Mixed-Methods Analyses of Subjective Strategies of Most Unlikely but Successful Transitions from Social Benefits to Work

Authors : Hirseland Andreas, Kerschbaumer Lukas

Abstract : In the case of Germany, there are about one million long-term unemployed – a figure that did not vary much during the past years. These long-term unemployed did not benefit from the prospering labor market while most short-term unemployed did. Instead, they are continuously dependent on welfare and sometimes precarious short-term employment, experiencing work poverty. Long-term unemployment thus turns into a main obstacle to become employed again, especially if it is accompanied by other impediments such as low-level education (school/vocational), poor health (especially chronical illness), advanced age (older than fifty), immigrant status, motherhood or engagement in care for other relatives. As can be shown by this current research project, in these cases the chance to regain employment decreases to near nil. Almost two-thirds of all welfare recipients have multiple impediments which hinder a successful transition from welfare back to sustainable and sufficient employment. Prospective employers are unlikely to hire long-term unemployed with additional impediments because they evaluate potential employees on their negative signaling (e.g. low-level education) and the implicit assumption of unproductiveness (e.g. poor health, age). Some findings of the panel survey "Labor market and social security" (PASS) carried out by the Institute of Employment Research (the research institute of the German Federal Labor Agency) spread a ray of hope, showing that unlikely does not necessarily mean impossible. The presentation reports on current research on these very scarce "success stories" of unlikely transitions from long-term unemployment to work and how these cases were able to perform this switch against all odds. The study is based on a mixed-method design. Within the panel survey (~15,000 respondents in ~10,000 households), only 66 cases of such unlikely transitions were observed. These cases have been explored by qualitative inquiry – in depth-interviews and qualitative network techniques. There is strong evidence that sustainable transitions are influenced by certain biographical resources like habits of network use, a set of informal skills and particularly a resilient way of dealing with obstacles, combined with contextual factors rather than by job-placement procedures promoted by Job-Centers according to activation rules or by following formal paths of application. On the employer's side small and medium-sized enterprises are often found to give job opportunities to a wider variety of applicants, often based on a slow but steadily increasing relationship leading to employment. According to these results it is possible to show and discuss some limitations of (German) activation policies targeting the labor market and their impact on welfare dependency and long-term unemployment. Based on these findings, indications for more supportive small-scale measures in the field of labor-market policies are suggested to help long-term unemployed with multiple impediments to overcome their situation (e.g. organizing small-scale-structures and low-threshold services to encounter possible employers on a more informal basis like "meet and greet").

Keywords : against-all-odds, mixed-methods, Welfare State, long-term unemployment

Conference Title : ICSG 2017 : International Conference on Sociology and Humanities
Conference Location : San Francisco, United States
Conference Dates : June 07-08, 2017