expected *de facto* labour market possibilities, as foreign-born employees perceive better labour market prospects than native-born employees. These patterns, however, vary depending on the applicable institutional context. The interdependence of individual characteristics and the institutional context is further examined in the final two papers, which focus on the relationship between national and transnational labour markets. **Paper III** and **IV** show that highly skilled Swedish labour migrants encounter difficulties during employment abroad, despite their high levels of recognized resources regarding their level of education and country of birth. However, the papers show that the migrants experience an inability to achieve a transnational recognition of their resources which causes a feeling of vulnerability abroad. **Paper III** conceptualises the collision between the self-image and the actual experiences of the migrants as *imagined independence*, depicting a tension between their specific experiences and their self-image; none withstanding the experienced vulnerability, their self-image as independent employee remains unchanged. Moreover, as **Paper IV** shows, the privileged position given education and country of birth is an important part of their self-image and enables them to challenge norms in the society/workplace. Overall, these two papers show that local workplace conditions and recognition of resources may be decisive for the individuals' potential labour market opportunities in the country of employment.

The theoretical argument of the thesis is that labour market opportunities are primarily socially framed, which challenge the current European opportunity-oriented policy approach. The process of social framing is a consequence of the dominant institutional conditions and the local social settings which provide or limit access to important labour market resources. As such, the thesis acknowledges that employability requires recognition of individuals' resources, and that this recognition is context-dependent.

Key words: perceived employability, labour mobility, highly skilled migration, institutional context, labour market policies, im/mobility of capital, imagined independence.