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The Rationality of Reluctance and Indifference Toward Adult Education: Difficulties in Recruiting Unemployed Adults to Adult Education

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Abstract: This work presents the findings of a 2002 Swedish study of barriers to participation in adult education. The study questions why some members of the target group for the Swedish government's Adult Education Initiative (AEI) – unemployed adults lacking upper secondary education – chose not to participate in programs.

Introduction and Background

This presentation will discuss some of the main results from a study in the field of adult education concluded in 2002. The study was conducted in Sweden and addressed a problem concerning barriers to participation in adult education. The problem was highlighted when the Adult Education Initiative (AEI) was launched in 1997. It was by far the largest adult education investment ever undertaken in Sweden. All Swedish municipalities took part in the AEI project. No less than 100 000 positions a year was financed by the government for five years in a row. The adult education initiative was also an important part of the Swedish government's strategy to reduce unemployment and to generally upgrade the level of knowledge in the Swedish labor force. The main target group for the AEI was unemployed adults who lacked upper secondary qualifications. But earlier research in the field of adult education has shown that it can be hard to recruit people to adult education (Rubenson 1975, Johansson & Ekerwald 1976, Larsson 1986, Beder 1990). Thus the problem mentioned beforehand emanated from research connected to AEI which indicated that many from the target group lacked interest to participate (Paldanius 2000). The phenomenon or problem of non-participation has been described and discussed for over 30 years in Sweden. The problem has proved to be resistant to a series of recruiting efforts based on new knowledge and measures that addressed the problem over the years. To give you a few examples of the knowledge we have today. For instance, Cross (1981) presented three main categories to summarize an extensive amount of reasons behind non-participation. They were situational barriers (everyday problems), institutional barriers (high costs, too many study hours a day, lack of qualifications) and dispositional barriers (attitudes against education and teachers). Beder (1990) wrote that the most frequent reasons to not participate in adult education are lack of motive, deterred of education and lack of information in the sense that they do not know of the possibility and/or what it would mean to their situation. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) suggested one more dimension to the barriers, namely deterring information. It was not only lack of information but also that the received information can be deterring in itself. One example translated from the Swedish context could be that much of the information was about how to accomplish years of study and that one primary goal should be to study even more, for instance at university (Paldanius 2000). Lundqvist (1989) pointed to the Swedish study loan system as contributing factor to non-participation. Financial issues tend to be of importance to most people. The maximum amount of loan for one month was perceived as too small to continue everyday life the way they were used to, thus they were deterred from taking part in adult education. Finally but not the least is one of many recruiters favorite barrier, low self esteem towards education based on previous bad experiences (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 1995, Paldanius 2000).

In an effort to analyze the existing knowledge the study concluded that earlier research on non participants showed that most of the knowledge about non participants was based on research on participants in adult education (motives for participation), opinions among those who worked with guidance to adult education, and finally, on an assumption that deep down inside everyone (secretly) wanted to participate in adult education. The last assumption can be divided into two main arguments. The first one is that human beings generally want to develop and therefore education is something attractive and the second argument is that adult citizens want progress in their lives and therefore adult education is a good opportunity. If we accept these arguments as valid we are oriented to an answer that something fairly tangible must be stopping the non-participants, hence theory of barriers to participation in adult education (Cross 1980, Beder 1990, Rubenson & Xu 1997). To conclude the background section of this paper we can state that we know quite a bit about why adult individuals choose to participate in adult education and why individuals who are interested in adult education feel that they can't participate. But even if we implement new ideas in recruiting efforts many of them do not show interest. Can it be that the basic assumptions are faulty? Thus the lack of progress in the efforts to recruit non-participants seemed to suggest that we had missed something important. From a governmental point of view and apparently for the most research in the field of adult education AEI represented a fantastic offer and opportunity for the primary target group to upgrade their educational level. In accordance with the research findings mentioned above AEI launched with new beneficial conditions for participants, proximity, specialized courses to prepare beginners and a gigantic advertising campaign. These new measures made it even more difficult to understand what the early indications on non-participation were all about.

Purpose and Design of the Study

This study started with a practical purpose, namely how to get the primary target group to enlist to adult education, specifically AEI. Based on a critical review of earlier research a theoretical hypothesis was raised in which the phenomenon of reluctance should be studied as a relation between opposing positions and rational reasoning constituting the recruiting situation. The following related questions guided the realization of the study.

1. Why are people in the target group reluctant to participate in adult education?
2. How does the target group reason about their situation and options in life?

The study set out to find categories that constitute for an individual or a groups reasoning in their decision to avoid adult education. These categories can be identified and problematized with Bourdieus concepts of habitus and dispositions.

A social phenomenon such as reluctance and indifference has to be interpreted in its social context. The social context of recruiting to adult education is built by two opposing positions. One position is constituted by a governmental policy and the rational reasoning by all of them working within this policy. This creates a dominating rational that creates pressure to carry out what is decided on a higher level. Through this massive initiative adult education and specifically AEI establish itself as something positive and something that everyone with an opportunity should take part in. The other position of the recruiting situation is constituted by actions and reasoning of unemployed individuals who lack upper secondary education. In this study I suggest that experiences of earlier education, previous work life and unemployment are the important contextual factors that need to be considered to understand the reasons behind their reluctance. It seemed like a good idea to try to interview both the non-participating target group and the employees that were trying to recruit the reluctant target group. The results of the study are based on interviews with 34 individuals from the unemployed and reluctant target group and

30 interviews with recruiters of different categories (study guides, labor guides and occasional guides from the labor unions).

Theoretical Frame of the Study

The theoretical approach in the study was based on the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work. A social phenomenon has to be interpreted in its social context. The main concepts put to use in this study are social space, habitus (dispositions), praxis, capital and in a more cautious manner social field. The concepts of habitus and dispositions were used extensively.

Social Space, Field, Habitus, Disposition, Capital

Social space is, in a simplified manner, the social environment that we live within in our everyday lives. As such social space is also a concept that describes localization, content and different forces that are at work in a system of relations. One example of what Bourdieu (1994) means is that positions in social space are separated by how much capital they possess. Capital means valuable possession within social space or a specific field. Positions and systems of schemata give every agent a sense of one's place and a sense of the place of the other (Bourdieu, 1994). When we consider what reluctance and indifference towards adult education is about we should consider different positions in social space.

The concept of field is rather complex compared to the others. In this study I use field as a means to see differences and borders that serve to constitute the phenomenon of reluctance and indifference. Field delimits a portion of the social space with a set of positions, certain rules and a lasting activity. Another name for it is field of competition (Broady, 1989).

The concept of habitus is one of Bourdieu's key concepts. It is used to investigate and to understand the relation between an agent and the environment, the social space (Bourdieu, 1999). It means that an agent perceives a certain social order (for instance differences between positions) and this order are constructed through a negotiation between habitus dispositions and the environment.

The concept of disposition is closely connected to habitus. Habitus is interpreted as a system of incorporated dispositions that orientates agents' thoughts, feelings and actions. Habitus and dispositions within this study means that the target group orientate and understand propositions about adult education in relation to their earlier experiences.

By praxis I mean a delimited set of relations in social space (Bourdieu, 1994). A social praxis is not the same as a field because it does not in the same way comprise a regulative praxis and competition over distribution of capital. It's a location as a social area of action where things happen in term of what one usually does in that place.

Results and Discussion

Most of the results on the targets groups "clear-cut" reasons to not participate confirmed results from earlier studies. One thing was very different though. The results pointed to very rational reasoning behind their reluctance and indifference, hence the title of this presentation, "The rationality of reluctance and indifference". There weren't many barriers at all, but there was a lack of interest or motive for education. The second area of results presents a map of different dispositions that constitute for the rationality of reluctance and indifference toward adult education. For most of the agents in the target group education where described as something that had to be done while waiting to get to the real life (work life), the period of education was not hard but rather easy times but more often downright boring. The target group perceives that real life starts when they become an adult in the meaning working life and responsibility.

Interestingly enough they describe education as important, but mostly for kids. It is important that their kids get a good education. To many of them, education means to be a pupil, an under-aged or an incapacitated person compared to their own preferable status, which is to be employed and have a profession (to occupy a recognized position). Adulthood means that an agent has a chance to fulfill his/her dispositions and to start produce real life praxis, or in other words, working class normality. Adult education would then be interpreted as a suggestion to be positioned as a child once again, condemned to boredom, or adult "daycare". The individual cannot spontaneously perceive the recruiters suggestion about adult education as valuable since it is not part of their orientation toward the adult and working class normality. Most of the interviewed unemployed individuals had work life experience behind them. The target group's stories of their working life were quite comprehensive and generated a lot of preliminary categories for dispositions. The first and probably most important one is the disposition of normality. This disposition connects to the earlier presented disposition about adulthood and orientates agents toward their "right" position. In a situation of unemployment the former normality is perceived as very desirable and therefore they are focused on getting back to their former status. Work experience from different categories of manual labor is common. Acquired dispositions from these jobs can become clear when they consider an offer about adult education. The following quotation from a middle-aged male in the target group exemplifies.

Learning for the sake of learning, never, I have much more important stuff to do, for instance I can plant onions and then I know that it will take so and so long time until I see the results of my actions, I have actually made something, manufactured something (Inf. 34; p.21).

Another one is the disposition of first hand experience. This disposition orientates agent's actions towards first hand experience (as opposed to reflection and text about something) and also about handling something manually instead of reading about it in a book. This also signifies an orientation towards clear-cut decision-making based on schemas such as dichotomous categorizing, if it's not good, then it's bad. From the target group's stories of unemployment I will first describe the disposition of offended ness. This disposition orientates agents to distrust towards governmental agencies, and given time, also normal people. This disposition emanates from loss of their original position in normality and is accompanied by shame of being unemployed. To put it simply, some of them carry anger and they want to get back at the other with the only means they have. The disposition of strained life orientates agents to appraise their action from within a scarce situation. This means that everything that is not necessary is considered a luxury and therefore excluded as unrealistic. The unemployed individuals are very cost conscious when considering what to do. If some event costs money they want to make sure that they get something back. One especially important disposition is the disposition of irresolute action. This disposition orientates agents during a period of transition between dispositions of working life and dispositions of unemployment. This means agents get confused about what to do in everyday life. A shattered approach to action makes them tired without having accomplished anything practical that could reproduce their values. This in-between disposition actually confuses and disturbs any attempt to plan ahead and therefore fortify their position as reluctant. Thus with experience of long-term unemployment they tend to live on a day-by-day manner.

To conclude this presentation I would like to state that given the circumstances under which the primary target group lived it was rational to show indifference towards a proposition to participate in adult education. The findings of this study complement the theory of barriers in the sense that we now know a bit more about their position in society and reasoning when presented with an opportunity of adult education. So what does this mean for recruitment to adult education? It has a lot of implications. First of all, it implies that the target group might carry dispositions for another praxis than what might be expected from a recruiter's point of view. The

problem would be that if they could not attach value to adult education, why should they bother to participate? As Beder pointed out there was a lack of motive. This was a bit concerning for the AEI project since there was not a lot of efforts concentrated to create motive. Almost all recruiting resources went to measures based on knowledge about barriers. In accordance with the results above we can state that they will not be motivated by information alone, since the information itself will be considered unnecessary and uninteresting. Their motivation is almost always directed towards a job, since that triggers the relation between habitus and praxis to produce a motive. Some good experiences were made using work life rationality rather than a more educational rationality in recruiting efforts, but that's another story. Please bear in mind that I have only selected tiny pieces of the study to this paper. I hope that the idea, the conduct and the outcome are understandable.

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