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From Crisis to Renewal: Narrative Coaching and Generative Welfare for a Sociodynamic Approach to Change

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FOREWORD

Social inequalities represent one of the most pressing and complex challenges for contemporary socioeconomic systems, with profound effects on social cohesion, economic growth, and democratic stability (World Bank, 2021).

In recent years, these inequalities have deepened further due to the economic and social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic which has exacerbated disparities related to gender, social class, ethnicity, and territorial belonging (OECD, 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

Within this context, **Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs)** have become one of the main tools to promote social inclusion and employment, **particularly for vulnerable groups**.

However, their effectiveness largely depends on their **capacity to adapt to individual needs, coordinate with social policies, and foster empowerment processes that strengthen people's agency and employability** (ILO, 2019; European Commission, 2021).



The Italian case and the gray space of the inactivity

Italy provides a significant example of how structural inequalities intersect with institutional fragilities.

In terms of absolute values, the decrease in the unemployed population is almost mirrored by the increase in the number of the inactive population (33, 4% against 26,3% EU27).

it should be added that the latest ISTAT Labour Force Survey (2024) shows that 45.2% of inactive working-age adults (15-64 years) have no formal qualification that can be spent in the labour market, and only a marginal share has access to paths of recognition of the competences they possess acquired elsewhere or retraining.

The South of Italy continues to suffer from a weak economic fabric, high unemployment, and **persistent inactivity rates**, often intertwined with informal work and deep gender and generational gaps (ISTAT, 2024; Benini, 2025).

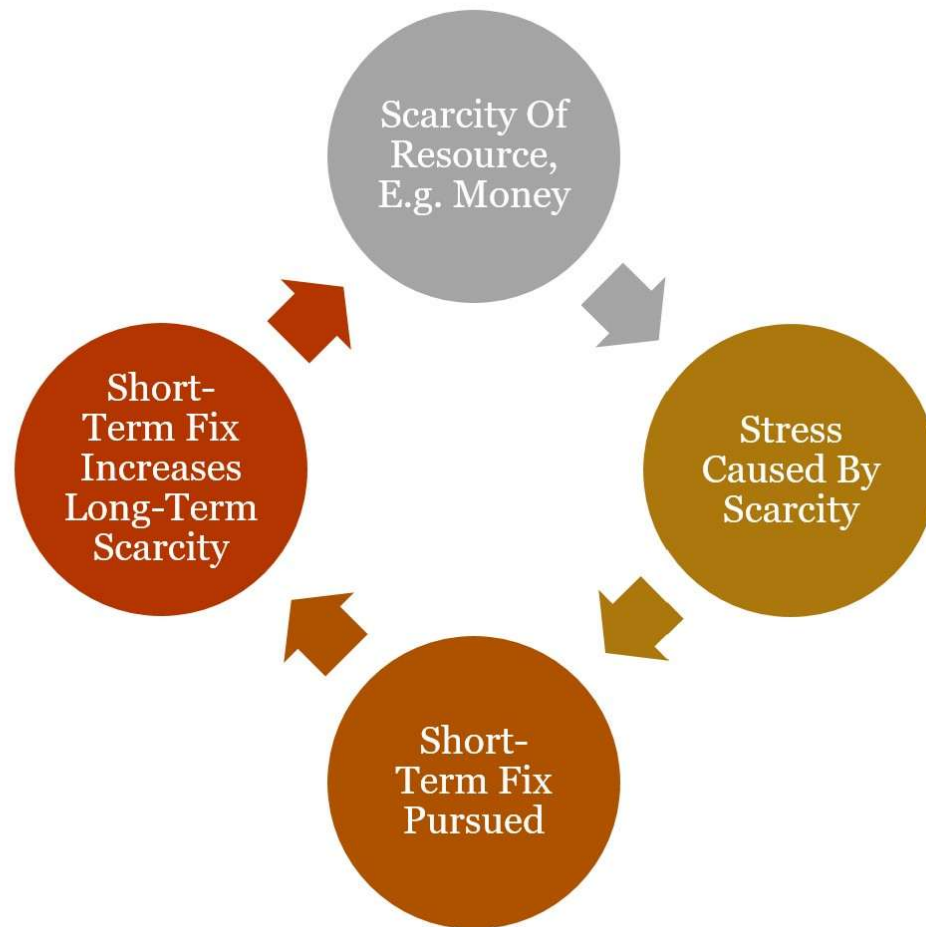
The phenomenon of inactivity is not a simple individual or transitory condition, but a structural indicator of inequalities, silent exclusion, discouragement and lack of social recognition.

Understanding the reasons why people are not employed or seeking employment requires an analysis that includes personal (care duties, health issues), economic (lack of opportunities, low wages), and cultural (mistrust, lack of self-awareness) factors

Inactivity is increasingly configured as “a gray space” of disconnection from today's society in which the loss of work or the impossibility of accessing it is often accompanied by the loss of role, identity, relational networks



The theory of bandwidth scarcity (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013)



The scarcity (of money, time, security, relationships) further reduces our available "mental bandwidth".

This produces a "vicious circle".

Less mental bandwidth → worse decisions → reinforcing disadvantage



The theory of bandwidth scarcity: some examples



An unemployed person, who devotes all his energy to managing economic anxiety, will have less ability to invest time and attention in training, active job searching or networking

In this perspective, if too complex or rigidly bureaucratic, even some welfare measures can be counterproductive.

The cognitive commitment required to manage obligations, documentation and deadlines generates an overload that often discourages beneficiaries, damaging their self-efficacy and engagement (Babcock, 2014; Pavetti, 2014).

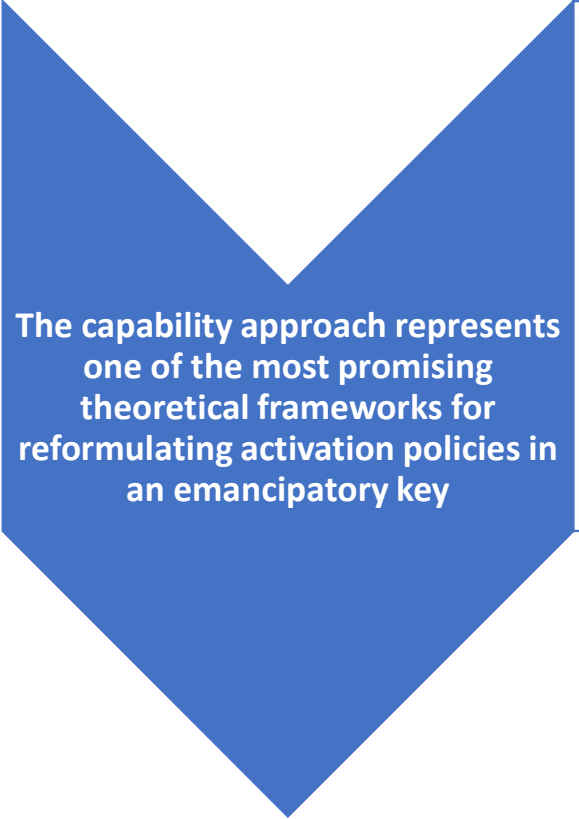


A caregiver, who must take care of a family member 24h/7days, experiences a scarcity of mental bandwidth that limits his opportunities for personal and professional growth.

As a result, people tend to make short-term decisions, often counterproductive, because they do not have cognitive "space" to think strategically, thus worsening their performance in different areas of life.



The research approach



The capability approach represents one of the most promising theoretical frameworks for reformulating activation policies in an emancipatory key

- Integrating activation, inclusion and empowerment
- shifting the focus of public intervention from control to care, from performance to listening, from task to project;
- recognizing that transformation does not occur only through the provision of services or incentives, but in the quality of the relationships established between people and institutions (Donati, 2013).
- A system capable of enhancing the experiences and the competences acquired in the different contexts

Generative welfare (Donati and Maspero, 2021), moves beyond traditional welfare models by:

- promoting **co-responsibility** and individual **agency** (Bandura, 1997).
- encouraging the **creation of meaningful relationships** and shared value through the development of personal and collective capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

HOW CAN WE ABANDON THE LOGIC OF MERE "ACTIVATION"/"EMPLOYABILITY" TOWARDS A GENERATIVE AND BROADER LOGIC THAT INVOLVES THE ENTIRE FAMILY UNIT?

HOW CAN WE CONTRIBUTE TO PROVIDE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE?

HOW CAN INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE POTENTIAL BE ENHANCED THROUGH ENABLING DEVICES, REFLECTIVE SPACES AND RELATIONAL PRACTICES, CAPABLE OF GENERATING TRUST, AWARENESS AND A SENSE OF BELONGING?



Research design: autoethnographic framework and qualitative strategies

In the study, autoethnography is adopted as an epistemological and methodological key, with the aim of exploring in depth the life stories collected at the Job Guidance Center

Ethical writing, which respects the privacy and dignity of the subjects involved;

Triangulation with external sources (documents, interviews, observations)

Critical re-reading: supervision, peer review and discussion with research communities;

Integration between personal narrative and social theory

The study was carried out through a combination of different methodologies and qualitative research techniques:

- **desk review of the national and international reference literature**, duly cited in the presentation of the results;
- **participant observation**: six months spent in the guidance centres spaces, participating in daily activities (from first access interviews to team meetings, up to informal coffee break moments), in which valuable reflections and fragments of history that would escape a formal interview often emerge
- **Guidance centres desk analysis**: review of user sheets, activity reports, network materials and projects carried out to place the observed practices within the framework institutional and local policies;
- **In-depth interviews**: four semi-structured interviews with operators aimed at exploring not only working techniques, but above all role visions, guiding values and transformative experiences;
- **Focus group**: a collective meeting with the whole team, focused on the analysis of complex cases for a reflection on the challenges of work.



In addition ...

- ❑ Prolonged observation is essential to grasp **the routines, micro-practices and unspoken that structure the life of an organization**
- ❑ This has made it possible to bring to light the resonances between biography and context and to make the invisible visible: **the emotions, the fractures, the potential of the subjective experience that becomes shared knowledge.**
- ❑ In the study, narration is considered:
 - not only as a restitution of the results (collecting and returning data through narrative forms that preserve the complexity and humanity of the experiences themselves);
 - but, also and above all, **as an object of study (analyzing how coaches and coachees construct meanings through stories)** and as a tool and method of research and theorization (Gariglio, 2025).



Method of analysis and representation of results

Each episode has been selected for its ability to illuminate **key aspects of narrative work in the context of a public guidance service**, with particular regard to:

- **structural patterns**, rooted in the coachee's personal biography, deep blocks that require long-term narrative work, because they have often been sedimented for years and linked to identity dynamics;
- and **situational patterns**, linked to contingent conditions, urgencies or opportunities that require rapid and more targeted responses and that require focused and strategic interventions.

This return will take place through the alternation between theoretical analysis and ethnographic vignettes, what Van Maanen (2011) defines as "**tales from the field**" that allow the reader to see and hear what is happening, not just to understand it in the abstract

+--- Narrative Box – "A Career in Pieces"

"I don't know what I want to do, but I know I can't go on like this,
I just wasted time, I have nothing to put on my CV." (Mauro, 29 years old – excerpt from the COL interview)

"Along the way, constants emerge such as the ability to manage small budgets, relate to people
and the management of unforeseen situations." (COL operator, focus group)

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The narrative coaching as a transformative practice in guidance

The International Coach Federation - ICF defined Coaching as a process that supports the individual in defining goals, creating concrete results and managing personal change, it is based on the enhancement of the person's autonomy and skills (International Coach Federation, 2023).

Numerous studies (OECD, 2020; European Commission, 2021a) underline how accompaniment-based interventions, empowerment and capacity building, can significantly improve the effectiveness of PALs, with particular reference to: young NEETs, women with family burdens, people with disabilities and citizens with a migrant background.



Among the different approaches to coaching, narrative coaching can be considered a real methodological hinge as it relates the internal dimension of managing emotions, motivations and goals, with the external dimension of occupational transitions and professional choices.

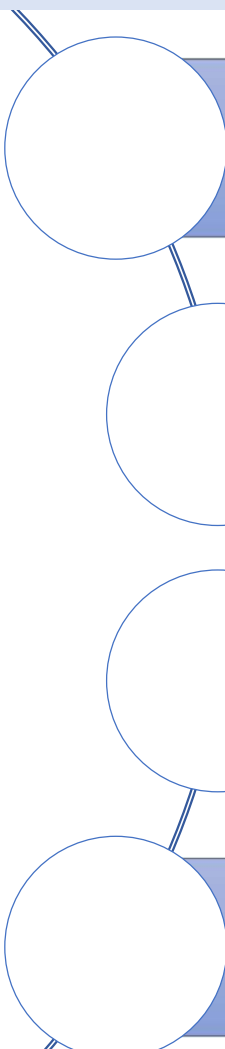
Narrative coaching aims at supporting people in externalizing their implicit cognitive patterns and the tacit connections that support them, in order to be able to observe and deconstruct them gradually.

As Drake (2018) and Stelter (2019) point out, the intentional slowness of this process allows for the creation of new neural connections, thus facilitating a reformulation of memories of the past, a reworking of present experiences and the emergence of new modes of expression for the future.

In this perspective, the biographical narratives are discursive practices capable of generating awareness and agency in the subjects involved (Formenti & West, 2018).



In addition...



The coach helps the coachee **to reread his or her own history, to relocate painful or fragmented events in an evolutionary framework and to write "future chapters" consistent with his or her values.**

The privileged instrument is **the storytelling** able to operate simultaneously on a cognitive, emotional and social level, by acting as a meaning-making tool: **reworking of one's professional history** in meaningful forms and the construction of causal and moral links that guide future choices, **reconsidering one's own role and imagining new possibilities** (White & Epston, 1990; Bruner, 1990).

According to Drake (2018) the focus shifts from the coach and his methodologies to the coachee: the focus is all on his stories and his path of transformation, while promoting a process of lasting personal development. In narrative coaching, the coach's main task is to create a safe, empathetic and non-judgmental space, within which the user can feel free to tell their story.

This approach can be particularly useful in situations where the work biography can be experienced as interrupted or devalued and disturbed by multiple "interferences" (Gallwey, 2000) that affect everyday personal life.



In the context of public employment services (often characterized by standardized and location-oriented approaches) 1/2

The narrative practices would mean moving from a transactional model, in which the user is a "case to be treated", to a transformative model, in which the user is a person with a history and skills to be valued (Council of the European Union, 2012) and a future to be co-built.

From an operational point of view, narrative coaching applied to ALMPs allows:

- to reconnect the person to his or her skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, bringing out knowledge that is often invisible to traditional systems of skills assessment (Council of the European Union, 2012);
- to design a new employment trajectory that takes into account both personal aspirations and the opportunities offered by the labor market (ILO, 2023).

This method could be particularly powerful for those targets that live in conditions of occupational fragility or marginality in the labor market, where the fragmentation of experiences and the breakdown of self-confidence are often more significant obstacles than the lack of professional and technical skills (Bandura, 1997).



In the context of public employment services (often characterized by standardized and location-oriented approaches) 2/2

The underlying concept is that professional identity is not a fixed entity, but a continuous construction, shaped by experiences, relationships and the socioeconomic context in which we are immersed (Savickas, 2013).

People, especially in times of transition or employment crisis, tend to tell their story through scenarios of loss, failure or marginality

The most recent literature (Kaliris & Issari, 2022) also shows how narration, if facilitated in an intentional and structured way, functions as a transformative device capable of **reorganizing self-image, redefining priorities and generating new scenarios of action.**

The task of the narrative coach is to help "decentralize" from that dominant narrative and co-construct alternative plots that highlight skills, values and resources, opening new trajectories of action, starting from these.

In this perspective, we approach Mezirow's (1991) idea of **narrative transformation**, according to which profound change occurs when a person reworks his or her frames of reference and adopts new meanings



THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CAREER GUIDANCE CENTER: *main findings*



The stories collected reveal that limits and opportunities are never purely individual, but rooted in social, economic and cultural contexts that condition the possibilities of choice

Narrative coaching proves to be a real empowerment device, in which the person is not guided towards a predefined response, but accompanied to reconstruct his or her horizon of meaning and action.

The narrative coaching is placed, in the context of job orientation, as a hybrid practice, capable of dialoguing with counselling, career guidance and adult education, while maintaining its specificity, that is, starting from lived history to create new opportunities.

The narrative framework makes it possible to recognize latent resources, to name problems and to formulate concrete future scenarios, as well as to make decisions, which gives the person the perception of agency, even in situations of uncertainty or crisis.

Challenges that are still open such as:

- the need for continuity in interventions;
- the need for updating and advanced training of coaches;
- the structural integration of narrative coaching in the ALMP and the construction of networks with other local services.

Without these conditions, the risk is to reduce the transformative scope of the approach, confining it to experimental contexts or spot consulting interventions that do not restore centrality to the person in his or her identity and aspirational complexity.



CONCLUSION: POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Making coaching a stable and structural measure within public employment services, and not just an experimental intervention funded by European calls.

Cultural change, which recognizes the motivational and relational dimension as an integral part of the activation and accompaniment work, thanks to the implementation, for example, of measures based on stockability, modular and customizable, which also include the use of micro-credentials (Council of the European Union, 2022), individual learning accounts (European Commission, 2022) and hybrid ways of job placement.

Hybridizing the skills of public employment service operators also through continuous training, also co-designed with professional associations of coaches, could represent a promising path.

Not only administrative skills and matching supply and demand but also management of the relational and emotional dimension of users, even without personalizing too much. strengthen technical work (drafting CVs, interviews, job offers, training, etc.), motivational and identity work as an integral part of the reintegration and inclusion process.

- Double effect:
- more effective action of CPIs, often perceived as mere "bureaucratic counters" (ANPAL, 2023);
 - greater continuity between professional coaching and public services, avoiding the risk of overlapping and unproductive competition.

Putting coaching and IVC services in dialogue

NO to the "cold" skills assessment, which photographs what the person has already done, but without accompanying him or her to imagine and build future scenarios.

Combining two perspectives: formal certification that guarantees the marketability and institutional recognition of skills; and motivational and planning enhancement, which allows you to attribute meaning and direction to your personal and professional path.

Validation services from simple attestation tools to enabling devices, consistent with EQF and VNFIL and Skills First approach also able to return empowerment, resilience, planning.

Cultural paradigm shift towards the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) which invites us to consider the substantial freedom of people. It is not a question of placing them in just any job, but of supporting them in the construction of a dignified, sustainable life project consistent with their potential and skills

Generative welfare enhances the resources of people and communities not as mere recipients of aid, but as actors capable of producing social value (Donati, 2013).

- evaluate the impacts not only in quantitative but also qualitative terms (stability, satisfaction, professional growth);
- guarantee differentiated paths customized even if not to the extreme, adapted to the needs of the different targets;
- build an institutional culture of capacity-building, in which public services, integrated and spread throughout the territory, are perceived not as bureaucratic constraints, but as opportunities for growth and social inclusion.



Conclusion and perspectives

The future of coaching in ALMPs will depend on the ability to bring together scientific research and policy design:

- ❑ on the one hand, it will be necessary to consolidate the empirical bases through longitudinal, comparative and interdisciplinary studies;**
- ❑ on the other hand, it will be necessary to translate this knowledge into institutional choices that make coaching – with particular regard to narrative coaching (Drake, 2018) rather than behavioral coaching (Rayan & Deci, 2000) – an accessible, equitable and sustainable tool.**

In recent years, narrative coaching has begun to integrate with the potential of digital technologies and artificial intelligence, through automatic narrative analysis tools and proactive conversational supports (Haase, 2025; Feng et al., 2025; Srinivas et al., 2025).

These innovations open up promising prospects to further personalize the path, while preserving the human and relational dimension that remains the founding core of the practice (Arakawa & Yakura, 2024; Manahan-Vaughan & Papworth, 2024). A combination of storytelling, reflection and action that helps people become not only employable, but aware and resilient authors of their own life and work path.

The research questions in this case could concern not only effectiveness, but also ethical implications: what risks exist in terms of dehumanization, algorithmic biases and loss of the ethical dimension of coaching? And, conversely, what opportunities can AI offer in enhancing the work of coaches and guidance counselors, for example in mapping opportunities or customizing paths?





Thank you for your attention

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