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The winner takes it all, the loser has to fall: Provoking the agency perspective in employability research

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Abstract

In this paper, we provoke the strong focus on personal agency in employability research. We counter three dominant assumptions in the literature, namely, (a) that employability is an individual asset, (b) that employability is owned by the individual, and (c) that employability leads to positive outcomes. A key observation is that the three dominant theories that are being used in employability studies, namely, human capital theory, conservation of resources theory, and social exchange theory, also question these core agency assumptions that form the basis of those studies. Based on these theories, we identify three blind spots in employability research: Employability is (a) *contextual*, (b) *relational*, and (3) *polarising*. Taken together, we make the case that the agency perspective overlooks a potential dark side of employability: The winner takes it all, the loser has to fall. We outline a future research agenda on this potential dark side of employability.

KEYWORDS

agency, conservation of resources theory, employability, human capital theory, social exchange theory, structure

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although employability is not a new concept, it commands now more than before a central place on both the policy and research agenda (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). This aligns with the move towards neoliberalism in most Western societies and the associated emphasis on personal agency: Individuals are held responsible for their

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employment and career outcomes (Crisp & Powell, 2017). This emphasis has had a strong impact on career research in general, for example, in the assumption that career control has shifted from the organisation to the individual (Guest & Rodrigues, 2015). It is also shaping current employability research: Most employability studies have adopted an agentic perspective (Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009) in the form of one or more of the following three assumptions.

A first assumption is that employability is an individual asset. Employability is generally defined as an individual's chance of a job in the internal and/or external labour market (Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015). This chance is often interpreted in a person-centred way, such as the individual's ability to obtain and retain work (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006), or a set of individual competences (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), attitudes, and dispositions (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). Hence, enhancing employability is mostly about individual "up-skilling." Examples are the many studies on employability enhancement through skill and competence development, (e.g., Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Schaufeli, & Blonk, 2015; De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011; Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011).

A second assumption is that individuals will act as free agents in the employment relationship: The employee is in control over career-related matters and decides on whether or not to enter in or continue the employment relationship (Guest & Rodrigues, 2015). This decision is conditional upon what the employer has to offer in terms of employability support. This assumption is inspired by literature on the new psychological contract, in which employability support on the part of the employer is a critical employee entitlement (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008).

Finally, a third assumption is the idea that personal agency in employability-related matters brings about positive outcomes for the individual: The employability discourse advocates individual growth and development as the norm. The underlying idea is that individual control and responsibility are motivating and thus beneficial. Outcomes typically associated with employability are positive and signal success, such as reemployment (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2013; Mc Ardle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007), career success (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; De Vos et al., 2011), and well-being (De Cuyper, Raeder, Van der Heijden, & Wittekind, 2012).

Our aim is to provoke this focus on agency and the above three assumptions in particular. We do so by highlighting three blind spots in employability research, each related to specific assumptions. A summary is provided in Table 1. The first blind spot is that employability is inherently contextual and not exclusively a personal asset (vs. Assumption 1). The second blind spot, building on the previous one, is that employability is embedded in an interdependent employment relationship and not entirely under the control of the individual (vs. Assumption 2). These two blind spots eventually lead to a third blind spot that emphasises a risk of polarisation between the strong and the weak in the labour market, so that employability does not provide gains for all (vs. Assumption 3). We thus point to a potential dark side of employability that is largely overlooked in the agentic perspective. We situate the blind spots against insights from human capital theory (HCT), conservation of resources theory (COR), and social exchange theory (SET). Those same theories are being used in employability studies, however mostly to support agentic ideas. We argue that the agentic assumptions may only be valid for those who are highly employable. This potential dark side of employability should be accounted for in employability research. We formulate specific illustrations on how this can be done in our research agenda. We set out with a state-of-the-art: a conceptual discussion about different interpretations that fall under the heading of employability and an overview of how the three dominant theories are typically used.

2 | EMPLOYABILITY: A CONCEPTUAL ACCOUNT

There is general agreement that employability concerns "an individual's chance of a job in the internal and/or external labor market" (Forrier & Sels, 2003, p. 106). The debate concerns what constitutes this chance. Approaches come in two strands, input-based and outcome-based (Forrier et al., 2015; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014), and both advance an agentic view.

TABLE 1 Overview of provocation to the employability literature and questions for future research

	Human capital	Conservation of resources	Social exchange	Research questions
Assumption 1 (A1) Employability is an individual asset acquired through individual upskilling.	A1.1 Employability is acquired through individual investments in movement capital.	A1.2 Employability is a personal resource that individuals nurture.		
Blind spot 1 (BS1) Employability is contextual.	BS1.1 Employability acquires meaning in a specific context.	BS1.2 Employability is shaped through common appraisal.		To what extent is movement capital generic or context-specific? How does context shape employability perceptions? And does this further divide winners from losers?
Assumption 2 (A2) Individuals act as free agents and are in control of their employability development.	A2.1 Individual employability investments make individuals more independent from the employer.	A2.2 Investments in employability come from the individual's resource pool.	A2.3 Employable individuals are independent from the employer.	
Blind spot 2 (BS2) Employability is relational.	BS2.1 Employers' employability investments are based on firm specificity and on expected gain in the future.	BS2.2 Organisations provide a pool of collective resources over and above individual resources.	BS2.3 Employability is shaped through interdependent, backward- and forward-looking exchange processes.	How do variations in dependence in the employment relationship shape employability? And does this strengthen the distinction between the strong and the weak in the labour market?
Assumption 3 (A3) Employability generates positive outcomes for all individuals.	A3.1 Return on employability investment is positive for the individual.	A3.2 Employability investments are made with a view on optimal functioning.	A3.3 The employment relationship serves individual gain in employability.	
Blind spot 3 (BS3) Employability is polarising.	BS3.1 Development is elitist: Lack of employability forestalls career self-management and development.	BS3.2 Employable individuals are prone to resource gain, and less employable individuals are prone to resource loss.	BS3.3 The employer invests disproportionately much in highly employable employees.	Which capital and resources are crucial for less employable employees to overcome inaction? Which interventions might avoid polarisation in the labour market? How can employers be stimulated to invest in the less employable?

Input-based approaches of employability emphasise personal strengths that increase the individual's chance in the labour market. The set of personal strengths is seemingly endless, and input-based classifications are multiple (e.g., Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006) so that the field appears fragmented. In response, Forrier et al. (2009) have brought the different strengths together under the heading of movement capital with four dimensions: (a) human capital built through education and experience, (b) social capital built through formal and informal networks, (c) self-awareness built on the individual's values and career interests, and (d) adaptability in response to environmental demands. The notion of movement capital is inspired by the boundaryless (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) and protean (Briscoe & Hall, 2006) career literature in which personal agency is exemplified.

Outcome-based approaches of employability do not focus on aspects that increase the chance of a job, but they instead aim to directly assess this chance, mostly by looking at the window of employment opportunities that the individual perceives and considers within reach and attractive (Gunz, Peiperl, & Tzabbar, 2007) and in the internal and/or external labour market (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). This has been coined self-perceived or self-rated employability (Acikgoz, Sumer, & Sumer, 2016; Berntson et al., 2006; Nelissen, Forrier, & Verbruggen, 2017; Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010). The argument that is commonly used to focus upon self-perceived employability and not objective outcomes (e.g., transitions) is highly agentic: Individuals are likely to act upon their perceptions, so that self-perceived employability influences labour market behaviour (Forrier et al., 2015).

Input-based and outcome-based approaches have often been advanced in terms of disagreeing views on how to conceptualise employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014). On the one hand, authors following the input-based approach consider self-perceived employability as a consequence of employability, not as employability per se. They rightfully argue that the unidimensional nature of self-perceived employability does not provide much insight into critical personal factors that determine employment chances (McArdle et al., 2007). On the other hand, authors following the outcome-based approach argue that the input-based approach mixes up employability and its antecedents (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007), and they argue that self-perceived employability is more encompassing: Employability perceptions are assumed to be formed by both individual and contextual factors (Vanhercke et al., 2014). These differing views notwithstanding, we argue that this disagreement is relative for two reasons. First, personal agency is at the core of both approaches. Second, input- and outcome-based approaches are logically connected, so that movement capital predicts self-perceived employability (e.g., Forrier et al., 2015; Wittekind et al., 2010). Hence, both approaches have the individual as the focal point and are part of a dynamic chain.

3 | EMPLOYABILITY: A THEORETICAL ACCOUNT

Employability research to date is hardly theory driven. Theory is brought in mainly to explain empirical observations. A potential unintended consequence is that the theories are used post hoc to explain empirical observations and are therefore read with a narrow lens that is biased by taken for granted assumptions on personal agency. This is the case for the three dominant frameworks in the employability literature: HCT, COR, and SET. We refer to Table 1 for a summary.

The basic tenet in HCT is that investments in human capital, understood as qualifications and skills, increase individuals' productivity and marketability in the labour market (Becker, 1964). This framework has been adopted in employability studies in support of the notion of agency. The general idea is that employability is acquired through investments in movement capital (Table 1, A1.1; De Vos et al., 2011; Wilton, 2011). Those investments strengthen individuals' labour market positions and make them more independent of the current employment relationship (A2.1). The return on investment takes the form of positive outcomes for the individual (A3.1), for example, career success (De Vos et al., 2011).

COR is a motivation and stress theory that focuses on resources, which are "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies that are valued by the individual" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). The basic tenet is that individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect resources (Hobfoll, 1989) for two reasons: to protect against potential

or actual resource loss (stress perspective) and to achieve optimal functioning (motivational perspective). This framework has been used to support the idea that employability is a personal resource that people eagerly nurture (Table 1, A1.2; Acikgoz et al., 2016; De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012). They do so on their own account by investing resources from their individual resource pool (A2.2) and to good effect (A3.2). In particular, employability has been demonstrated to help individuals to bounce back in times of adversity, for example, organisational restructuring, job insecurity, or unemployment (De Cuyper, Raeder, et al., 2012), and to promote well-being at work (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

The central tenet in SET is that relationships are based on reciprocity: They are defined in terms of mutual exchange in view of generating benefits that cannot be achieved alone (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012). In the employability literature, SET is mostly used in the context of the new employment relationship (Solberg & Dysvik, 2016): Employability investments on the part of the employer are currency for employees' engagement in the relationship, typically assessed by commitment (Philippaers, De Cuyper, & Forrier, 2017) or turnover intention (Nelissen et al., 2017). This view on social exchange is highly agentic: Control over the employment relationship rests with the individual (Table 1, A2.3) and is based on an expected gain in employability (A3.3).

4 | EMPLOYABILITY: BLIND SPOTS

The strong agentic focus in employability literature neglects a number of themes, which we refer to as blind spots. In the following, we demonstrate the connection between the agentic assumptions and those blind spots, and we provide theoretical arguments and evidence as to why those blind spots should be accounted for (see Table 1).

4.1 | Blind spot 1: Employability is contextual

The emphasis on employability as an asset tied to the individual (Assumption 1) largely neglects the role of context. Studies on movement capital seek to develop a core, interpreted as fixed, set of movement capital indicators to gauge employability, and those indicators tap into individual strengths (Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). The underlying assumption seems to be a one-to-one relationship between movement capital and chances in the labour market. In the conceptual literature, self-perceived employability is often advanced as conditional upon both personal and contextual features (e.g., Forrier et al., 2009; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Yet, despite a few exceptions (e.g., Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2014; Tholen, 2015), self-perceived employability in many studies is seen as a personal resource without much contextual influence. This neglect of context is surprising, given that contextualisation ties in with insights from HCT and COR that have implications for movement capital and self-perceived employability studies.

HCT highlights that capital acquires value within a specific context, in particular through the notion of firm-specific human capital. This was initially interpreted as knowledge, skills, and abilities that are not easily transferable to other organisations. More recently, capital is also seen as firm specific when the organisational context allows individuals to thrive, for example, because of firm-specific complementary assets (Coff & Raffiee, 2015) or social networks within the firm (Nyberg & Wright, 2015). Firm-specific human capital may explain why performance often declines after mobility to a similar job in another organisation (Coff & Raffiee, 2015) or why internal hires outperform external hires in similar positions (Bidwell, 2011). Taking this one step further, employees' self-perceived firm specificity may increase the window of employment opportunities in the internal labour market while at the same time reducing the overall window of employment opportunities (Raffiee & Coff, 2016). The point here is that, like human capital, movement capital is context specific, in terms of transferability and fit to the context, and the context specificity of movement capital may differently affect self-perceived internal and external employability (Table 1, BS1.1).

COR highlights that individual appraisals are to a large extent shaped along commonly accepted norms, coined common appraisal (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Common appraisals are bound to a specific context. This idea is not unique to COR: Similar dynamics have been described in social cognitive career theory: Individuals form their perceptions about career-related matters along shared standards (Lent & Brown, 2017). Excellent illustrations in the realm of employability research come from Reeskens and Van Oorschot (2012) and Tholen (2015): They show that macrolevel perceptions drive individual-level employability perceptions. More specifically, Reeskens and Van Oorschot (2012) show that the individual perception of labour market opportunities among European young adults is to a significant extent shaped by a shared perception about the labour market malaise. Tholen (2015) likewise demonstrates that self-perceived employability among Dutch and British students is shaped by a different intersubjective logic that is connected to differences in the labour market and educational systems. In sum, self-perceived employability is context dependent because it is shaped along common appraisals that are embedded in a specific space and time (BS1.2).

In all, both HCT and COR provide strong arguments for contextualisation. Calls for contextualisation have been launched earlier by Clarke (2008) and Forrier et al. (2015), but so far without much follow-up.

4.2 | Blind spot 2: Employability is relational

A key assumption in the agentic literature is that employees are free agents who act independently from the existing employment relationship. One illustration is studies on the “self-made employability man” (Philippaers et al., 2017): Employability is often seen as the result of individual merit and effort (Assumption 1). Rather ironically, another illustration is studies probing the employability management paradox: Employer investments in employability are beneficial for the organisation, for example, in productivity gain, but also risky when employable workers are more likely to quit (Acikgoz et al., 2016; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Nelissen et al., 2017; Philippaers et al., 2017). Though those studies concern the employer’s perspective, they study individuals and their decision on whether or not to stay with the organisation (Assumption 2). What these studies seem to neglect is that employability is in essence relational, and this neglect is somewhat paradoxical given that those studies almost all refer to SET: They highlight the changing set of expectations that together hint at growing independence while SET in fact has interdependence at its heart.

Interdependence in SET is established through reciprocity under the form of recurrent mutual exchange and in view of mutual win (Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This has had some resonance in the employability literature: Employability is sometimes seen as the result of employer inducements, such as training, which the employee reciprocates by contributions, such as loyalty (e.g., Nelissen et al., 2017). Yet this unidirectional focus from employer inducements to employee contributions puts the final decision to continue the employment relationship still with the employee. This does not signal genuine interdependence, understood as recurring exchanges of inducements and contributions (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007).

Interdependence also includes the idea that employees and employers are bound to the employment relationship not only based on earlier but also on anticipated benefits. This refers to the distinction between backward- and forward-looking exchanges (Cook & Rice, 2003). In combination and over time, backward- and forward-looking exchanges make an increasingly strong appeal on employees and employers: Employees express commitment because of what has been and to reap future benefits, and in exchange, employers invest for past commitment and to secure commitment in the future. Because employability is in essence about future employment opportunities, forward-looking exchange is highly likely (Philippaers et al., 2017). In concert, this implies that employability is embedded in interdependency, and this interdependency is shaped through backward- and forward-looking exchanges (BS2.3).

Interdependency and forward-looking exchange are also central in HCT and COR. The argument in HCT is that employers will invest in employee development based on expected returns in the future because human capital is a source of *sustained* competitive advantage (Nyberg & Wright, 2015). Expected returns and thus also investments are highest for capital that is valuable and unique to the organisation. Employees who own this capital are loyal because

of these investments but only to the extent that the employer will feed their capital in the future (Lepak & Snell, 1999). This dynamic has been described in the area of strategic talent management: The identification of high potentials and the associated differentiated human resource architecture serves to ensure employees' future commitment to the organisation (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Taken together, the employee is dependent upon what employers value, and employers are dependent upon the availability of a strong stock of capital. Both employer and employee look forward to rewards, be it loyalty of valued human resources or continuous development (BS2.1).

The argument in COR is that individuals are eager to obtain, retain, foster, and accumulate resources for future use (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011), and they do so by drawing upon resources available in the environment, so-called resource passageways. Organisations comply with this individual striving by offering a collective pool of resources, including employability-enhancing opportunities (BS2.2), and they do so with a view on creating commitment. Individuals, in turn, are willing to invest and risk resources also on behalf of the organisation when they evaluate their resource pool as rich and well supported by the organisation, so that ultimately, organisational functioning and goal achievement are promoted and a mutual win is established. The point here is that resources on the part of both employee and employer are invested with a view on sustainability and future gains. Resource investment in many cases is proactive rather than reactive (Chen, Westman, & Hobfoll, 2015).

Taken together, we launch a call to see employability as a matter of interdependent and both backward- and forward-looking exchanges between employees and organisations. Employability as a matter of interdependent and forward-looking exchanges goes against the idea of the employee as a free independent agent and hollows out "the new covenant" sketched out in employability literature (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). That is, employees who are free agents and not loyal citizens are actually *less* likely to attract employer investments in employability. Yet interdependent and forward-looking exchanges have hardly been touched upon in employability studies (Philippaers et al., 2017).

4.3 | Blind spot 3: Employability is polarising

Employability is thought to generate positive outcomes (Assumption 3). This is based on the agentic idea that individuals are in control over their stock of capital (Assumption 1) and over the employment relationship (Assumption 2), so that they can produce positive outcomes and avoid negative ones. Stretching the agentic idea one step further implies that lack of employability is an individual shortcoming (Crisp & Powell, 2017; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2016). This has been criticised by opponents as supply side orthodoxy (Berglund & Wallinder, 2015; Tomlinson, 2012). The risk is a potential Matthew effect and increased polarisation of the labour market: The highly employable are likely to become more employable, and the low employable to become even less employable. Concerns about a potential Matthew effect and increased polarisation appear well justified, also from a theoretical point of view.

An implication from HCT is that differences in human capital explain inequality in labour market outcomes (Wilton, 2011), so that those with more capital occupy a better position. Likewise, employable individuals typically pursue and get the best job: Employable individuals possess the movement capital that is needed to be a true career agent and that is valued in the labour market. And conversely, less employable individuals lack the movement capital that is a critical condition to take action and to be valued by employers. An illustration comes from Koen et al. (2013): Unemployed individuals who lacked movement capital had lower job search intensity and fewer chances to be hired. Said differently, a lack of movement capital signals a need for action yet at the same time explains inaction (BS3.1).

COR arrives at a similar conclusion through the notion of gain and loss cycles: Those with more resources are more capable of resource gain, and those with fewer resources are prone to resource loss (Hobfoll, 2011). Individuals who have resources look for resourceful settings, and these settings then enable them to accumulate more resources. For example, employees who feel employable may actively pursue high quality jobs and then craft those jobs to become even more resourceful (Akkermans & Tims, 2017). In contrast, individuals with fewer resources are inclined to defend existing resources, even to the extent that they may not be perceptive for opportunities because this implies risking scarce resources. To illustrate, underemployed UK graduates experienced lack of skill utilisation and development, and this fed career indecision in the study of Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2014). In conclusion,

the strongest employability profiles pursue and attract more resources and thus become increasingly stronger, and vice versa for the weakest profiles (BS 3.2).

SET provides an account on how polarisation exists also at the level of the employment relationship. Benson (2006) argues that supervisors are more inclined to invest in highly employable workers as a retention strategy, with further support coming from the study by Van der Heijden, Boon, Van der Klink, and Meijs (2009) and the literature on high potentials (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Huselid & Becker, 2011). On the contrary, supervisors may not invest in less employable workers: Investments may not be needed because employees are more dependent on the current employment relationship, and they may not be warranted as the anticipated benefits are lower than the costs (Allen, 2007). This dynamic is also central to general labour market theories: The primary labour market offers better quality jobs, more development support, and more career opportunities than the secondary labour market (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). Less employable individuals are more likely to occupy jobs in the secondary labour market (Berntson et al., 2006; Mäkikangas, De Cuyper, Mauno, & Kinnunen, 2013; Spurk, Kaufeld, Meinecke, & Ebner, 2016) that leave scars in terms of future employability (Reeskens & Van Oorschot, 2012). Furthermore, perceptions of being a low status member may become internalised so that individuals ultimately lose confidence and see few employment prospects (Thozhur, Riley, & Szivas, 2007). In all, the argument is that those who are employable attract more investments and become even more employable, and vice versa for the less employable, thereby signalling a Matthew effect (BS3.3).

In conclusion, our argument is twofold. First, less employable workers are most in need to take action but are least likely to do so. Yet they are often not to blame, because inaction can be a signal of lack of capital or resources to initiate action. And second, less employable individuals often attract fewer investments, so that ultimately, their profiles become gradually more precarious. The Matthew effect opens up a dark side to employability, yet it has not attracted much attention thus far.

5 | DISCUSSION

Personal agency is central to the contemporary employability literature, often in the form of three related assumptions (see Table 1): Employability is a personal asset (Assumption 1); the individual is the main agent in the employment relationship (Assumption 2); and personal agency in employability-related matters generates positive outcomes (Assumption 3). Those assumptions are authoritative as they are seemingly grounded in theory, HCT, COR, and SET in particular. However, they are not quite accurate: The theories are used in a fairly narrow way and so that the agentic discourse is supported or in any case not falsified. We argue that the assumptions each come with blind spots and that the contextual combined with the relational nature of employability (blind spots 1 and 2) may lead to increasing polarisation in the labour market (blind spot 3). Provoking the agency perspective ultimately highlights a potential dark side of employability: The winner takes it all, the loser has to fall. This potential dark side warrants more scholarly attention. We therefore provide key research questions that all address specific aspects of the same theme, namely, whether the agentic assumptions are only valid for those who are highly employable (see Table 1). These specific aspects tie in with the three blind spots.

5.1 | Contextualisation

A first research question concerns whether movement capital is generic or instead firm or context specific. Firm specificity may influence the transferability of movement capital, and also, processes such as statistical discrimination and labour market segregation may point to possible contextual interference and explain why the same stock of employability skills may land some but not others in high-quality employment (Wilton, 2011). Inspiration can also be found in theoretical frameworks that are more encompassing of the agency-structure debate than HCT, for example, the notion of symbolic capital advanced by Bourdieu (2000) and applied to the employability of theatre actors by Delva, Forrier, and De Cuyper (2017).

A related research question could be how context shapes employability perceptions and how this may further divide “winners” from “losers.” A potential lens could be the concept of common appraisal from COR. For example, the early exit culture in some European countries may be internalised in the employability perceptions of older employees (Gaillard & Desmette, 2008): They *feel* less employable because they *are* less employable according to the standard. Further inspiration can be found in the notion of shared norms as understood in social cognitive career theory. This theory provides a closer fit to the topic. We refer to the recent special issue “Social cognitive career theory in a diverse world” edited by Lent and Brown (2017) for further illustrations. Ideally, this would lead to an understanding about the complex interaction between individual and context and how this interaction may preserve existing labour market divides: Individuals contribute to shaping norms, sometimes by simply complying with the existing norms, and those very norms then shape their employability perceptions. Older employees may, for example, comply with the early exit norm and even feel discriminated, yet this reinforces the norm for the next generation.

5.2 | Relationality

A challenging research question in terms of relationality is whether and how variations in dependence in the employment relationship shape employability in a way that strengthens the distinction between the strong and the weak in the labour market enhancement. Based on SET, employers may be least likely to invest in the employability of employees on whom they do not depend, for example, when the employee does not possess capital that is valuable to the organisation or when the capital is not unique. This lack of employability investment may not be problematic for employees who are independent from their employer but extremely risky for those who are not independent owing to lack of opportunities in the external labour market. Still according to SET, employers may be most likely to invest in employability in case of interdependence. An intriguing follow-up question then is who will benefit from these investments. COR suggests that employees may differ in the extent to which they proactively pursue the collective pool of resources organisations provide. Those with more resources—in this case, the more employable—will presumably be more likely to seek further resources.

5.3 | Polarisation

The idea of increasing polarisation in the labour market obviously leads to the question how to stop the negative cycle, if at all possible, and how to shape them into positive experiences. Overall, this line of research builds on the aforementioned research questions. A first research question concerns which capital and resources are crucial for less employable employees to overcome inaction. For example, research among the unemployed showed that job loss may have potential opportunities and can be “a blessing in disguise” (Zikic & Klehe, 2006) when it triggers self-reflection. A follow-up question is how and which interventions might help. Inspiration can be found in intervention studies among less employable groups, such as temporary workers (Akkermans et al., 2015) and unemployed (Koen et al., 2013). Given the importance of context, we encourage intervention studies among a wide variety of samples and in diverse labour market contexts. Based on the notion of relationality, intervention studies may include other stakeholders, for example, current or potential employers. A possible route is intervention studies on whether and how employers can be stimulated to invest in the less employable.

5.4 | Methodology

This research agenda also has methodological implications. First, more qualitative research is needed to probe how context and (inter)dependence in employment relationships shape employability. These complex issues warrant in-depth qualitative analyses that can provide valuable input for further theorising and quantitative research. Second, multilevel (both the individual and the context) and multisource (both the employee and employer) studies are an excellent fit with the idea of employability as inherently contextual and relational. Finally, more within-person longitudinal research is needed to enhance our understanding of polarisation and related employability gain and loss

cycles. Although some studies have been performed in this area (e.g., Mäkikangas et al., 2013), the time spans have typically been relatively short.

5.5 | Practical implications

Our argument that there is a potential dark side to employability does not need to strand in pessimistic thinking. Being aware of a risk for polarisation in the labour market is an important first step. Though there is need of concretisation through future research, our ideas hint to some practical implications and suggestions for interventions. These practical implications may be relevant for different stakeholders, be it policy makers, counsellors, employers, or individuals.

First, related to context, we argue that “one size fits all” employability interventions may not be effective. Instead, interventions should be tailored to specific contexts, so that individuals acquire capital that is valued in their field or that may help them to move to another field that suits them better. Interventions should also be well aware of shared norms and how those may monitor perceptions and behaviour.

Second, with regard to relationality, it is important to acknowledge that employability is not the unique responsibility of the individual, but a shared responsibility among various stakeholders, including the employer. This emphasises the need for employability policies at the level of the organisation. This is particularly challenging: Employers may be hesitant to invest in employability because they fear that such investments may trigger turnover of their best workers. Yet the evidence to date does not support such trade-offs (e.g., Philippaers et al., 2017). Moreover, because employer's and employee's perceptions of the employee's employability may differ considerably (Van der Heijden, De Lange, Demerouti, & Van der Heijde, 2009), employability policies may aim for a shared understanding and create a common ground for action.

Third, the risk for polarisation emphasises the importance to critically reflect on talent management policies. Strategic talent management has tended to focus on “the best employees” in a form of exclusive talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). More inclusive talent management policies may overcome or prevent loss cycles which can also be harmful for employers and the wider society. Including untapped or underestimated talent may moreover open new avenues for both organisations and society. A nice example is profit companies that are working together with social economy enterprises to stimulate the integration of low employable people in the regular labour market.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that the almost exclusive focus on agency in employability research has overlooked that employability is contextual, relational, and polarising. Employability dynamics can only be understood if we account for the interplay between agency and structure, the interdependence between individuals and organisations, and a potential Matthew effect. Taken together, in making the agency assumptions and related blind spots in employability literature explicit, we make the case that the agency perspective is only valid and realistic for those who are already highly employable: They have a strong stock of capital or resources that allow them to freely navigate the labour market towards more growth and development. Those who lack employability may end up in a loss cycle that undermines their long-term employability. In other words, the winner takes it all, the loser has to fall.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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