



***Patterns of empowerment through adult education
among people experiencing early job insecurity:
A capability approach perspective***

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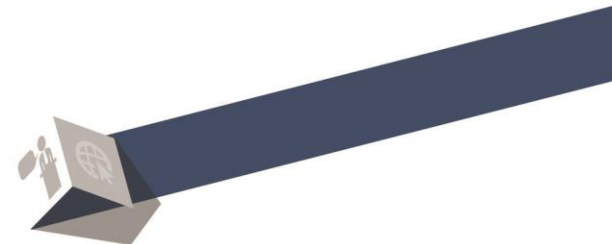
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Outline

- Introduction
- Theoretical considerations and previous research
- Data and methodology
- Results
- Discussion and conclusion

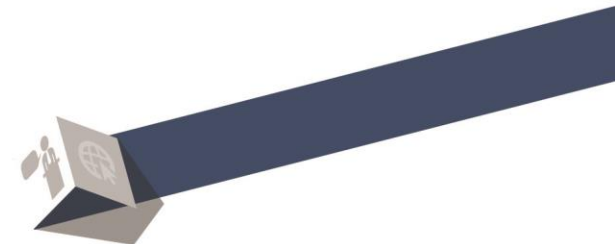




Introduction (1)

Background

- ❑ Empowering people in disempowering times through participation in education becomes quite important following the recession from 2008 (Kjeldsen & Bonvin 2015; Otto et al. 2017) and gains even further significance in the context of the recent Covid-19 crisis and the turbulent times we live in.
- ❑ At the same time, none of the previous conceptualisations of learner agency understands it as a part of a broader process of empowerment (e.g. Schoon 2018; Biasin & Evans 2019).
- ❑ To address this issue, we will build upon the capability approach to look at adult education (AE) as an empowerment process, and we will try to understand if and when agency leads to empowerment.

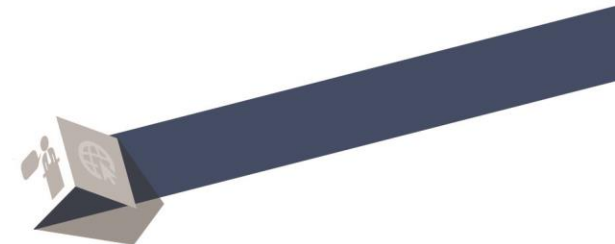




Introduction (2)

Aims

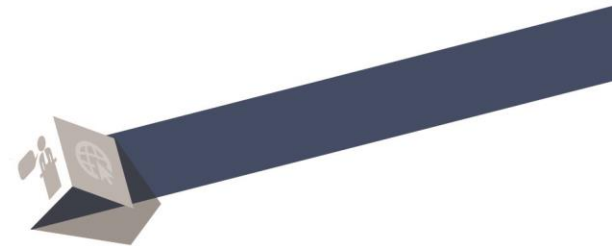
- (1) conceptualise empowerment as well as its relationship with agency, through the lens of the capability approach;*
- (2) identify patterns of empowerment through AE, &*
- (3) reveal the main factors, which can enable or hinder the empowerment role of AE.*





Theoretical considerations and previous research (1)

- ❑ Although both Sen and Nussbaum pay special attention to empowerment, mainly with regard to women, they do not provide a clear definition of it which opens up the floor to different interpretations.
- ❑ Sen (1999) considers the empowerment of women as one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today, stating that women's well-being could be improved "when their agency is respected and *empowered*" (Ibid., p. 195; Sen 2015, p. 112, emphasis added).
- ❑ Nussbaum (2000, p. 302) claims that the capabilities approach "is plural because what women strive for contains a plurality of irreducibly distinct components" and that "[i]t is focused on capability or empowerment, even as the women's own thinking is focused on creating opportunities and choices, rather than imposing on any individual a required mode of functioning".





Theoretical considerations and previous research (2)

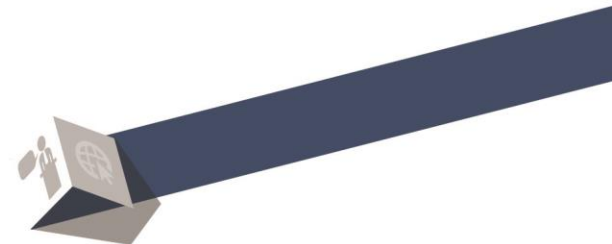
- ❑ Despite the previous research, which discusses the meanings of empowerment by drawing on different concepts associated with the capability approach (e.g. Alsop et al. 2006; Ibrahim & Alkire 2007; Samman & Santos 2009), the relationship between empowerment and agency within the capability approach literature is understood differently.
- ❑ So, although both concepts are related, there is disagreement within this literature about whether these concepts overlap or differ (e.g. Hilal 2019; Patrón 2019; Drydyk 2013; Bhattacharya & Banerjee 2012).
- ❑ In spite of this, we could agree with Unterhalter (2019, p. 80), who argues that: “the capability approach provides some important additional conceptual connections that help link empowerment more closely to ideas about social justice and an understanding of the institutional space in which this is to be achieved”.



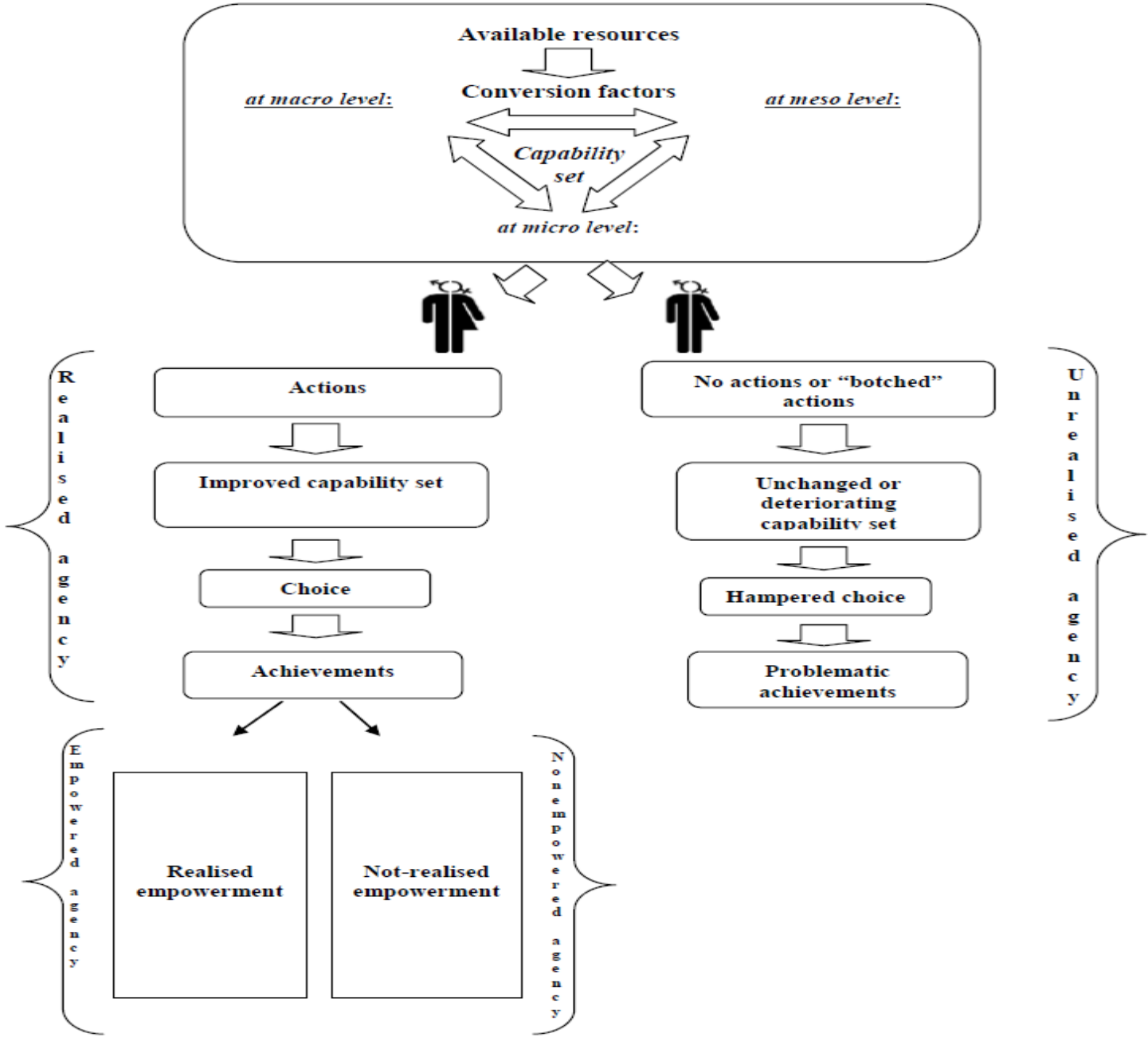


Theoretical considerations and previous research (3)

- ❑ Taking into account this literature, we define empowerment in and through (adult) education as an expansion of both agency (process freedom) and capabilities (opportunity freedom).
- ❑ It is not only an expanded agency but an **agency which has a clear goal** – gaining control over one's environment with the aim to improve individual and societal well-being.
- ❑ The empowerment role of (adult) education has two sides:
 - ✓ **a subjective one**, which refer to individuals' capability to gain control over their environment; and
 - ✓ **an objective one**, which reflects the available opportunity structures.



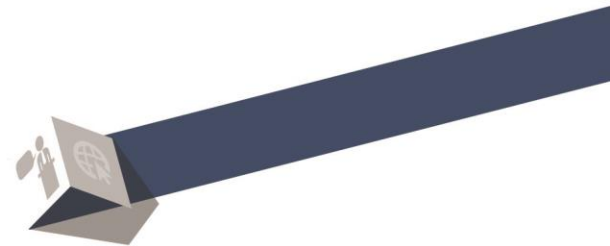
A static model of people's (un)realised empowerment with regard to AE





Research questions

- 1. What are the patterns of empowerment through AE among people experiencing early job insecurity?***
- 2. Which factors have hindered the empowerment through AE of people experiencing early job insecurity?***





Data and methodology (1)

Data

- ❑ 81 semi-structured life-course interviews with young people belonging to the 1990–1995 birth cohort in 7 European countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom)
- ❑ All interviewees had experienced unemployment or job insecurity by the time they were 25 years of age.
- ❑ These interviews were conducted in 2016 within the Horizon 2020 project NEGOTIATE.

Limitations

- ❑ We worked with synopses with some quotations in English which were made for each interview by the national teams, not with the full transcriptions.
- ❑ Although the country samples have some common characteristics (e.g. the samples are gender balanced), they differ in relation to ethnic composition, age, place of residence and health status of the interviewees.
- ❑ In accordance with the presented model, we have analysed only those episodes in the interviewees' life courses where we could identify patterns of realised empowerment regarding AE.





Data and methodology (2)

Data analysis

More specifically, we carried out a two-step analysis of the interviews:

1. each author independently read the extended summaries of the life-course interviews with the aim of identifying types of (un)expanded agency, i.e., agency which has occurred (or was expected to occur) or not after involvement in AE, based on agency achievements from it. We did not consider the commonality of each type, but rather only whether it represented an expanded agency or lack of agency when viewing the different types of gains made in AE and different types of improvement of well-being.
2. we compared these types in a combined list from both authors' identification efforts.

There was about 90 percent coincidence in the identified types. We then selected and classified these overlapping types, introducing the notion of *patterns of (un)empowerment* to capture different types of (un)empowered agency based on gains made in AE.



Patterns of realised empowerment through AE

Patterns of realised empowerment through AE

Patterns based on different types of improvement of well-Being

Empowered/expanded agency to avoid unemployment

Empowered agency for ensuring quality employment/job (e.g. not just any job)

Finding a secure job and achieving stability

Providing opportunities for career development and future success

Finding a job relevant to one's field of education

Patterns based on different agency achievements as the basis for expanded agency

Empowered agency based on an acquired sense of self-fulfillment, satisfaction, and a sense of control over the environment

Empowered agency based on identity formation

Increased self-esteem

Empowered agency based on discovering and stimulating one's positive characteristics and learning to formulate goals

Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE

Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE

Quality of AE does not provide a reliable basis for expanded agency

AE does not ensure enough (professional) skills

AE does not develop analytical or critical thinking but only passive memorising

Quality of AE was not acknowledged by employers

AE does not enhance opportunities for quality employment/job (e.g. no job) and improved well-being

AE does not provide a way to (secure) employment

AE does not ensure getting a job that matches field of education

AE does not have a positive influence on personality

AE does not stimulate—and even destroys—motivation

AE contradicts ones' views/expectations

AE was too demanding

AE opportunities and benefits reduced due to macro-economic situation



Patterns of realised empowerment through AE (1)

❑ **Empowered/ expanded agency to avoid unemployment**

This pattern refers to individuals who have used the achievements from involvement in AE (improved knowledge and skills, obtained certificates, etc.) as a basis for expanded agency targeted at getting a job and avoiding unemployment.

Because of family problems due to his parents' divorce, Arndt left home at age 16 and consequently lived in supervised housing. His integration into the labour market was delayed due to missing school qualifications. Arndt was increasingly aware of the fact that it would be difficult to achieve his goal of financial independence without a school certificate. He made use of his second unemployment period, ..., in order to complete lower secondary school. Following an internship in the IT sector, he successfully applied for a vocational training position. He has been employed there ever since.

Arndt (DE, male)





Patterns of realised empowerment through AE (2)

❑ **Empowered agency for ensuring quality employment/job (e.g. not just any job)**

This pattern refers to cases in which individuals use their achievements through involvement in AE as the basis for expanded agency with the aim to get a job of a specific quality, i.e., not to accept just any job but one that enhances the person's well-being by ensuring stability, career development, and prospects for future success. Thus, we have identified 3 *sub-patterns*. One of them is:

Providing opportunities for career development and future success

Dobroniega completed her secondary education at a technical school of landscape architecture. She was not accepted as a university student, so she began her job search. She found some casual jobs. Dobroniega is now much more successful studying art history: *"I feel that this field of study is a good choice for me; my grades are much better than before. This is more suitable for my abilities, so I think that sooner or later I may have more chances for success, even if this field is not too profitable"*.

Dobroniega (PL, female)





Patterns of realised empowerment through AE (3)

- **Empowered agency based on an acquired sense of self-fulfilment, satisfaction, and a sense of control over the environment**

Emil enrolled in an individual form of training in a vocational school in a small town. His goal was to get his GED (general education diploma) and find a job. Another important argument he gave for his continuing education is the example he will set for his child: *“Yes, I have a great desire to be able to create a future for this child that I am raising. I mean, when he grows up, I don’t want him to have the experiences and difficulties that I have been through and stuff, you know, but my point is that I want to get a steady job,..., so I can take care of my family”*.

Emil (BG, male)





Patterns of realised empowerment through AE (4)

□ **Empowered agency based on identity formation**

This pattern refers to individuals who exercise expanded agency stimulated by the development of their identity through involvement in AE.

Depending on the aspect of personal identity which has been improved due to participation in AE, we have identified 2 sub-patterns.

One of them is:

Increased self-esteem

Nadja quit school after getting her general education diploma at age 16. By 21, she had enrolled in evening classes at a vocational school for ceramics and glass. Her job search experience has shown that it is difficult to find a job without an education: *“I have looked for jobs in many places, but no one will take you without an education; they either want you to have education or experience, even for manual jobs ... Also, you know, without an education, you do not have enough motivation or self-esteem. You have to have some certainty and that’s why education [is important]”*.

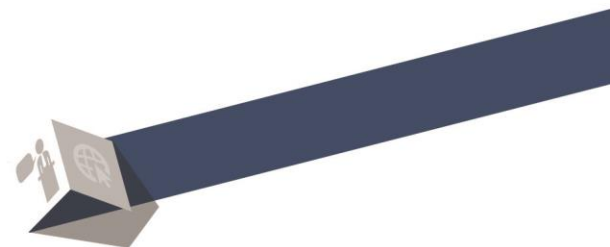
Nadja (BG, female)





Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE

- ❑ These patterns refer to individuals who are not able to use their agency achievements from involvement in AE (obtained certificate, acquired knowledge and skills, personal development, and identity formation) as a basis for expanded agency.
- ❑ The reasons for this may refer to the quality of education received or discrepancies between the acquired education and the needs (and opportunities) of the economy and employers in a given country.
- ❑ Even when individuals undertake some actions, they do not transform these into empowered agency because they do not lead to their improved well-being.





Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE (1)

❑ **Quality of AE does not provide a reliable basis for expanded agency**

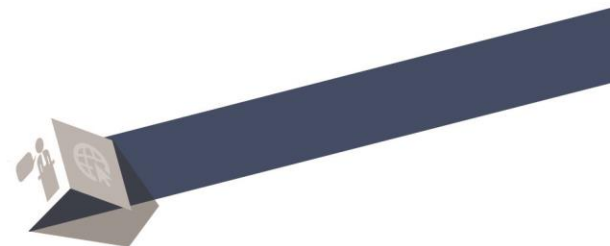
Within this pattern, we have identified 3 sub-patterns.

Among them is:

AE does not ensure enough (professional) skills

Kylie gained four A levels in English, Photography, Media, and Information and Communications Technology. During a period of related work experience, she decided not to pursue a career in any of these fields. She felt that it was hard to make informed subject choices at age 16, saying, *“I find it’s quite a hard age and I think it’s quite a hard age ... to pinpoint exactly what you want to do”*. Overall, Kylie is focused on support mechanisms for post-18 vocational routes. She feels that there has been little appropriate training to increase her employability or help in finding jobs.

Kylie (UK, female)





Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE (2)

- ❑ **AE does not enhance opportunities for quality employment/job (e.g. no job) and improved well-being**

Within this pattern, we have identified 2 sub-patterns. Among them is:

AE does not ensure getting a job that matches field of education

Ludmila was studying the field wig-weaver and make-up artist for television and theatre in vocational school. She worked in a theatre for 3 years, but she was fired because of collective redundancies. She tried to raise her level of education by attending 2 retraining schemes in cosmetics and permanent make-up; she is considering another course in hairdressing: *“Nobody wants me with this educational background ... I would like to do this; ..., but it is still impossible even if I try so hard”*. She tried to look for similar jobs (e.g. in perfumery) but was unsuccessful: *“I have the feeling that these courses are not valued enough; it is perceived like having nothing ... one can be disappointed that it was good for nothing”*

Ludmila (CZ, female)





Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE (3)

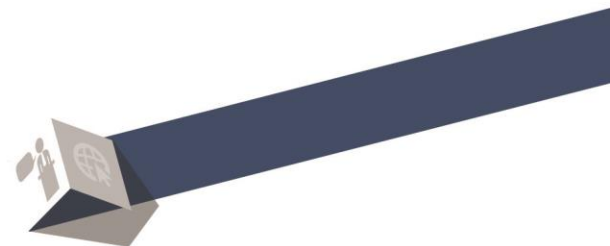
❑ ***AE does not have a positive influence on personality***

Within this pattern, we have identified 2 *sub-patterns*. Among them is:

AE contradicts ones' views/expectations

Anders went to a high school for folk crafts after upper secondary school. He then went on to teacher education in a different part of the country. He quit that educational path after finding the study program irrelevant, in addition to stating that the tendencies in education policies do not fit his views of being a teacher.

Anders (NO, male)





Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE (4)

□ AE was too demanding

After completing her secondary education, Bianka was accepted as a student in the field of English philology. Unfortunately, it all proved too demanding for her with her health problems, so she dropped out after one year. She later tried studying Japanese philology, albeit with the same results.

Bianka (PL, female)





Patterns of unrealised and stumbled empowerment through AE (5)

- ❑ **AE**
opportunities and benefits reduced due to unfavourable macro-economic situation

Nikoleta went to a vocational school for nurses, following a 2-year course. After searching for almost one year and a half, she found her first job as a freelance personal nurse in public hospitals, working as self-employed ...; she worked there for 7 months. She stayed unemployed for 6 months afterwards ... She feels that her sector has been affected by the economic crisis and she thinks that 2008–2009 was a milestone. She thinks that immigrants compete with nurses born in the country and are frequently preferred by employers: *“From all the students of my age who were at school with me, only 3 are working. On the contrary, nurses who finished school before 2008–2009 were recruited and are still working”*.

Nikoleta (GR, female)





Discussion and conclusion (1)

Our paper:

- develops the concept of '*patterns of (un)empowerment through AE*' to capture different types of (un)empowered agency based on gains made in AE.
- shows that the process and results of empowerment through AE are neither linear nor unproblematic. Instead, it becomes clear that it is only in some cases that the benefits from AE can lead to empowered agency. In this regard, *two groups of factors* turn out to be most important:
 1. the quality of the knowledge and skills acquired and specificity of the educational process and its influence on students.
 2. the socio-economic situation and arrangements which could enable or hamper individual agency.





Discussion and conclusion (2)

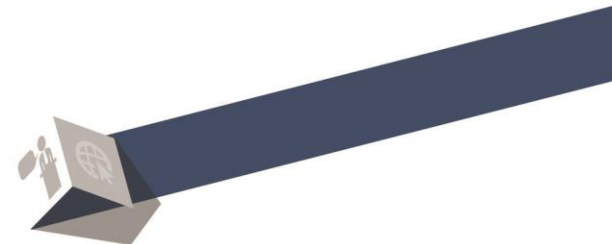
- ❑ We acknowledge that our study is based on qualitative data and a non-representative sample.
- ❑ Furthermore, while the identified patterns were constructed out of certain elements in the life courses of our interviewees, they are not entirely encompassed by any of our interview cases. It is possible for different patterns to be present in different stages of a single life course.
- ❑ That is why these elaborated patterns need to be tested in further studies, comparative and longitudinal ones included.
- ❑ There is also a need to deepen the theoretical conceptualisation of empowered agency and the role of AE for individual empowerment.
- ❑ Another direction for future research could be an attempt to disclose different dimensions of empowerment through AE —economic, political, cultural, psychological (Page & Czuba 1999; Luttrell et al. 2009).

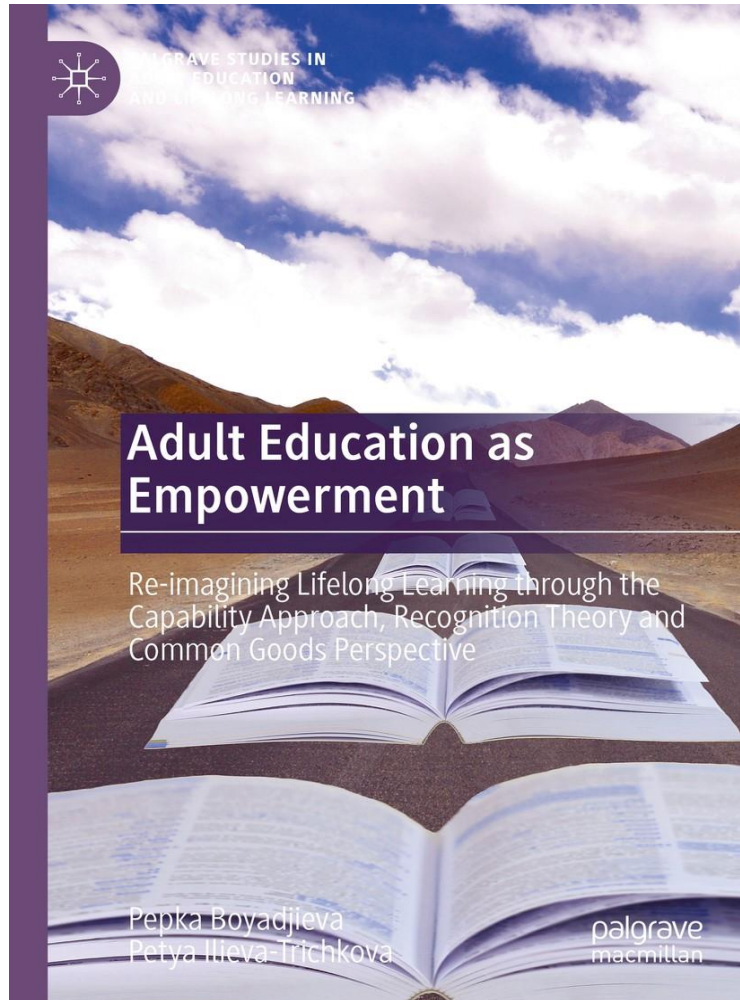




Discussion and conclusion (3)

- ❑ In line with Paulo Freire's (2005 [1970]) ideas, the capability approach allowed us to view the empowerment of individuals through AE as a process which must be forged and accomplished *with them*, not *for them*.
- ❑ Such an understanding provides a reliable basis to disagree with those critics of the concept of empowerment who insist that empowerment is a power relationship which, even when the will to empower is well-intentioned, remains "a strategy for regulating the subjectivities of the 'empowered'... toward an appropriate end" (Cruikshank 1999, p. 69).
- ❑ Thus, in contrast to previous research, the capability approach offers a fruitful viewpoint from which to rethink education (e.g. Walker & Unterhalter 2007) by taking into account the wider benefits it could have, not only for the individual but also for society.





Boyadjieva, P., Ilieva-Trichkova, P. (2021). Adult Education as an Agency and Empowerment Process. In: *Adult Education as Empowerment*. Palgrave Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

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<https://justedu2020.eu/>





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