

Embodying specialized job counselling for people with a disability: how embodiment affects job counselling

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Research goal

The goal of this study is to understand the embodiment within job counselling, specialized in supporting labour market entry among job seekers with a disability. The outcomes of such counselling are not indisputable: It may lead clients to jobs no one else wants (Johnson et al., 2021; Maravelias, 2020), thereby maintaining rather than challenging disability inequality (Scholz & Ingold, 2020). This paradox is particularly challenging for job counsellors, yet their role is often overlooked, with two main gaps. First, in situ approaches of job counselling – what job counsellors do and how they do it – appear to be missing, unfortunately so, as these can increase the understanding of key processes or steps within job counselling. In response, we study specialized job counselling as a situated and performative practice. Second, job counsellors are typically not approached as embodied workers. This is surprising given that bodily experiences are at the core of their work. More in general, there is some scholarly attention to the body in organisations, yet this remains marginal (e.g. Lawrence et al., in press, for a review). In response, we understand employees as embodied workers (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019) and aim to integrate embodiment in disability studies (e.g. Dobusch, 2019). This study aims to fill these gaps by examining in which ways, when and how embodiment affects the practice of specialized job counselling.

Theoretical background

We draw on the theoretical concept of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Based on a relational ontology, the world can be understood as mutually enacted by relations of social processes (e.g. cultural representations) and material processes (e.g. technology) (Barad, 2003; Dale, 2005). Embodiment can be understood as an illustration of this sociomateriality (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019): The body is not viewed in an essentialist way, reduced to its biological features, but is claimed to be infused with meaning. The body is theorized to be enabled by social relations rather than something personal and to be a process rather than a state (Dobusch, 2019). Through this concept of embodiment, we can gain a more in-depth understanding of how job counsellors perform their jobs in an embodied way in order to provide the best counselling for people with a disability. This concept allows us also to understand how embodiment can affect the process and outcome of counselling.

Research design, data collection and data analysis

We opted for an ethnographic study with a sensibility for practices (Sedlacko, 2017). This approach is appropriate for a number of reasons. It fits with the onto-epistemological framework. An ethnography further allows us to scrutinize the sociomaterial nature of embodiment. The sensibility for practices is finally appropriate to examine the practice of specialized job counselling in situ.

We have conducted an ethnographic case-study within a Flemish organisation providing specialised job counselling, mediation and training. The organisation targets vulnerable unemployed jobseekers who struggle to find or retain a job. We focus on a project that counsels people with disability. The foundation of the data collection consists of observations of job counselling sessions and is complemented by interviews with job seekers and job counsellors, informal conversations with job counsellors and observations of the organisation's daily workings. We analyse the data by defining in which ways and when embodiment becomes apparent within counselling and by examining how embodiment affects the counselling trajectory.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings are twofold. We found that job counsellors seem to do their jobs as embodied workers. In order to help job seekers find a job, they develop an embodied relational competence (Heaphy et al., 2014) which can be defined as a competence based on the attention to and use of embodiment in jobs which are highly characterized by creating and maintaining relations (e.g. with job seekers, employers, civil society). They do this by displaying vulnerability throughout their counselling and by balancing visceral knowledge with objectivity. Relatedly, a macro-climate of neoliberalism and an impending re-organization of the disability project appear to create a risk for the embodied well-being of job counsellors.

Value and implications

Theoretically, we answer to calls for attention to the body regarding work and integrating embodiment in disability studies (e.g. Dobusch, 2019). This way, the study addresses a gap in critical disability studies and organisation studies. Practically, findings might lead to adaptations in certain steps within job counselling for an underrepresented group in the labour market. Furthermore, preliminary findings challenge whether it is possible for job counsellors to autonomously do their jobs in a context characterized by neoliberal-ableism and pressure on the social sector.

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