

Experiences of Work Ability Support in Non-Standard Employment: Narrative positioning Analysis

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Background

- Supporting work ability of individuals to extend working lives has become crucial in Western societies
 - Employers have adopted disability management programs (including work accommodations)
 - Individual employees are expected to actively maintain their work ability and seek possibilities to participate in working life
- Labor market has changed towards flexibility and non-standard employment (NSE) is become more popular
- Research suggests that workers in NSE may not have the same access to work ability support as workers in standard employment

Objective

- To examine the experiences of work ability support of employees in the Finnish retail trade and food and restaurant services, from the perspective of agency and identity work
- Agency and identities become relevant in two ways: 1) individuals' actions are required because of fewer possibilities for support and employment insecurity 2) active logic constructs an identity of a person efficiently managing their life and well-being, and a new kind of working life agency is required



Theoretical background

- Agency is viewed from a sociocultural subject-centered and life-course perspective and thereby seen as manifestations of agentive subject's intentional actions, choices and stance taking that affect their work and professional identities (Eteläpelto et al. 2013).
- Knowledge created is a mutual interactional achievement of the interviewer and the interviewee, subjective agent's situated self is constructed in interaction (Depperman 2013; Bamberg 2004).
 - Constructionist approach
- Narrative approach: small stories—short narratives of past, present or future events—serve as sites of identity work and are shaped in and by the ongoing interactions (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008).

Data

- Part of a larger research project studying multiple jobholders' work ability support.
- Thematic interviews with workers in the Finnish retail trade and restaurant and food service industry conducted between 2022 and 2023 by face-to face or online methods.
- The interviewees were working-aged women and men in various occupations, such as retail workers, kitchen staff, bartenders, waitresses and chefs.
- 11 interviews (appr. one hour each) were obtained, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim



Narrative positioning analysis

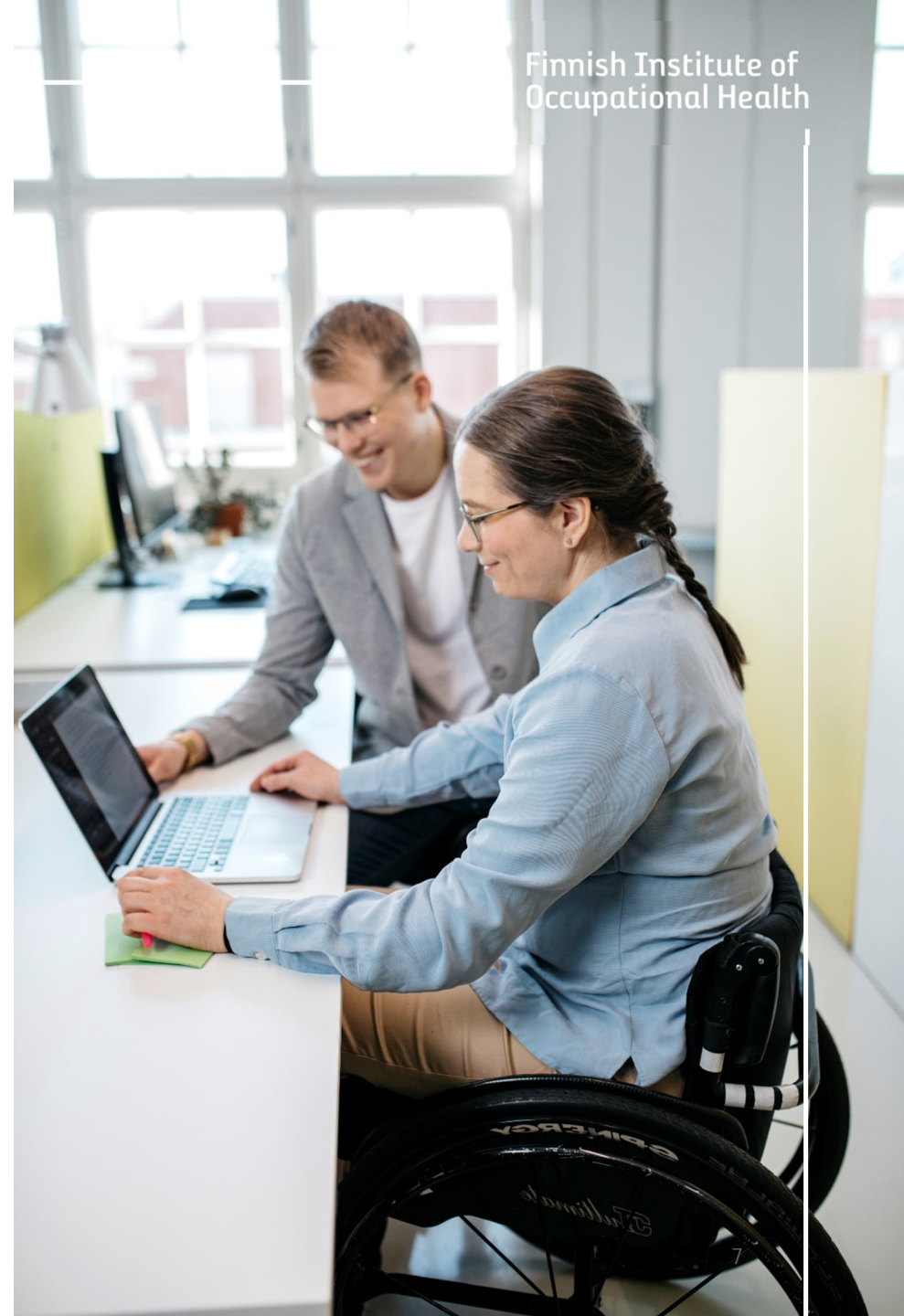
Level 1: The story world level.
Analysis focuses on how story characters are positioned relative to each other, especially the teller's positions.

Level 2: The storytelling level.
The focus is on the interaction between the storyteller and the audience.

Level 3: The cultural model story level, the analysis examines dominant narratives and how the teller makes them relevant for identity construction and interaction.

Results 1/2

- Three different narrative types were found:
 - 1) Disabled but good worker, balancing being acceptable (transformative agency)
 - 2) Self-reliant and resourceful worker, creating their own working conditions (transformative agency and resistance)
 - 3) Inadequate and rejected worker, suffering from circumstances and employer attitudes (small agency)



Results 2/2

- Overall, experiences of receiving work ability support, such as work accommodations, were occasional.
- Individual's own actions and characteristics were emphasized in maintaining work ability or seeking possibilities to continuing working.
- Changing jobs was a common way to manage decreased work ability.
- Across the data, identity position of a disabled worker was constructed as undesirable in the interviewed employees' stories.



Discussion 1/3

- Expressions of transformative agency prevailed. Many interviewees described themselves as capable of influencing on their situation either by requesting work accommodations or changing jobs (in-firm or in-career transformative agency, Järvensivu 2020).
 - However, experiences of receiving actual work accommodations appeared to be occasional
- Identity work constructing disability as an undesirable trait of an employee and aiming to the ideals of a good worker was required (dominant discourses concerning ableist and neoliberal norms, see Foster and Wass 2013; Varje 2018).
 - The employee invited the interviewer to co-construct the identity position during the interview -> cultural model stories are shared
- Seing et al. 2014: Employees' access to employer support may vary depending on their value to the employer. We suggest that for workers in NSE, personal resources and characteristics are further emphasized due to employment insecurities and replaceability of employees.

Discussion 2/3

- An adaptive, creative, self-reliant and resourceful employee can be seen as a strong agent capable of affecting their own conditions
 - However, this kind of employee is also self-responsible, finding their own solutions and taking the responsibility of their disability and its impacts on work, enacting a cultural model story of a neoliberal ideal worker (see Varje 2018).
- An inadequate and vulnerable worker may end up in a precarious labor market position, and insecurities of NSE may enhance this
 - Their agency becomes restricted in this kind of position (Åkerblad 2014)
 - They may have the need to participate in contemporary working life at any cost

Discussion 3/3

- Stories of job transitions to find more suitable work tasks may imply that flexible labor markets offer opportunities for workers to choose jobs according to their personal needs and preferences.
- Workers in NSE are a heterogeneous group and not necessarily all in precarious positions (Hipp et al. 2015).
 - Some workers with disabilities prefer NSE for personal reasons, and NSE offers them flexible ways to participate in working life, but health-related reasons also often lead to precarious types of work (Schur & Kruse 2021.)
- Although both forms of transformative agency, in-firm and in-career, are important from the viewpoint of an employee with disabilities navigating flexible labor markets, the latter may also to some extent be the result of a shift of responsibility from employers to workers in NSE.

Conclusions

- Our study suggests that
 - Work ability support is occasional for workers in NSE and highly dependent on their characteristics, resources and own actions.
 - Workers in NSE do not perceive work ability support as neutral and mundane part of workplace practices.
 - In case of disability and having a need for work ability support, identity work to reach ableist and neoliberal norms of a good worker are required

Thank you!

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