

Paradoxes of empowerment in labour market activation

Findings from a narrative study about vocational rehabilitation
of people with disabilities in the Netherlands

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The rethoric of empowerment has disempowering consequences for clients and professionals in vocational rehabilitation programmes

This paradox is an unintended consequence of:

- Norms and expectations embedded in vocational rehabilitation programmes
- Professional accountability frameworks

Let's work!

- Activating welfare states
 - Focus on labour market participation
 - the Netherlands: **Participation Act**
- Vocational rehabilitation support under discussion
 - Goal & Effectiveness

- Overlooked:

How does vocational rehabilitation work in practice?

Focus on practices

- Practice is **no direct reflection** of policies (or theories)
- Practice has **its own normativity**: embedded assumptions and expectations
- **Stories** give insight in practices
- From the **perspectives of the people concerned**

Stories

- Powerful way to constitute an **identity**
- Stories as **social creations** (made and told in particular society)
- Stories articulate **expectations** embedded in practices and its **consequences**.
- 'Clients':
 - Participating in VR programs after receiving sickness benefits for > 5 years
 - **Life story interviews**
- Professionals:
 - **Indepth interviews about their professionals practices**

Major assumptions in vocational rehabilitation support

- Training of skills

van Hal, L., Meershoek, A., de Rijk, A., Nijhuis, F. (2012). Beyond vocational rehabilitation as a training of skills: return-to-work as an identity issue. *Disability & Society*, 27(1), 81-93.

- Fostering empowerment

van Hal, L., Meershoek, A., Nijhuis, F., Horstman, K. (2012). The 'empowered' client in vocational rehabilitation: the excluding impact of exclusive strategies. *Health Care Analysis*, 20(3), 213-230.

- Checking motivation

van Hal, L., Meershoek, A., Nijhuis, F., Horstman, K. (2013). A sociological perspective on 'the unmotivated client': public accountability and professional work methods in vocational rehabilitation. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 35(10), 809-818.

- Determining abilities

van Hal, L., Meershoek, A., Nijhuis, F., Horstman, K. (2013). Disembodied abilities: Sick role and participation in 'activating' return-to-work practices. *Social Science & Medicine*, 96, 9-16.

These assumptions have unintended consequences that hamper labour market activation.

Empowerment in vocational rehabilitation

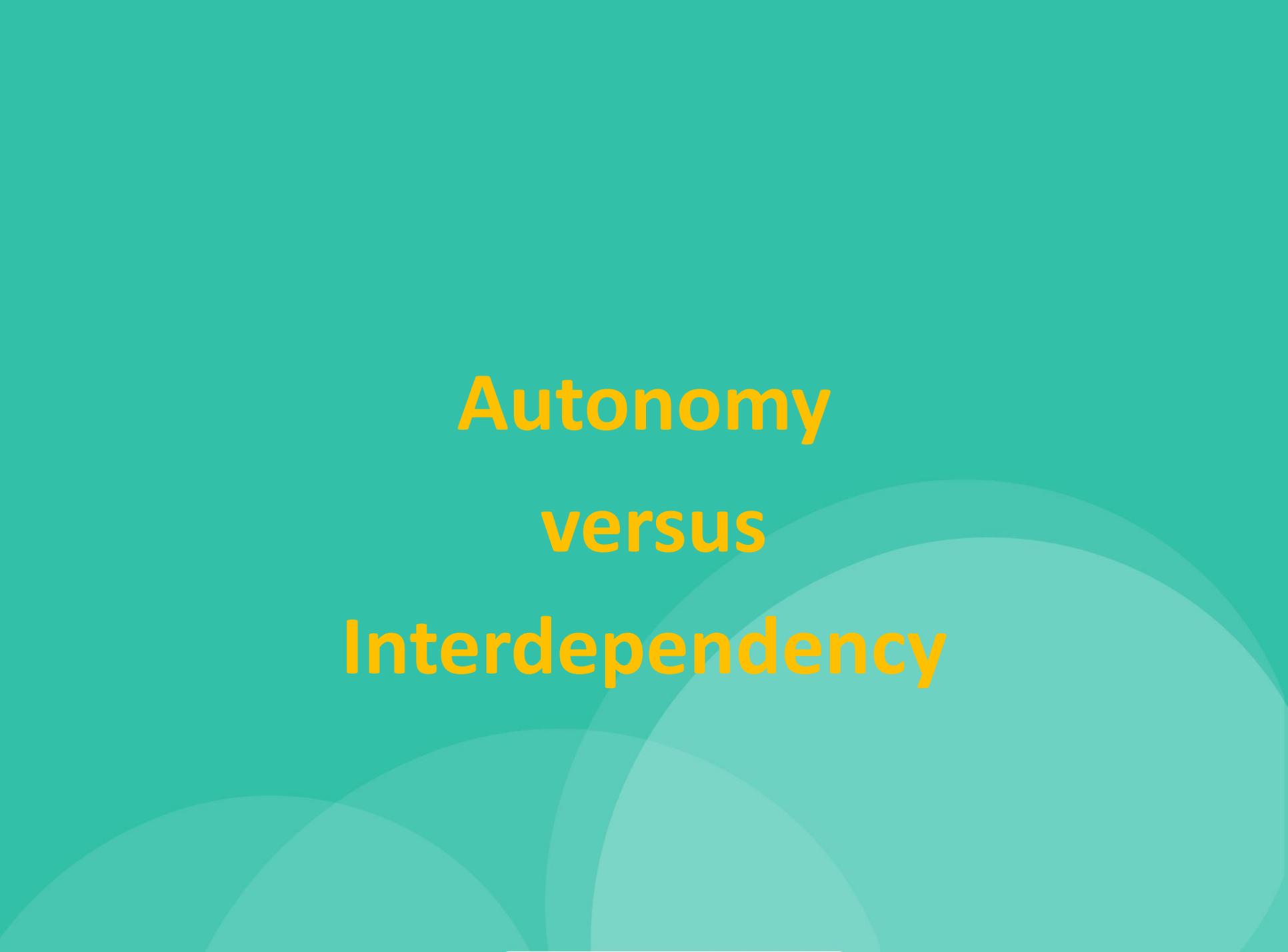
‘when people possess a certain inner leadership, they are **capable of self-reflection** and have the capacity to make an informed, **independent decision**. With this increased **autonomy**, they are able to make their **own choices**, and these might **lead to better prospects** for the rehabilitation process’

(De Koning (2008) *Handbook for Empowering Strategies in Social Services and Vocational Rehabilitation*, p. 12).

'Doing' empowerment

- Exploration of various ways in which empowerment is 'done' in practice
- Different ways of 'doing' embody different norms
- Narratives that explicitly challenge dominant expectations of empowerment
- Five illustrative cases

**Autonomy
versus
Interdependency**

The background is a solid teal color. In the lower right quadrant, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent circles of varying shades of teal, creating a layered, abstract effect.

**The goal of labour participation
versus
Living a Good Life**

**Linearity
versus
Erratic Process**

**‘All or Nothing’
versus
Balancing**

**Reflection
versus
Learning by Doing**

Some concluding remarks

- Empowerment as an activation strategy:
 - Understood in a **dichotomous** way
 - **Psychologizing**: reduced to individual characteristic
 - **Disciplines** both clients and professionals
- **Excludes** people from the support the need in order to feel empowered
- Taking **situated stories** of clients as starting point as a way to work towards empowerment
 - Alternative approaches that go **beyond dichotomy**

What 'works'...

- Taking into account what it **means** in peoples' lives to (return-to) work
 - Changing relation to body, self, society and perspectives on past, present, future [**identity work**]
- **Embodied** abilities
- **Working on the norm** of the able-bodied worker
 - Beyond logic of recovery
- **Professional leeway** and **reflection** by intervision
- **Valuing all work** done during vocational rehabilitation

Learning from practice for combating worklessness of young people with disabilities

- Making (implicit) assumptions and expectations explicit
- Learning from unintended consequences
- Articulating alternative ideals and conditions

Thank you for your attention!

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