

SUMMARY

A CALL FOR RESPECT

EXPERIENCES OF UNEMPLOYED WORKERS IN A MERITOCRATISING SOCIETY

Is failure one's own responsibility? Is success a matter of choice? Does one deserve appreciation based on achievements? Is a person a loser if he or she occupies a low rung on the societal ladder? This thesis is about how long-time unemployed workers, 'distanced from the labour market', protect and build their self-respect in an increasingly meritocratic society. In a meritocracy, status and appreciation are dependent on personal achievements which are based on ability and effort. One's hierarchical place in society, and the recognition that goes with it, is to be *earned*. It then also follows that when one is unemployed, or one occupies a low rung on the social ladder, this is one's own fault and this does not garner any respect or recognition. Tsjalling Swierstra and Evelien Tonkens presuppose that the self-respect of the so-called 'losers' in meritocratic competition for social success has come under considerable pressure (Swierstra & Tonkens 2008, 2006; cf. De Botton 2004; Sennett 2003).

The concern for a potential erosion of self-respect inspired me to research the sources of self-respect of the so-called 'losers' in a meritocratic society. How does it affect unemployed workers when they can't use paid work to generate respect? Do unemployed individuals regard their 'failure' as their own fault and as a reason to be ashamed? The main research question of this thesis is as follows:

What are the consequences of meritocracy for the self-respect of long-term unemployed workers, distanced from the labour market?

The question of whether or not our society is meritocratic, is not relevant for this study. What is relevant, however, is whether a perceived meritocracy has consequences for identity and self-respect. The idea that success and failure can be ascribed to personal merit is in any case firmly rooted in everyday life. The downside to this meritocratic ideal is becoming ever more real (SCP 2004: 376). This thesis shows how unemployed workers perceive their unemployment; what the absence of paid work means for their self-respect; why and how they deal with their unemployment; and how they protect their self-respect. Also, this thesis provides insight into *how* appreciation and self-appreciation are created, and under which circumstances the self-respect of unemployed workers is threatened. I show that unemployed workers are ambivalent towards the meritocratic ideal. Obviously they are 'burdened' by it, but interestingly, they also gain self-respect from meritocracy. I also examine how contradictory they can be about which sources are, and which sources are not important for their self-respect. These contradictions demonstrate a certain resilience in how unemployed workers deal with their relatively low social status and meritocracy, but they also expose how important work 'as duty' is for them, and how vulnerable that makes them.

The main research question is answered for a specific group of people who are out of work: unemployed workers who do not resign themselves to their unemployment. I spoke with unemployed individuals who voluntarily participate in 'citizen activation' projects that sought to increase their employability. Because their participation is voluntary, they fit well in the presuppositions of the meritocratic ideal. They show an intent to actively change their social position by putting in a lot of effort. My expectation was that these unemployed people in particular do not

view their position to be a *fait accompli*; that they reflect on their social status; and that they are able to express their thoughts on their situation.

A myriad of research methods was applied to answer the main research question: semi-structured interviews with unemployed workers and professionals; a vignette study; document analysis; and in-situ observations. I conducted semi-structured interviews at six citizen activation projects, with 56 unemployed workers and with sixteen (paid) project coordinators. With the professionals, I spoke about their experiences with participants of the projects, their goals and expectations for the participants, and their methods. Along with the semi-structured interviews about their own position, I asked the participants of the projects to rank fourteen (paid and unpaid) positions in the labour market according to appreciation and respect in a so-called 'appreciation-hierarchy'. This ranking was then used as a 'vignette', according to vignette studies' methods, to study to what extent society is perceived to be meritocratic by the project's participants. The purpose of this was mainly to find out which criteria and which values are used to assign high or low appreciation to labour force positions. The pivotal question was whether participants perceived the hierarchy of society on the basis of meritocratic values and principles or on the basis of sources that are better suited to an alternative logic.

CITIZEN ACTIVATION PROJECTS: ACTIVATION, APPRECIATION AND THERAPEUTISATION

Before I selected six 'citizen activation' projects for further research, I studied promotional material of twenty-four citizen activation projects to explore the range and variety of the projects available in the Netherlands. It turned out that they shared an important characteristic: the view that people are themselves responsible for (the arrangement of) their lives. They help unemployed individuals to become active in society, so that participants will in the end be able to take steps towards getting a job. The projects differ, however, in the extent to which they promote the idea that it is a moral duty for participants to re-join the workforce. In other words, they aren't all just about activation. In some projects, recognition and therapeutisation also play a part, giving unemployed workers a way of gaining recognition and self-respect outside of the labour force.

I was able to distinguish three types of citizen activation projects according to their goals, methods, and relation to the labour force (chapter six). They differ in the ways that self-improvement is used by participants to improve their suitability and relevance for the workforce. Unemployed workers at 'Instrumentality projects' are prepared for re-entering the labour force by learning appropriate skills. In so-called 'star projects', self-esteem is raised and the development of a range of 'special' talents is encouraged, like a talent for singing or an ability to be an agent for connecting residents in a neighbourhood. 'Therapy projects' give participants an opportunity, through self-exploration, to heighten their resilience so as to better deal with expectations of a demanding society.

MONEY AND SOCIETAL VALUE: TWO LOGICS OF APPRECIATION

Unemployed workers in the selected six citizen activation projects were asked how they appreciate themselves and how they think they are appreciated by others. Again, central to this was the question of whether or not they did this using meritocratic values. I asked the participants to make two hierarchies of positions in the labour market: one according to how they appreciate the positions, and one according to how they thought *others* appreciated those same positions.

Interestingly, I found two different logics of appreciation: one I named 'logic of meritocracy', and the other I designated 'logic of societal value'. According to the participants, the logic of meritocracy

dominates the way the general public appreciate the labour market positions. They think that *others* believe in a meritocratic ideology. 'Other people' would base their ranking on education, on having paid work, and on success based on ability and effort, chance or social background notwithstanding. An important feature of this repertoire is that simple and unpaid work, like cleaning jobs or volunteer work, come out low in the rankings because they require little talent or ability.

The ranking based on how the participants themselves appreciated the positions in the labour market is underpinned by a logic of societal meaningfulness. Unemployed individuals largely use the same values and criteria to support their own appreciation hierarchy, but there are important differences. Caring for others, working hard, and contributing to society are thought to be important sources of appreciation, whether people are being paid for it or not. They question a hierarchy that is primarily based on meritocratic values; they advocate upgrading the appreciation for 'active' unemployed people who are motivated and make themselves useful, but also volunteers and cleaners; and they advocate a more critical approach to people with high social status. In their eyes, (highly) paid jobs should not be the only source of recognition. It is an oft-voiced sentiment that even if people cannot win respect and appreciation through having a job, they can still contribute through doing unpaid work. Work that is perceived to be less appreciated in a materialistic sense, is in their eyes not necessarily of low worth in a non-materialistic sense. Further, unpaid and low paying jobs are often said to involve higher moral values, being noble and useful.

CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-RESPECT ON THREE LEVELS

When the unemployed individuals whom I interviewed explain how they view themselves and how they construct their self-respect, we notice certain inconsistencies. Sometimes they use the logic of societal meaningfulness to protect and consolidate their self-respect, and at other times they use the logic of meritocracy. They are at least ambiguous about the sources of their self-respect. I distinguish three levels on which unemployed workers construct their self-respect: an individual level, a social level, and a cultural level.

In chapter four I describe how unemployed workers protect, on an *individual* level, their self-respect against personal failure. Despite their employment status, unemployed workers are convinced that they are deserving of recognition, are talented, and that they do contribute to society, in keeping with the logic of societal value. They apply both meritocratic and pre-meritocratic considerations in their reasoning. They for instance say that employers are guilty of age discrimination and of not giving fair opportunities to people without certificates. Their social background is also often used as a reason why they can't get paid work. Participants regularly said that they never had the chance to gain an education because that was very unusual in the families and communities they grew up in. These thoughts are used to protect their dignity. Their unemployment is not *their* fault. It's not them, but others who are letting them down.

Interviewees also sometimes explain their unemployment by using the logic of meritocracy to their advantage. They emphasize that their unemployment is due to a lack of effort in their past and they reassure themselves that they would land that job if they were to actually really try (cf. Lamont et al. 2013: 148). When they identify a lack of effort as a cause for their unemployment, it also means that they don't have to doubt their talent and abilities. Another way of explaining unemployment and shoring up self-respect is by embracing alternative values. Interviewees reject meritocratic values and emphasize the worth of unpaid (volunteer) work.

While unemployed workers generally don't use their own shortcomings to understand their unemployment, they believe others do – in accordance with the meritocratic ideal. They believe

other people see them as ‘naught, nothing and useless’, or as lazy profiteers who leech on the state and do not try to find work at all. The unemployed I spoke with found a way of distancing themselves from this stereotype. They consolidate their self-respect on a *social level*, convinced that they are better than other unemployed workers (chapter five). They draw a clear line between themselves, as ‘active unemployed’, and unmotivated ‘inactive people without jobs’ who according to them unfairly receive social benefits. The logic of meritocracy is now very convenient. Archetypal, inactive jobless people do indeed have themselves to blame for their failings. They are the actual losers who are worthless, say the interviewees. Because of this strategically chosen group to compare themselves with, the interviewees are able to distance themselves from the losers and to deflect any criticism from others. It eases societal pressure and acts as a shield against losing self-respect.

There is a third way of constructing self-respect, and it acts on a *cultural level*. This third way concerns the financial rewards for work. ‘Who earns money, is more valued’ is a dominant cultural value. In chapter seven I show that this also applies to unemployed workers. Even though they have little or no influence in this matter, unemployed workers would still feel like a more respected member of society if they were to receive a financial reward for their contributions. This does not, however, mean that they cannot generate self-respect from unpaid work. Although it does help when the activities closely resemble ‘real’ work. But herein lies a danger for it to backfire as well. For most, participating in the activation projects is a temporary measure, not a sustainable solution. It just is not *real* (i.e. paid) work. When participating in activation projects does not lead to securing a paid job, the consequences are disappointment, frustration and anger. Their experiences with social activation expose another contradiction: where unpaid work is ascribed to have higher moral values (chapter three) – because it is noble and useful – it is not a sustainable source for self-respect.

IMMATERIAL MEANINGS OF MONEY

In chapter eight I show – building on the above – that the role of financial rewards in the construction of self-respect must be understood not only in a material sense, but also in a symbolic, immaterial sense. It was striking that many respondents brought up the more intangible meanings of getting paid that are important to them. A salary stands for appreciation and recognition. The fact that money has more meanings than merely a financial one is, according to several (economic) sociologists, an understudied and perhaps an underestimated subject in the literature (Velthuis 2005, 2003; De Regt 1995; Zelizer 1989). My research shows that symbolic meanings of financial compensation help to better understand the emotional health of unemployed workers. Several symbolic meanings came up during the interviews, unprompted and in differing combinations. I distinguish four meanings.

First, financial rewards provide an income, but they also mean autonomy and independence from a partner and from the state. The second meaning is payment as recognition and immaterial appreciation of personal value. Third, a salary stands for the reciprocal dependency between the provider and the user of a service. The financial compensation is the link in this relationship. The trade compensates the obligation that comes with work. And a fourth meaning is that paid work is a source of self-respect, if the reward is deemed to be fair. The compensation has to be proportional to a person’s usefulness and proportional to what others receive for equivalent efforts.

These ‘immaterial benefits from a material source’ help to understand why a relatively low-paid cleaning job and being forced to provide unpaid work in return for social benefits can be considered to be humiliating. They also show that an unconditional basic income will not be a panacea. Such an income lacks the symbolic meanings that financial compensation for services provided carry, and

that are important factors in job satisfaction. It is especially an 'earned' income that contributes to self-respect. It makes one view oneself as being a productive member of society. An unconditional basic income will leave unemployed workers as dependent and as unrewarded for their services as they are now, receiving social benefits.

UNEMPLOYMENT AS A SOURCE OF SHAME AND GUILT

Based on my findings in this thesis, and in answer to the main research question, I have shown three entangled effects of meritocracy on the self-respect of unemployed workers. Firstly, it takes unemployed individuals a lot of emotional labour to protect their self-worth and to extract themselves from the negative stereotypical image that they feel others have of them. They feel they are struggling with the image of being *self-made* losers in a competition for societal success (cf. Prast & Elshout 2012).

The second effect is closely related to the first. As a result of the constraining norm that 'real' work is in fact paid work, the number of sources of self-respect for unemployed workers are limited. Unemployed workers have narrow views on what is work and what is not (cf. Pahl 1984: 91). Raising children, being a caregiver, or doing volunteer work are all considered to be not 'real' work and are therefore, in their eyes, inadequate alternatives (cf. Van Berkel en Van der Aa 2005: 331). The constraining norm of paid work makes unemployed workers, distanced from the labour market, vulnerable. As long as wider cultural and social recognition is generated through paid work, unemployed individuals will find it difficult to feel like a fully accepted member of society. Participating in alternative ways will not be satisfactory. Without societal recognition it is very difficult indeed to protect and build on one's self-worth.

Finally, a third consequence of meritocracy is apparent from my research. Many active unemployed draw a clear distinction between themselves and inactive unemployed, using it to protect their self-respect. This does have repercussions. It makes them even more vulnerable, in fact. By reproducing the dominant discourse, they themselves are hindered by, they not only help maintain social inequality and the idea of unemployment as an individual problem, but in fact also strengthen it. This polarises people rather than uniting them. A collective solution, like unifying to combat negative stereotypical imaging, is not part of their options (cf. Derks et al. 1995: 154-155). The unemployed I spoke with do not rebel against society, but rather against other unemployed. This could possibly be an indication of far-reaching individualism in the Netherlands. It certainly does not indicate that people at the lower end of society are inclined to identify with each other, least of all to unite.

The underappreciation that unemployed workers say they are subjected to therefore shows an important flipside to a meritocratic society. By reproducing an 'own-fault-discourse', unemployed workers impede solidarity and help uphold the stereotypical image of the unemployed as failures.

MERITOCRACY ON THE RISE: PROGRESS OR HUMILIATION?

The erosion of the self-respect of people on the lower rungs of the social ladder is not so clear-cut. Often, unemployed workers are quite successful in guarding against feelings of personal failure. The way they construct their self-worth, on a personal, social, and cultural level, demonstrates how they reject the meritocratic ideal when they feel pressured by it, and use it to their advantage when it happens to suit them. This shows their ambivalent attitude towards the meritocratic ideal, but also that meritocracy is not exclusively felt to be forcing and restraining. They can be pragmatic and

resilient in their approach towards the ideal (cf. Lamont et al. 2013). They remain sensitive to the dominant social hierarchy, but they will create their own social hierarchy when necessary.

These ambivalences, however, do reflect the struggle of unemployed workers, just as it reflects the bleakness of their positions. It is quite possible that just the (literally) expressed wish to have work helps in self-protection. Possibly, it provides unemployed individuals a handle on a society in which recognition and appreciation are heavily dependent on having paid work. In that sense it is very understandable that they would want to put faith in the *engineerability* of their social position. But as long as 'real' work means paid work, those distanced from the labour market have no chance of sustainably building their self-respect. This makes it necessary for society to recognize that unemployment is a painful and unwelcome situation, and not the result of personal failings. The same goes for embracing a wider definition of merit. This can help bridge the gap between unemployed workers and the rest of society.

Life has always been very tough for those hit by unemployment. An increasingly meritocratic society just adds another painful dimension to it. Losing your job was once a result of the state of society, the financial crisis, or just bad luck. Now, it is the fault of the unemployed individuals themselves. Even when taking personal responsibility is a virtue, a person being a self-made project is an inspiring challenge, and meritocracy is a stimulus for self-expression; it should not mean that unemployment is a reason for guilt and shame. That would make meritocracy a force not for progress, but for humiliation. With this book, I hope to contribute to the realisation that unemployed workers also have a fundamental right to respect and dignity. Being unemployed is hard enough as it is.