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Contextualizing employability: Do boundaries of self-directedness vary in different labor market groups?

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Abstract

Purpose – Individual employability has become a crucial element in ensuring labor security in flexibilizing labor markets. The importance of agency-side factors as antecedents of employability has been emphasized in the relevant literature, spurring the criticism that some worker groups may be more restricted than others by contextual factors in respect to their employment prospects. The goal of this article is to examine empirically how labor market groups differ in what shapes their employability.

Design/methodology/approach – We used a representative sample of 1055 employees to detect differences in the impact of career self-directedness (agency-side) and several contextual factors (structure-side) on employability, comparing workers with and without higher education and workers in and outside managerial positions. Confirmatory factor analysis with subsequent tests of invariance was used.

Findings – Results confirm that employability is affected both by contextual factors and by self-directedness. No significant differences were observed between the compared groups in the extent to which self-directedness and the contextual factors influence employability. An important finding is that self-directedness itself is affected by preceding career history (career mobility and previous unemployment), which may suggest a vicious-cycle relationship between past and future career precariousness.

Practical implications – Our findings support the view prevailing in policy circles that fostering agency-side factors such as self-directedness is instrumental toward achieving higher employment security. At the same time, individual agency cannot replace traditional policy measures in tackling structural labor market inequalities.

Originality/value – This study used robust methodology and a representative respondent sample to statistically disentangle the effects of agency and context on employability. Its key contribution pertains to the explicit comparison of different worker groups, with separate contrasts on each model parameter.

Introduction

The concept of employability takes a prominent place in both the academic and the public policy discourses on mobile and flexible labor markets (Berntson, 2008; Muffels and Luijkx, 2008). It is considered a crucial component in achieving long-term employment security, as well as a policy instrument geared towards improving labor market participation (European Commission, 1997; Forrier and Sels, 2003).

The degree to which a worker is employable on the labor market is defined by both individual (agency-side) and contextual (structure-side) factors (Berntson et al., 2006; Forrier and Sels, 2003; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008). On the one hand, the literature dealing with flexibilizing employment relationships has primarily touted the agency-side factors as a means toward better employability (Inkson et al., 2012; Tams and Arthur, 2010; Zeitz et al., 2009). Workers are assumed to hold the responsibility for their careers (King, 2004), with the implicit requirement of remaining adaptable to the shifting employment context (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Hall, 1996) as well as being proactive and self-directed in their labor market behavior (Greenhaus et al., 2008; Briscoe and Hall, 2006). On the other hand, a concern has been raised by many scholars that some worker groups may be to a larger degree constrained by contextual factors (Forrier et al., 2009; Guest and Sturges, 2007; Inkson et al., 2012; King et al., 2005; Van Buren, 2003; Standing, 2011), implying that the labor market might not be homogeneous in regard to the dynamic between agency-side factors and employability.

Even though the research on the 'new' employment relationship and the associated 'new' career paths on the flexibilizing labor market has been developing for more than two decades, this particular area still remains under-researched (Inkson et al., 2012; Zeitz et al., 2009). Given that labor market flexibilization and the associated emphasis on employability are embraced by policy makers in many developed countries as strategic elements in improving employment rates and increasing economic competitiveness (Van Eyck, 2003), it is crucial to understand the limits of what determines employability for different labor market strata and identify worker groups that may be disadvantaged by their position on the labor market.

In this article, we compare two pairs of worker groups on the degree to which their employability on the labor market is affected by self-directedness in career (agency-side) on the one hand, and contextual (structure-side) factors on the other. Workers with higher education are compared to workers without higher education, and workers in managerial positions are compared to workers in non-managerial positions. Our analyses contribute to the discussion of structural boundaries in contemporary employment relationships, with specific attention to potential labor market stratification.

Theoretical background

Employability

Outlining the concept. There exists a variety of contexts and meanings in which the concept of employability is used, rendering it somewhat diffuse (Berntson et al., 2006; Forrier et al., 2009). In its earlier uses, the term was generally reserved for workers outside employment, e.g. unemployed, disabled or belonging to disadvantaged groups (Forrier and Sels, 2003; Vanhercke et al., 2014), with the goal of re-integrating them into the labor market (Berntson, 2008). More recently, the use of the concept has been extended to cover all workers, including those already in employment, as improving workers' employability on flexible and dynamic labor markets has become paramount for workers themselves, their employers as well as for policy makers (European Commission, 1997; Vanhercke et al., 2014). At the same time, the focus in the employability literature has shifted from macro to the micro perspective, emphasizing the responsibility of the individual for his or her *possibilities of obtain and maintain employment* (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Hillage and Pollard, 1998), the latter phrase being essentially the definition of the term we adopt in this article.

Given the diffuse nature of the concept, its operationalization presents challenges as well (Forrier and Sels, 2003). Traditionally, employability was assessed using objective indicators of the worker's labor market position, such as education, training or occupational position (De Cuyper et al., 2008). When focusing on those without employment, the objective conceptualization of employability in essence referred to whether or not an individual was

able to secure a new job (Berntson et al., 2006). Following the extension of the concept to workers steadily remaining in their current employment, such direct approach proved problematic as often there are no actual labor market transitions to gauge employability. As a result, much attention was paid to measuring the subjective or *perceived* employability, a concept referring to the individual perception of his or her possibilities to achieve a new job (Berntson et al., 2006). It is often argued that it is the individual perception that drives actual career decision-making, which makes individual perception important in the context of flexible and uncertain labor markets (Berntson, 2008).

Motivated by the importance of external labor markets in the contemporary ‘new’ economy (DiPrete et al., 2002), we focus on *external* employability in this article, a notion that refers to individual possibilities to obtain and maintain employment on the external labor market (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

Employability and the new career. The concept of employability derives its relevance from its central place in the discourse regarding the contemporary work careers, both in academic and in policy circles (Berntson, 2008; European Commission, 1997), as well as from practices in flexibilizing labor markets where transitioning between employers becomes more and more common (Fugate et al., 2004; Clarke, 2008). The way careers unfold is said to have undergone a vast transformation in the past few decades. The contents of these changes have been widely discussed in the academic career literature (e.g. Arthur et al., 1999; Baruch and Bozionelos, 2010; Clarke, 2013; Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999), and are generally framed as a shift from the so-called *traditional* career pattern, developing within one or two organizations (Sullivan, 1999), towards mobile and non-linear career paths evolving within multiple organizations (Baruch and Bozionelos, 2010). In career literature these emergent career forms are often referred to as the *new career* (Arthur et al., 1999).

Employability plays a special role in this new career climate. Job security is no longer guaranteed for most workers, as flexibilization of labor, an essential condition for maintaining competitiveness in the globalizing economy, has rendered the prospect of a life-long attachment to an organization unrealistic for the majority of the labor force (Berglund

et al., 2014; Muffels and Luijkx, 2008; Reich, 2008; Standing, 1999). Instead, *employment security* is stated to assume a central position in the flexible economy, an idea that, aside from being postulated in new career theories, is also reflected in the concept of the transitional labor market (Schmid, 1998) and in the ‘flexicurity’ approach, popular in the European policy circles (European Commission, 2007). Employability is a crucial element in achieving employment security in the ‘new economy’ setting, enabling workers to identify and realize career opportunities, and facilitating the movement between jobs, both within and between organizations (Fugate et al., 2004). Employability is therefore a key prerequisite for building a successful career in the context of flexibilizing labor markets (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008), not only for the unemployed, but also for the entire labor force (Fugate et al., 2004).

A wide consensus in employability and career literature is that modern workers themselves must carry the responsibility for developing and maintaining their employability and for managing their careers (Clarke, 2008; Van Buren, 2003). The emphasis on the individual responsibility for one’s career is reflected in the changes to the psychological contract, the set of “individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). The old ‘relational’ psychological contract, prevalent in the Fordist era, implied that workers are loyal to the organization, and work hard, while accepting a great deal of managerial control (also see Standing, 1999). In exchange, the employers provided job security, and took the responsibility for managing the careers of their employees, providing promotion opportunities in a hierarchical organizational structure, company supported training and pay raises. This relational contract came to be replaced in the past decades by the so-called ‘transactional’ psychological contract, which is oriented towards “specific, short-term, and monetizable obligations entailing limited involvement of the parties” (Morrison and Robinson, 1997, p. 229). Given the short-term orientation of this new psychological contract, and the more transitional nature of the labor markets in general, most employers are to a larger degree unable, and often unwilling to assume the responsibility for the careers of their employees. The fact that both the responsibility for career management and the risks associated with it

are placed on the individual shoulders, is also in line with the neoliberal *Zeitgeist*, in which the individual agency is strongly emphasized (Harvey, 2011).

Many critical authors have noted, that the emphasis on the individual responsibility is based on a tacit (and a rather heroic) assumption that workers are, in fact, fully in control of their careers, unbridled by contextual factors (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Tholen, 2015; Van Buren, 2003). According to the critical view, the agency-oriented supply-side conceptualization of employability decontextualizes individual actions, and may ignore the risks, inequalities and stratificational mechanisms that can stem from the socio-economic context in which the individual operates. Hillage and Pollard (1998) argue, for example, that most definitions of employability pay little attention to demographic or physical characteristics, which are often quite critical in shaping a person's ability to remain employable. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) formulate a similar critique, calling the overemphasis on the individual agency "supply-side orthodoxy" (p. 204) and arguing that the issue transcends a mere academic debate, as the concept employability has been used as a key public policy component on both national and supranational levels. The focus on the individual agency may result in proverbial blaming-the-victim understanding of employability, according to the critical view.

Other scholars have argued that the individual capacity to successfully navigate the flexible labor markets can be structurally different for some labor market groups (e.g. Zeitz et al., 2009), such as lower educated workers (DiPrete et al., 2006; Muffels and Luijckx, 2008). The positively framed narrative of the mobile and flexible careers, based on continuous learning and self-development, has been criticized for being applicable to more privileged labor market strata, e.g. those in managerial positions. These new stratificational mechanisms of the new flexible economy have not been sufficiently studied empirically, despite several calls in the literature.

In the subsequent analysis, we will explore the effects on employability of an important agency-side factor, career self-directedness, as well as a number of contextual factors, paying attention to possible stratification between groups.

Self-directedness and employability

A lot of attention in the new career and employability literatures has been paid to how workers can cope with the increasing uncertainty on the labor market, with a heavy emphasis on the individual agency as a buffer against unwanted career interruptions (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Inkson et al., 2012; Tams and Arthur, 2010; Zeitz et al., 2009). Career self-directedness, an agency-side factor, has been postulated to be one such crucial coping mechanism, helping workers navigate uncertain employment environments (Briscoe et al., 2012; De Vos and Soens, 2008). Previous research has established a positive relationship between self-directedness and employability (Raemdonck et al., 2012), though the empirical evidence still remains scarce.

In general, career self-directedness refers to the proactivity workers exhibit in constructing their career (King, 2004; Kossek et al., 1998), as well as to a certain level of independence from the employing organization (Briscoe et al., 2006). Similar to employability, the objective and subjective dimensions can be discerned for the concept of self-directedness as well (De Vos and Soens, 2008). The objective or behavioral component refers to concrete actions or behaviors proactively used to achieve career goals (King, 2004). The subjective or reflective component has been invoked in different meanings in the literature, referring to “the insights individuals develop into their own career aspirations” (De Vos and Soens, 2008, p. 450), to “having the ability to be adaptive in terms of performance and learning demands” (Briscoe and Hall, 2006, p. 8), or to “the employee’s orientation to manage and advance current work conditions to promote career development” (Raemdonck et al., 2012, p. 139). The latter conceptualization essentially echoes the definition of the behavioral component, yet demarcates a distinctively different domain, viewing the proactive ability as a psychological orientation and not its actual behavioral manifestation. Such definition is essentially similar to the view provided by Briscoe et al. (2006), who refer to career self-directedness in the sense of the individual ability to take “an independent role in managing their vocational behavior” (p. 31). It is in this sense that we will use the subjective component of self-directedness throughout our inquiry. The following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1: career self-directedness is positively associated with perceived employability

Employability and contextual factors

The theoretical literature on employability views this concept as an outcome of the interplay between agency- and structure-side factors (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Tholen, 2015; Forrier and Sels, 2003). In research and policy practice, however, one aspect is often overemphasized at the cost of the other, which has yielded two perspectives on employability, namely supply- and demand-side views (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), sometimes also referred to as absolute and relative perspectives on employability (Tholen, 2015).

The supply-side view is deeply rooted in the domain of public policy (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), which for the past several decades has been dominated by the neoliberal paradigm. The same view is also currently prevailing in the mainstream academic research on employability (Tholen, 2015; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Forrier and Sels, 2003). Partly due to the methodological individualism typical for this perspective, partly due to the public policy goal of activating unemployed and inactive workers on the labor market, the research within this view has predominantly paid attention to the individual factors that foster employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Tholen, 2015; Forrier and Sels, 2003). Within the supply-side framework, context is seen as something that can be reduced to the sum of outcomes of individual actions, consistent with the atomistic perspective typical for the neoliberal policy discourse. As consequence, agency in the domain of work often becomes 'decontextualized' or unbounded (cf. Inkson et al., 2012; King et al., 2005).

The demand-side literature, largely sociological in origin, emphasizes, on the other hand, the relational and contextual nature of employability (Tholen, 2015). It focuses on how structural factors limit the individual agency, and considers the interaction between the individual and a variety of contextual factors that influence employability. There exists a degree of disagreement between the two perspectives as to what is considered contextual. Factors that are often seen as structural in the sociological literature, in the sense that they

refer to the impact of norms, beliefs and values that regulate social action (Bernardi et al., 2007), are seen as merely individual characteristics in the supply-side literature (Tholen, 2015), one example of this being gender. While within the individual-oriented supply-side approach gender is typically seen as an individual characteristic, in the sociological demand-side literature gender can be conceptualized as a structural factor, a social institution that entails a number of practices, beliefs and norms. As such, gender co-defines individual chances of employment on the labor market, propensity towards certain kinds of jobs (Marler and Moen, 2005) or career patterns (Kovalenko and Mortelmans, 2014). In the institutional sense gender operates therefore as a contextual factor. In this article, the analytical goal is to determine the contextual limits of career self-directedness, the agency-side factor, and establish whether these limits vary for different worker groups. Given that goal, we adopt the broader view of the context, in line with the sociological demand-side perspective and the institutional view on social structure (Bernardi et al., 2007).

In employability literature the contextual factors in the sense used in this article, have been studied from the viewpoint of ‘underprivileged groups’ (Forrier and Sels, 2003). Researchers concerned with a more holistic view on how individuals make their journeys in the labor market, sought to incorporate these contextual factors in the analysis of employability (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). While the number of contextual factors in reality is potentially very large (see Forrier and Sels, 2003), several contextual characteristics have been focused upon more commonly. Thus, attention has been paid to the effects of age on employability (Forte and Hansvick, 1999; Sharit et al., 2009), with the hypothesis that older workers may be less attractive to potential employers due to a number of reasons, such as (perceived) lack of technological skills, health or higher salary expectations. Younger workers tend, on the other hand, to be optimistic about their employment opportunities (Berglund et al., 2014). Gender is another relevant background characteristic that has traditionally produced stratification in the labor market, with research showing that there is little improvement in gender equality in the era of flexible work (Flecker et al., 1998). Migration background and language mastery are well-known factors on which

employers may discriminate in their hiring processes (Luthra, 2013). Indicators of socio-economic status, such as educational level (Núñez and Livanos, 2010), family economic background (Grotti and Scherer, 2014), and job level (Karren and Sherman, 2012), have also been demonstrated to affect employment chances.

Career and training history are factors that have been studied as ‘signals’ of individual ability in the context of employability (Forrier and Sels, 2003). These signals are individual traits or behaviors that provide information about the capabilities of an individual. Thus, the scarring effect theories postulate that previous unemployment history diminishes the chance to obtain a new job (Brandt and Hank, 2014). Research is inconclusive in regard to the direction in which previous job mobility affects employability. Some authors argue that fast advancing careers are seen in a positive light by the employers (see Rosenbaum, 1989), while others contend that it takes some time to gain expertise in a job, implying that there is an optimum tenure in each job (Forrier and Sels, 2003). Empirical results suggest that job mobility may be positively related to unemployment (Light, 2005). In addition to career history, training history is also a signal of individual capabilities, as it provides an idea of the investments that can maintain or enhance human capital (Rosenbaum, 1989). The following hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypothesis 2a: additional educational activities and speaking the language on a native level will have a positive effect on employability;

Hypothesis 2b: having no higher education, being older, having a previous unemployment history, and having a migration background will have a negative effect on employability;

Hypothesis 2c: non-managerial job level, gender, family income, and previous job mobility variables will have an effect on employability.

Since the structural factors may play a role in shaping the attitude of self-directedness, our model will include the respective causal paths in order to control for eventual indirect effects. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here.]

Differences between labor market groups

The popular managerial theories of the new employment relationship and the new career, with their emphasis on the individual agency as the most important coping mechanism with uncertain and dynamic labor markets, have been repeatedly criticized for their lack of attention to power inequalities in flexible and mobile working arrangements (Tams and Arthur, 2010). The duality of the labor market seems to have generally been ignored in the most of the research on the new career, yet the assumption of labor market homogeneity is a dangerous one, as it downplays differences between workers and can impede improvements for weaker labor market groups. Several authors have postulated the idea that two tiers of workers may exist in contemporary flexible labor markets (Beck, 2000; Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Kim, 2013; Kovalenko and Mortelmans, 2014; Standing, 2011; Van Buren, 2003; Zeitz et al., 2009). The upper tier, consisting mainly of skilled managers and highly educated professionals, accepts the responsibility for career self-management, and benefits from the labor market flexibility and the absence of mobility constraints, potentially achieving greater autonomy in their working lives, better work-family balance and higher incomes. Workers of the lower tier, however, may be forced into the kind of flexibility that entails precariousness rather than freedom. Such workers, often belonging to weaker labor market groups, usually with low levels of human capital, have increasing chances of getting stuck in dead-end low quality jobs, and have little certainty concerning their future (Heery and Salmon, 2000; Standing, 2011). The critique of the new career theories entails that they may apply only to “*some individuals, some organizations and some industries*” (Inkson et al., 2012, p. 8), with two particular higher-tier worker groups standing out in this respect: those highly educated and those in managerial positions (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Guest and Sturges, 2007; Muffels and Luijckx, 2008; Zeitz et al., 2009).

Addressing this critique is the central focus of our analysis. A distinct possibility exists, according to such critical view, that careers of workers in more precarious labor market strata are driven to a larger extent by factors outside their immediate control, in comparison with their better-off counterparts. Projected onto the relationship between self-directedness

and employability this would imply that weaker labor market participants might have lower self-directedness levels and/or that the effects of self-directedness in regards to employability for these workers and, as consequence, their employment security, differ from those in more privileged labor market positions. Both phenomena would undermine the universal claims of the contemporary career theories in regard to the power of individual workers to shape their careers (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Inkson et al., 2012; Zeitz et al., 2009). In this study we explicitly test for both types of differences for those in non-managerial positions and those without diploma higher education. We formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: lower educated workers and those in non-managerial jobs will be to a larger extent affected by the contextual factors than their respective counterparts.

Several recent studies have initiated an exploration of the self-directedness dynamic in more vulnerable worker groups (Briscoe et al., 2012; Raemdonck et al., 2012). Nevertheless, direct empirical evidence of (in)equality in regard to self-directedness effects remains limited. The limitations arise not only from the scarcity of the studies, but also from using statistical samples not necessarily representative for the worker population. In addition, to our best knowledge, no attempts have been made to statistically disentangle confounding effects of structural factors from pure self-directedness effects. Finally, to our best knowledge, neither the measurement nor the population invariance for the self-directedness concept has been explicitly tested in different worker groups.

Method

Sample

In our analyses we used the dataset “Careers in Flanders” (2011) collected under the auspices of Policy Research Centre Work & Social Economy (www.steunpuntwse.be) in Flanders (Belgium). The goal of the survey was to collect work- and career-related information to support policy decisions concerning the labor market. A two-step PPS sample of the population between 18 and 64 was drawn, resulting in a study sample representative of the Flemish labor force (excluding students and self-employed). Computer-assisted personal

interviews (CAPI) were used to collect the data. The response rate for the survey was 53.1%. The study dataset contained information from 1055 employed respondents, 550 men and 505 women.

Measures and covariates

Self-directed career attitude was measured using a subset of the self-directed career attitude scale proposed by [Briscoe et al. \(2006\)](#). Using the subset was motivated by a poor fit of the measurement model for this factor, when using the entire scale (RMSEA = 0.098). The discrepancy in CFA fit between the original article and our analyses could be explained by the specific population used to validate the original scale (undergraduate and MBA students), as opposed to the representative sample in our study. Based on the measurement models, four items with the highest factor loadings were retained (RMSEA = 0.007). These items exhibited the highest loadings in the original analyses as well. The items retained were the first four items from the original scale, for example: “Ultimately, I depend upon myself to move my career forward.” Robust Cronbach’s alpha for the measure of self-directedness was 0.83.

Employability was measured using the perceived employability scale proposed by [De Cuyper and De Witte \(2008\)](#), which in turn is an adaptation of an earlier scale developed by [De Witte \(1992\)](#) based on a literature review (for details see [Silla et al., 2008](#)). The adapted scale included two dimensions of employability: (1) external vs. internal, and (2) quantitative vs. qualitative. The first dimension refers to employment outside and within the current organization. The quantitative aspect refers to a perceived chance of finding *a* job, regardless of its quality, whereas the qualitative aspect refers, to a perceived chance of improving the quality of one’s working arrangements, e.g. in terms job content, working conditions or relations. Given our analytical focus, we have limited ourselves to the items pertaining to quantitative external employability, one example being: “I could easily move to another employer, if I wanted to.” Robust Cronbach’s alpha for the measure of employability was 0.96, reliability and validity of the scale have been demonstrated in [De Cuyper and](#)

De Witte (2008).

Educational attainment was measured using two variables, first one accounting for the initial educational trajectory, coded as dummy for not having a diploma higher education. This variable was also used to define the lower-educated worker group ($N = 637$). The second variable took into account the number of career-oriented educational activities undertaken in the last 5 years. Family economic background was measured as equalized family income, bracketed in 23 categories and adjusted for the number of household members. The variable was treated as continuous. Function level was measured by a dummy distinguishing between non-managerial and managerial job positions, coded respectively as 0 and 1. The former category refers to those outside middle, senior and top management positions ($N = 887$).

Ethnic background was measured using two variables: a dummy referring to whether the respondent or their parents have immigrated into Belgium at some point; and a dummy for whether the respondent's native tongue is that of the endogenous population of Flanders (i.e. Dutch). Previous career mobility was measured as number of jobs the respondent had in the ten-year preceding the survey administration. Unemployment history was measured as number of months the respondent spent in unemployment during the same period.

Gender was coded as 0 for men and 1 for women; age was measured in years as a continuous variable. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between the variables in the analysis are presented in Table 1. Means for the dichotomous variables should be interpreted as proportions.

[Table 1 about here.]

Statistical Analyses

Structural equation modeling (SEM) with robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to disentangle direct and indirect effects of the structural factors and determine unconfounded influence of self-directedness. Scaled (i.e. robust) fit measures are reported in all instances. Standardized versions of parameter estimates are reported. Measurement invariance testing was used to determine between-group differences in regard to self-directedness

and its effects.

For the tests of invariance between the two pairs of labor market groups we will use the terminology introduced by Meredith (1993), where configural invariance refers to comparable factor composition (i.e. latent concepts are measured by the same set of factors in all groups), weak invariance refers to equality constraints of factor loadings across groups, strong invariance refers to equality of both factor loadings and intercepts across all groups. Further equality constraints involve equal means, regression coefficients and latent variances. Equality constraints are cumulative, i.e. additional constraints presuppose all preceding constraints.

We present firstly the single-group model for the entire sample, which includes the indicators for the two pairs of groups as predictors. Secondly, we present the group comparison analysis, where we remove each time the corresponding group indicator variable from the model, and use it to define the groups in the multigroup SEM framework.

Results

Single-group model

The measurement model indicated sufficient fit to the data: RMSEA = 0.055 (CI 0.044-0.066, $p[\text{RMSEA} < 0.05] = 0.208$), CFI = 0.978. The structural model was then fitted, containing all the relationships of the conceptual model (Figure 1). The result is presented in Figure 2, non-significant relationships are not reported in the figure.

[Figure 2 about here.]

The fit parameters of the structural model are well within the customary thresholds: RMSEA = 0.037 (CI 0.031-0.043, $p[\text{RMSEA} < 0.05] = 1.00$), CFI = 0.972. The self-directed career orientation has a statistically significant effect on perceived employability, even when all other factors are taken into account. As expected, employability is also influenced by education, including both higher education as well as additional career-oriented educational

activities. Age has a negative effect on employability, as does female gender. Counter-intuitively, equalized family income is negatively associated with perceived employability. Consistent with theoretical expectations, previous mobility history has a positive effect on employability, whereas previous unemployment history is negatively related to it.

None of the socio-economic background variables have a statistically significant effect on self-directedness. On the other hand, both career history variables are significantly related, job mobility having a positive effect and unemployment having a negative.

Multi-group models

Workers in non-managerial positions. Table 2 presents the results of invariance testing for two groups of workers, managerial vs. non-managerial positions.

[Table 2 about here.]

The results indicate that (1) both self-directedness and employability concepts are measured similarly in both subpopulations, (2) average levels of self-directedness and employability are identical in both subpopulations, and (3) the effects of self-directedness are similar in both groups. In addition, the variation of both self-directedness and employability is similar in both groups.

Workers without diploma higher education. Table 3 presents the results of invariance testing for two groups of workers, those with vs. those without higher education diploma.

[Table 3 about here.]

The results of the invariance tests reveal (1) no differences between the groups in the measurement of the two concepts, except a single intercept pertaining to the second item for perceived employability. This exception does not prevent further group comparison (Brown, 2006). In addition, also for these groups there is a similarity of (2) average levels of self-directedness and employability, as well as of (3) the effects of self-directedness on

employability. In addition, the variation of both self-directedness and employability is similar in both groups.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we have disentangled the effects of several structural factors influencing perceived employability, which can serve as an indicator of employment security within uncertain employment environments, from the effects of individual agency, measured as career self-directedness orientation. We have found that self-directedness remains a significant determinant of perceived employability even when the effects of the structural variables, pertaining to socio-economic status and previous employment history, are accounted for in the model. In addition, we have found that self-directedness exerts its effects in the same way for workers in non-managerial positions as it does for workers in managerial positions. The same conclusion is reached in regard to workers with and without a diploma higher education. Finally, we have found that workers in both these groups exhibit, on average, similar levels of self-directedness.

Our results indicate that both agency and structural factors have an impact on the individual perceived employability. These findings are in line with the existing research on the subject ([Berntson et al., 2006](#); [Forrier and Sels, 2003](#)). On one hand, the link between self-directedness and employability supports the major shared claim of the new employment relationship theories that modern workers have the potential to influence their working trajectories, and are therefore able, at least in principle, to effectively cope with the inherent uncertainties of the flexible labor markets. With the single exception of age, the effect of self-directedness on employability was the highest of all factors in the model. At the same time our results clearly show that the contextual factors considered in the model also affect employability. In line with extant research (e.g. [Raemdonck et al., 2012](#)), older workers were found to perceive themselves as being less employable, this reflecting a well-known structural problem in Belgium and Flanders concerning the notoriously low employment rate of those aged 50 or older ([Herremans et al., 2015](#)). The effect of age on perceived employability is

about twice as high as the effect of self-directedness. The effect of age may be somewhat exacerbated by the media attention towards the issue of unemployment of older workers. In addition, there may exist a relationship between age and general pessimism (see e.g. [Lachman et al., 2008](#)), which could affect the perception of employability. Gender was also negatively related to employability, women finding themselves less employable than men. This relationship could be a consequence of historically higher unemployment statistics for women in Flanders, a trend that has only reversed around the time of the survey ([Statistics Belgium, 2013](#)). The positive relationship between education and competence development on one hand, and employability on the other, has also been documented in the literature ([Berntson et al., 2006](#)).

Though the effects of contextual factors were, with the exception of age, smaller than that of self-directedness, they are by far not negligible in practical terms. Thus, unstandardized regression estimates for education and gender were respectively -0.148 and -0.224, implying that the traditional divisions in the labor market continue to play a role alongside the agency.

Previous job history appeared to be related both to career self-directedness and employability. Indeed, taking career decisions such as a (voluntary) job change may reflect a higher propensity for self-directedness; the fact that new employment had been found in the past may serve as evidence for the individual of his or her capacity to find new employment in the future. The opposite holds true for past experiences of unemployment. These findings may suggest the existence of a vicious cycle: individuals with a precarious career trajectory are not only less employable, but also less self-directed, which in turn leads to even more career precariousness.

Contrary to our initial expectations, we did not find any substantial differences in the model for the two pairs of groups in the analysis, namely workers without higher education and workers in non-managerial positions, with their respective counterparts. First, the effects of self-directedness as well as the structural factors in the model were the same, within the margin of statistical error, for the groups compared. This implies that self-directedness plays

the same role for lower educated workers and workers in non-managerial positions, as it does for higher educated workers and managers, respectively. Second, lower educated workers perceive themselves to be no less self-directed and employable than higher educated workers, and the same goes for non-managers and their respective counterparts. Within the limits of our model framework, we were therefore unable to detect any evidence of the two-tiered labor market with respect to employability. This negative result does not necessarily negate the existence of the two-tiered labor market. Instead, it shows where the break between the tiers is *not* situated.

Additional factors may be responsible for the negative finding. One possible factor pertains to a division in job quality: while less advantaged labor market groups may find themselves equally self-directed and employable, the quality of their employment may vastly differ. Another factor may pertain to the use of perceived employability, which may deviate from the objective re-employment potential, this is further discussed in the limitations section. Finally, it is possible that it is self-directedness itself that creates stratification in flexible labor markets, due to its increasing importance for career management. After all, the new career climate, while potentially being less secure and less predictable, is at the same time characterized by more permeable boundaries on the labor market (see [Gunz et al., 2000](#)). The individual ability to cross these boundaries may matter more for (the perception of) employability, than the initial structural position of the worker. This idea is to some degree supported by the fact that the impact of self-directedness was by far the largest in the model, aside from age.

Implications for research and policy

What implications do these results have for the academic debate on the new employment relationship and the related debate on the new career? Our analyses provide an empirical response to a growing awareness in the domain of career studies that a proper analysis of the new employment relationship cannot occur without paying attention to the societal context that constrains and shapes individual agency ([Delva et al., 2016](#); [Inkson](#)

et al., 2012; Roper et al., 2010; Tams and Arthur, 2010). They demonstrate that even though agency is a strong antecedent of employability, a key ingredient of labor market success, contextual factors that cannot be changed by the individual, at least not in the short-term perspective, can also play an important role. Our results suggest therefore that a more balanced approach in terms of interaction between agency and structure must be adopted in the employability and new career research (cf. McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). On the other hand, our results refute the claim raised by some career scholars that agency-driven careers are reserved only for the privileged labor market groups (see Inkson et al., 2012). They suggest that even weaker labor market strata can benefit from exercising agency to counter their less advantageous structural position.

Our results also imply that policy makers cannot rely solely on individual agency to mitigate the increasing labor insecurity stemming from the growing demands of labor force flexibility. Additional policy measures are required to improve employment stability for more vulnerable worker groups (cf. McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). At the same time, agency-based interventions, such as career coaching (Verbruggen and Sels, 2008), remain a viable tool to foster employability even for the weaker labor market groups.

Limitations

Our study has a number of limitations that need to be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, the use of perceived employability as an indicator of employment security has its drawbacks. Most importantly, it does not necessarily make an accurate reflection of the objective probability of being re-employed. Respondents may overestimate their employability for the reasons of social desirability or to avoid a negative self-presentation. Second, the use of cross-sectional data makes it impossible to determine the direction of causality between career mobility history and both latent variables. A similar observation holds true for the link between career self-directedness and additional educational activities, both can potentially influence and reinforce each other. Additional research is required to address these issues.

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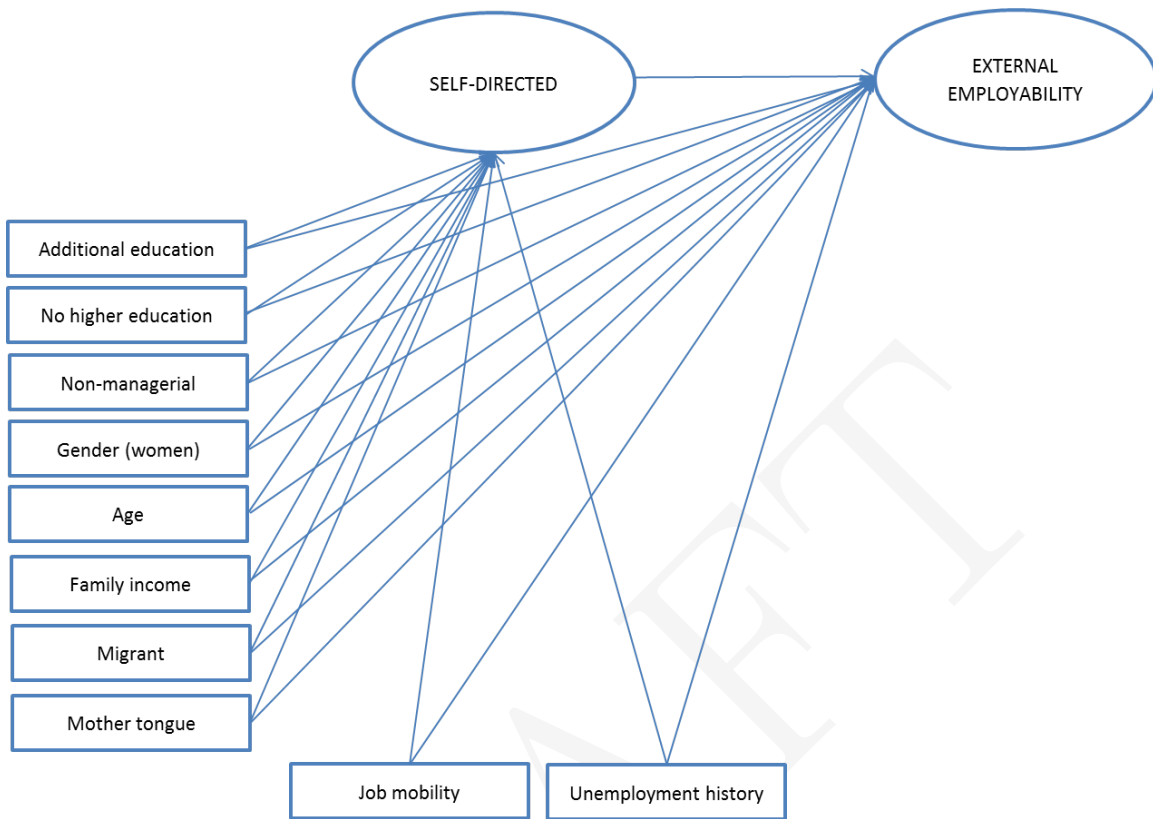


Figure 1. Conceptual model

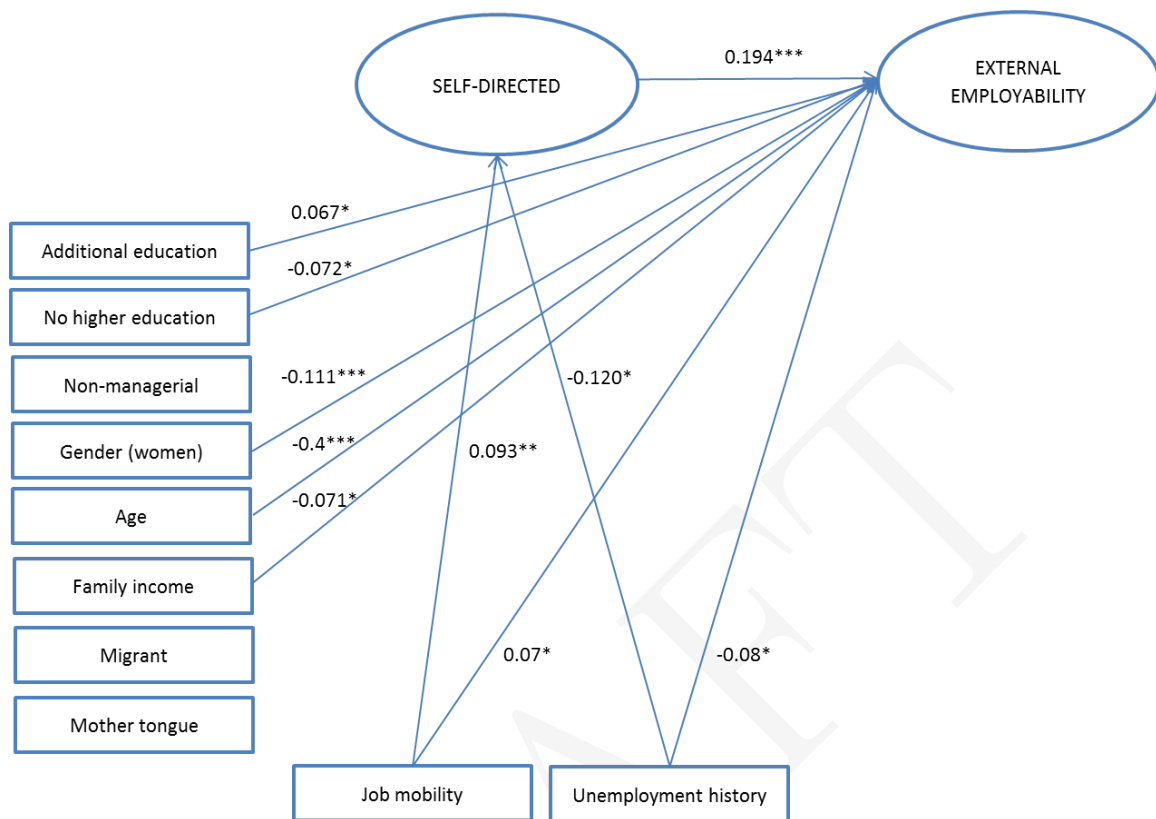


Figure 2. Structural model: standardized coefficients, non-significant relationships omitted

Table 1
Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations between the analysis variables ($N = 1055$)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Non-higher education	0.60	-												
2 Managerial position	0.16	-	-0.35***											
3 Gender	0.48	-	-0.12***	-0.16***										
4 Age	41.55	11.89	-0.02	0.15***	-0.04									
5 Migration backgr.	0.11	-	0.04	-0.05	0.02	-0.05								
6 Educational act.	1.04	1.08	-0.18***	0.20***	-0.02	0.01	-0.10**							
7 Family income	8.60	2.75	-0.07*	0.01	-0.05	-0.23***	-0.09**	0.05						
8 Dutch native	0.95	-	-0.02	0.02	0.02	0.10**	-0.57***	0.08**	0.12***					
9 Number of jobs	2.00	1.28	0.01	0.03	0.07*	-0.16***	0.09**	0.06	-0.03	0.00				
10 Previous unemployment	1.82	8.47	0.06*	-0.08*	0.06*	-0.06	0.14***	0.00	-0.05	-0.19***	0.13***			
11 Self-directedness	4.01	0.64	0.03	0.03	-0.05	-0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.07*	-0.10**		
12 Perceived employability	3.35	1.11	-0.06	0.01	-0.08**	-0.37***	0.02	0.08**	0.03	0.00	0.14***	-0.07*	0.18***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2

Invariance tests, non-managerial group

#	Model ID	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	prob	RMSEA	CFI
1	Configural invariance				0.043	0.967
2	Weak invariance	1.863	6	0.932	0.041	0.968
3	Strong invariance	4.210	6	0.648	0.040	0.968
4	Model 3 + eq. means	2.549	2	0.280	0.040	0.968
5	Model 4 + eq. regressions	20.965	19	0.339	0.038	0.967
6	Model 5 + eq. latent variances	0.752	2	0.687	0.038	0.968

Table 3
Invariance tests, higher education diploma

#	Model ID	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	prob	RMSEA	CFI
1	Configural invariance				0.041	0.971
2	Weak invariance	2.316	6	0.888	0.039	0.972
3	Strong invariance	16.242	6	0.013	0.040	0.970
3a	Model 3 + free intercept (e2)	10.901	5	0.053	0.039	0.971
4	Model 3a + eq. means	3.243	2	0.198	0.039	0.970
5	Model 4 + eq. regressions	20.205	17	0.264	0.038	0.970
6	Model 5 + eq. latent variances	2.251	2	0.324	0.037	0.969