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Capabilities and choices of vulnerable, long-term unemployed individuals

Abstract

This paper discusses the choices available to long-term unemployed and vulnerable individuals. It argues that the combination of poor employment opportunities, requirements, compulsions and sanctions has not merely reduced available choice for individuals with multiple barriers to re-/join the labour market but has also resulted in their curtailed decision-making abilities. The outcomes can include protective resistance and/or learned helplessness. Built on trust and the provision of a safe space, it is possible to rebuild capabilities and consider available choices that the unemployed individual may have cause to value.

Introduction

Autonomy and discretion have long been of interest to researchers of work and employment and those studying the genuine choices available to (often female) workers (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012; Platman, 2004). Less attention has been paid to the degrees of freedom and choice of those attempting to re-enter the labour market. It is clear that a period of unemployment restricts choices as fewer employment opportunities and types of jobs are available (Payne and Payne, 1993, Gabriel *et al.*, 2013) and options decrease the longer unemployment continues. The choices of unemployed individuals are being further constrained by increasingly draconian workfare interventions aimed at “complete and intimate behaviour change through coercive mechanisms” (Friedli and Stearn, 2015: 41). This is in conflict with the expansion of choices in other areas (e.g. healthcare provision) and the UK’s market based system of delivery, which relies on competition and therefore ‘consumer’ choice. The marketisation of employment services and high regulation of clients lead Zimmermann *et al.* (2014) to conclude that there is little client choice of service or provider. The problem is that choices are an important contributor to subjective and objective

well-being (Muffels and Headey, 2013). This paper questions whether the problems with choice amongst unemployed individuals runs even deeper as the degree of regulation may impede the capability to make choices. To this end, the 'institutional framework of choice' (Blank, 2009) contained within the employment and support provision to those outside of the labour market is assessed. More specifically, the focus is on the support provided by 'Charity A', a third-sector organisation working with the unemployed. The importance of including research into different actors' perceptions and going beyond the views of activation workers has already been highlighted (Marston, 2013; Wright, 2013). Informal and third sector organisations offer different approaches to working with unemployed groups – especially compared to 'official' support structures such as JobCentre Plus (JC+) – and often work with the 'hardest to help' groups (Damm, 2012). It is argued that such settings allow for a rediscovery of choice from a fuller range of options.

A changing policy framework for choice

The social security and support infrastructure available to unemployed individuals in the UK has changed substantially over the last decade. As Bradshaw (2015, 1) summarises, there has been a 'perfect storm of benefit abolitions, freezes, cuts, failures to uprate and conditionality [that] have lowered the value and reduced the coverage of the safety net'. The provisions have been replaced by an individualisation of responsibility as part of an overall workfarist approach. The level of required compliance that this approach entails was visible in court cases against the DWP (e.g. Reilly v. Secretary of State for Work and Pensions) based on individuals having to undertake activities against their wish or undertake work placements without remuneration (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014). The underlying, neo-liberal assumption is that unemployed individuals should, but do not, prefer any job to unemployment (Dunn *et al.*, 2014).

Ultimately the phased introduction of the Universal Credit which combines in-work and out-of work benefits into a single taper rate (Jones, 2012) acknowledges the rise in in-work poverty and underemployment, necessitating wide ranging social security support. Yet at the same time, the government has

stereotyped those with significant and multiple barriers to finding employment as workshy and feckless (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012). Even if such labels are myths, they have consequences (Hills, 2014) and, in this situation, choice is a complex issue. Participation in the Work Programme, “probably the biggest welfare-to-work initiative ever seen in Britain” (Jones, 2012, 432), is compulsory for the long-term unemployed. Conditionality has increased not just in job search and related behaviours but also in the areas of skill development. This means that most activities are enforced, usually via the threat of sanctions. Similar processes apply for Claimant Commitments (the revamped version of the Job Seeker Agreements), which are supposed to be “owned” by the unemployed individual but can be “reviewed and updated as the DWP sees fit” (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014: 38). Despite the focus on choice in recent changes to UK social security services, there has thus been a reduction in options available (Rafferty and Wiggan, 2011) as UK employment services are prescriptive with regard to the type and frequency of job searching and related ‘steps’. It is questionable to what extent unemployed individuals who utilise this service can still be said to have free choices. The neglect of choice for unemployed individuals is explained by Bonvin and Farvaque (2005: 277):

When work is seen as only a macro-political objective (e.g. to raise the employment rate), or is assessed only in terms of commodity values (the wage level), then all other reasons individuals have to be employed are discarded.

As Greve (2009) outlines, choices and preferences are socially determined and can be changed, for example, by social or statist reduction of available choices. In the area of employment services, choices are often combined with responsibilities, and can be offered or constrained by using financial incentives or sanctions (Zimmermann *et al.*, 2014). Sanctions (the withdrawal of social security payments) can be particularly prohibitive. Lack of funds can make job search activities difficult but more importantly the threat of sanctions is likely to make individuals compliant with the requirements and conditions imposed on them by their JC+ advisor, irrespective of their usefulness. Sanctions have increased substantially since the Coalition Government came to power and whilst

the main reasons for sanctions are listed as 'not actively seeking work' or 'failure to participate in work related activity' (DWP, 2014a), JC+ has sanctions targets (Wintour and Domokos, 2013; Hewison, 2014). There are also indications that focussing on vulnerable individuals including those experiencing mental health issues or who have learning difficulties is seen as an easy route to achieve sanction targets (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014: 57). The arbitrary nature of how sanction targets appear to be implemented is likely to further confuse and intimidate those affected, with implications for the availability of choices and options.

Choices and capabilities

Choice can broadly be defined as a freedom based on self-determination (Platman, 2004) and is reduced by job loss. Despite individual differences, this takes effect across the job spectrum including managers and professionals (Gabriel *et al.*, 2013) but is more likely to affect those with multiple barriers to the labour market. These barriers may include care responsibilities, learning difficulties, mental health issues, or experiences of offending or homelessness. When considering what choices vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals have or are confronted with, there are a number of issues to consider. At an abstract level, and drawing on the capabilities approach with its focus on choice (Muffels and Headey, 2013), there are two conditions for a successful labour market policy and intervention: the freedom of the individual to choose what they want to do and the provision of the means for that individual to achieve their ambitions (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). However, individuals may have to make 'involuntary choices' as a result of constraints including dismissal or disability (Muffels and Headey, 2013). The range of 'involuntary choices' may stretch from having to find a new job, via various less desirable employment options as a result of labour market, social or individual constraints, to not having any choices about future un-/employment. On a practical level, the variety of choices that unemployed individuals may need to make or that may be made for them as they search for employment include:

- content of employment service;

- level (quantity of provision);
- identity of a gatekeeper (case manager, commissioners);
- provider (of training and/or support) (Greve, 2009, p. 546).

Choices are necessary about the job search activity itself as well as the aimed for employment outcome – though the two are likely to be interlinked. By definition, long-term unemployed individuals, for a range of reasons, have been outside of the labour market for a sustained period of time. The reasons for this state of affairs and the motivations of individuals (Sen, 1991) are important factors in the choices that they make about the type and sector of a desired job, the skill development required, and the working hours and travel distances that are feasible. It may be that only low-paid, part-time or otherwise ‘inferior’ employment is available (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012). To achieve the goal of employment, individuals may have choices made for them about what are appropriate jobs and what steps to take about obtaining them. More fundamentally, vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals may be unclear about what employment is of interest. Depending on individual circumstances including closeness or distance from the labour market, and barriers that are experienced, knowledge about suitable available employment opportunities may be limited. The capabilities approach thus introduces a further important distinction between having choices that may be *available* (as outlined above) and having the ability to *make* choices (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). The ability to choose is based on a person’s self-determination to value who they want to be or what they want to do (Muffels and Headey, 2013), including what work they may find desirable. Theoretically, completely free choice should be possible, but in reality an individual’s ‘dream job’ may be unachievable due to the specifics of the local labour market and/or the individual. Such constraints make decision-making processes difficult and reduce or even remove the ability to make choices.

When considering capabilities, that include the ability to formulate and express choices, it is important to consider social and structural arrangements, i.e. the assessment of social security provision in general, and in particular “individual situations, trajectories and potentials” (Bonvin, 2012). In this paper, the latter

application of the approach is utilised to consider the possibilities for a choice-based employment service for long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals. In doing so, it follows Bartelheimer *et al.* (2012) in not evaluating the effect of programmes or interventions in terms of pre-defined outcomes (e.g. exiting unemployment or the length of unemployment) and instead focuses on the development of individual capabilities, that is the outcomes and options that may be valued by unemployed individuals. As the capabilities approach is interdisciplinary in nature (Bussi and Dahmen, 2012) economic, social and psychological aspects can be drawn on to consider the capabilities and choices available to unemployed individuals.

A (third sector) framework for choice?

The issue of choice is especially complex for individuals who are long-term unemployed. They have significant and often numerous barriers to entry into the labour market and are therefore 'furthest away' from employment (Damm, 2012). Charity A, the third sector organisation in which the research for this paper was undertaken, specialises on working with individuals who are long-term unemployed including those who have completed the Work Programme without change in their circumstancesⁱ; younger and older unemployed; lone parents; individuals with learning disabilities or mental health issues; ex offenders; and individuals with experiences of homelessness. The choices available to these groups are often further reduced due to regulations (e.g. requirement for a home address, DBSⁱⁱ checks) but also due to employer prejudice or discrimination (especially for ex offenders and individuals with learning disabilities). Overall unemployment figures may have decreased (ONS, 2014) but Charity A reports little noticeable difference in employment opportunities for these vulnerable groups. Individuals within these categories could thus be seen as those who are 'left over' after marketised employment providers have creamed off employable individuals and thus fall into the 'hard to place' category (Damm, 2012). The DWP (2014b: 34) accepts that the payment by results model it utilises is "less suitable for clients with multiple barriers to employment" and that "costs of support for those with greatest need exceed the

payments available". Vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals with complex needs may thus not receive the support they require via 'the system' (Greve, 2009).

Employment and support services available to unemployed individuals are dominated by large organisations, or prime providers, following the introduction of requirements that organisations tendering for employment services contracts should have a £20 million annual turnover (Zimmermann *et al.*, 2014)ⁱⁱⁱ. Service provision is big business, bringing with it the well-known issues of 'creaming' by prioritising those easier to place in employment and 'churn' as those who are harder to place are moved through various training schemes and work experience placements. Paired with the policy directives to reduce social security expenditure and to end dependency on the state, it is clear that this system is based on the workfarist approach that "...non-compliance will not be tolerated and will have serious negative financial consequences" (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014: 9). In this system, individuals' choices play a limited role and may be discouraged. Friedli and Stearn (2015: 42) refer to psycho-compulsion, "defined as the imposition of psychological explanations for unemployment, together with mandatory activities intended to modify beliefs, attitude, disposition or personality". It does not take much imagination to see that such a system is likely to clash with at least some needs and requirements of vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals. As the following quotation suggests, the lack of attention to individual choice also entails a contradiction with the avowed emphasis on individual responsibility for employability and employment outcomes. The 'voices of the workless' (Newman, 2011, Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005) are thus marginalised.

It's not about being told. People are grown-ups here. And they need to be treated as grown ups and grown ups need to take responsibility and a lot of the time within the system, and I use that term very loosely, people are told what they have to do. They're forced to do something. (F:11:40)

The employment and support needs and requirements of vulnerable and long-term unemployed groups are often met by a range of charities and other third sector organisations. These are often poorly funded as they have to bid for sub-

contracting arrangements with prime providers or for specialist funding, usually from other charities. There are links with the 'official system' of support structures in that organisations such as Charity A are likely to receive referrals from JC+, usually once the 'churn' through other programmes has been unsuccessful. From the point of view of third sector organisations, there are pros and cons to this situation. The lack of consistent and reliable funding streams is a problem^{iv}. However, a degree of independence from the 'system' allows a freedom of sorts to develop different mechanisms to work with client groups. Psychologically, unemployed individuals are also more likely to engage with an organisation that is not perceived to be part of 'the system'. As will be outlined below, this is especially the case in Charity A where a deliberate service-user oriented approach has been developed and choice is a key element of the work undertaken. This made it an ideal organisation in which to research the problem of choice amongst unemployed individuals and whether the degree of de-/regulation may support or impede the capability to make choices. Before Charity A's approach is discussed, the following section provides an overview of the research undertaken. The research findings are then presented by first outlining 'non-decision' making and resulting problems and second, by considering the – at times problematic – ways in which space and motivation are provided to encourage the re-/development of choices.

Research methods and data collection

Charity A works with unemployed individuals, referred to as service users, by: providing support to learn new skills, finding suitable training and search for a job; offering training courses; practical help with finding and applying for jobs and going for interviews; and by providing information and advice on work, training and social security. Potential service users come to Charity A either through a referral from JC+ or another service provider, via their own outreach work or through word-of-mouth. In 2014 they supported approximately 700 service users. Prior to undertaking any empirical work, two research ethics applications were submitted through the appropriate University Ethics Committees. The first application covered (participant) observation, which

constituted the first phase of the research. The application to cover interviews for the second phase of the research was submitted in short succession as it quickly became apparent that there would be overlap between the two phases. Moreover, an application to become a volunteer with Charity A was completed. This included committing to basic rules such as the 'safe space' discussed below and a DBS check. There was agreement from the outset that the research to be undertaken had to be mutually beneficial. To this end, regular conversations with key staff within Charity A ensured that the observations and interviews would not be disruptive and that the findings would be useful and could be fed back to all individuals involved in the research process. This arrangement meant that anonymised and general findings were fed back to the organisation on a regular basis but did not extend to Charity A influencing the research process.

In line with a phenomenological approach, the research process started by undertaking observations at Charity A. It was important to ensure an understanding of the services and provisions so that meaningful and appropriate research questions could be developed. Six months of (participant) observations were completed in July 2014. During this period and on average, observation was undertaken for a full day nearly every week (3.5 times per month) though in reality attendance was more unevenly spread. A total of approximately 150 hours were spent observing: open days in reception; Universal Jobs Match^v classes; numeracy and literacy functional skills classes (including the City and Guilds exams that these culminate in); National Careers Service sessions; mock interviews; and job search groups. The classes on offer last for between two and six weeks and where possible one group was observed throughout their programme to get to know them and see their development. Two informal group discussions about the research occurred in such groups. The balance between observation only and participant observation varied considerably depending on the activity and the group. In some groups and with some activities (e.g. mock interviews, job search group), participant observation involved being asked questions and engaging in in-/formal conversations. This provided interesting insights but meant that notes had to be written up in lunch breaks or at the end of the day. Note taking was also difficult when observing an active class (e.g. art based) where no one sat down. In these situations, not participating and taking

notes would have been obtrusive and notes were taken as soon as possible after the session had completed or at the end of the day. In other groups and with other activities (e.g. open days, National Careers Service session), observation was strictly passive and notes could be taken throughout.

In the second phase of the research, Charity A members of staff were interviewed. The 19 interviews conducted included all full members of staff and volunteers. As a result of the insecure financial situation some members of staff were themselves in insecure positions. At times, this made the discussions about unemployment and related issues personal in nature. The semi-structured conversations covered the individual's and charity's work, their views of unemployment in general, the specific services that Charity A provides and the challenges that they face. Issues that were highlighted in the interviews were the 'safe space' provided by Charity A; the relationships with and between service users; how choices are encouraged amongst service users; and issues of time use and meaningful activity.

The results presented here are based on the (participant) observation, informal discussions with service users and staff as well as interviews with staff. In the following, the issue of non-decision making is discussed in more depth to highlight the problems with choice. Following this, the importance of a 'safe space' to address non-decision making and the voicing and expression of opinion are discussed. Both are aspects of the work undertaken by Charity A to guide the development of decision-making processes and as such form pillars of their 'model of choice'. They provide insights into how the issues faced by unemployed individuals can be addressed effectively without resorting to the compulsion and threat inherent in the current system.

'Non-decision' making

There is considerable literature on the difficulties young people face in choosing an occupation or deciding what kind of work is right for them (see *inter alia* Brynin, 2013), but less attention has been paid to how individuals of different ages who have been out of employment long-term might also struggle with such

decisions. Hallqvist and Hydén's (2014) research shows the anxiety and doubts associated with career decision of 'mid-life' workers who had experienced redundancy. The situation is further complicated by limited employment opportunities and adults' potential (financial) commitments that influence the availability of suitable choices. In some circumstances, it is therefore more important to find options that meet practical requirements rather than fulfilling any fundamental interests and needs via a 'dream job'.

I don't believe that everyone will find what they want to do because you might find something that's ok for you but you may not necessarily think, right, this is what I want to do and I'm glad I've found it. (A:10:33)

Even where service users do not have extensive decisions to make and know what they want to do, they may not have the skills and self-esteem to pursue their ideas. Although this research cannot establish causal relationships, service users and staff relate much of the former's insecurity back to their experiences in the 'official system'. *One service user mentions the JC+'s 'bullyboy tactics' and a member of staff talks about 'a climate of fear'* (observation note 11 March 2014). The additional barriers most of the long-term unemployed service users encounter are also likely to play significant roles. Charity A staff report that new service users tend to display a high degree of 'protective resistance'. Although blame was squarely apportioned to official structures, it is difficult to establish whether staff themselves may also have play a role in this process. The resistance refers to strategies to protect themselves against the sense of powerlessness instilled by 'the system' which holds them personally responsible for their failures (Friedli and Stearn, 2015; Newman, 2011) often without supporting their ability to address problems or shortcomings. Parallels to experiences of the 'undeserving underclass' (Murray, 1999, Dunn *et al.*, 2014) as debated in the 1990s are not far fetched. Examples of protective resistance observed included hiding problems or covering up when mistakes had been made. With service users who may be naturally quiet, it can be difficult to tell whether they are getting on with tasks or whether they are struggling without asking for help. With others, it quickly became obvious that they were struggling with aspects of a course. Some service users utilised bravado to maintain a

sense of self-esteem whilst also refusing to deal with some of the difficulties they encountered.

Member of staff tries to get service user to write down something: he says he is doing it in his head. Another member of staff last week told me that he also tried to hide aspects of his written work because they were wrong. He then – ambitiously – tries to write a sentence using all the words on the list. [The task was to do one sentence per word.] Observation note 12 May 2014

Protective resistance is likely to arise in situations when an individual is under pressure to resolve unsolvable problems or is in an inescapable situation (Hiroto and Seligman, 1975). Such uncontrollable aversive stimulation as well as discrimination, that is unfair and negative treatment, can result in helpless behaviour, or learned helplessness (Heslin *et al.*, 2012), a type of shock that individuals are likely to attempt avoiding in future problem solving situations. When long-term unemployment cannot be resolved by extensive employment search and application processes, the perception is that it is inescapable. The extent of regulation imposed by JC+ further adds to the sense of a lack of control. A possible reaction to experiencing long-term unemployment is thus to change ones approach “from creativity and agency to a more passive and adaptive approach” (Hallqvist and Hydén, 2014: 9). Protective resistance can thus take the form of not engaging, hiding difficulties that are being experienced, feelings of ambivalence and a lack of direction (*ibid*, 2014) and, as a result, finding it difficult to commit to any decision-making process, as this could expose problems. Indirectly, protective resistance and helpless behaviour enforce dependency on others – in these cases including on the staff and volunteers at Charity A – as non-decision is a sensible option when based on the belief that another person’s implicit choice is the best one (Greve, 2009). More specifically in relation to job searching, Daguerre and Etherington (2014: 54) found evidence for “the notion that personal advisors [in JC+] (now referred to as coaches) know better than customers what is appropriate for them in terms of job search.” Unemployed individuals may thus ‘make do’ with the choices imposed upon them (Dobbins *et al.*, 2013).

A position of 'protective resistance' may have developed due to the lack of clear choices in the provision of support offered or the provider of employment services (Zimmermann *et al.*, 2014). As the research was undertaken within the premises of Charity A, their role in these processes was difficult to disentangle. In informal discussions, service users reported feeling pressurised by JC+ via a mixture of bullying tactics and sanctions to keep up their job search, despite often believing that the search is futile. Engaging with the system and the job searching has to continue even if the unemployed individual perceives the number of job applications or 'steps' towards employment required by JC+ to be excessive. The situation can leave service users uninspired, demotivated and unenthusiastic about their futures.

A safe space in which to develop choices

To overcome protective resistance a process of becoming acquainted, developing mutual understanding and trust is required. Greve (2009: 551) points out that trust forms the foundation for ensuring that "the outcome of choice from both society and individual users' point of view can be considered as useful". To nurture trust, Charity A aim to provide '*a safe and enabling environment that offers people access to the opportunities, which will help them achieve their potential in learning, work and life*' (Charity A Mission Statement). Grand aims of such nature are unlikely to be achievable in all cases and, in practice, the attempts to implement them included: showing awareness of individual needs; encouraging group involvement; allowing service users time to speak and ask questions; respecting confidentiality; service users supporting each other; and respecting others' opinions (from 'ground rules' displayed in teaching room). However, the safe space relies on staff supporting and challenging. Challenges are not merely related to inappropriate remarks or disrespectful and disturbing behaviour, but also to attitudes and behaviour related to service users' own situation and underlying issues or barriers.

We've got lots of success stories of people who came with absolutely nothing and no aspiration who've done very well. Now I'm sure on the flip side of that there are people who came, had lots of aspirations, didn't like

the way we were pushing them, didn't like the way we challenged them, didn't like the way we provoked them into doing things possibly and have fallen by the way side. (B:38:10)

The attempt to change the unemployed' attitudes and behaviour is comparable to the stated aims of institutions such as JC+ and the Work Programme (Dunn et al., 2014, DWP, 2014b). This questions and potentially undermines Charity A's avowed aim of developing individual service users' choices. While the means by which service users are challenged differ, it could be speculated that an attempt to convince individuals to 'freely' choose something they didn't originally want is even worse than compulsion. Charity A's goal is nevertheless to develop rather than stifle choice. The distinction is explored by considering three related issues: attendance is not compulsory, reducing the power imbalance between staff and service users, and culminates in the 'model of choice' that Charity A offers.

During initial conversations, service users are informed that they are free to leave if they wish but that Charity A will provide support if it is requested. This practice ensures that vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals have a degree of choice about the provider of employment services they want to work with (Greve, 2009) – a policy that could potentially be applied to the range of providers contracted to the Work Programme. The voluntary nature of attendance is limited as a threat of sanctions imposed by JC+, for example for non-compliance with a referral or required activity, cannot be removed or undone by other institutions. A threat of sanctions or conditionality by 'the system' may thus undermine attempts to achieve the aims and values of service users (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). Nevertheless, during observation, the impression was of individuals of equal status working together, to the extent that initially *I wasn't sure whether all were service users or who was staff* (observation note 25 February 2014). Further restrictions on the reduction of the power imbalance are imposed by the roles as teacher/advisor or learner, which can constitute a potential factor hindering the development of trust. The reduction in power imbalance is thus only reduced relative to the relationship that unemployed individuals have with advisors within JC+ or the Work Programme who impose requirements and conditionality (Friedli and Stearn,

2015). This is despite the fact that the roles of staff at Charity A are at times similar to 'official' advisors.

... you can see that people feel safe and comfortable coming here and for me that is the first part of being able to develop and grow with a support provider, is feeling safe and knowing that, you know, if you're having a bad day, you can still come in and there is someone to talk to. (D:5:50)

The 'model of choice' developed by Charity A establishes engagement as an important foundation for development. Based on voluntary attendance and a 'support and challenge' approach Charity A also introduces a degree of choice about the content of services (Greve, 2009) as service users can opt into and out of aspects of the provision. This works at both a course level, i.e. whether a service user wants to do certain classes, take the exam at the end, or try a practice lab, but also extends to the content where differentiated tasks may be set depending on the range of skills and abilities. Skills and choices are developed concomitantly. For example, job search sessions begin with a discussion of every individual's main strengths and transferable skills. Initial responses are stereotypical (team player, reliable) but members of staff spend a considerable amount of time to tease out what each label means to the individual and how it could be used to benefit job applications. The process of 'wringing it out of them', as it is put in the following quotation, refers to a simple but time consuming process of getting to know an individual service user and their background to explore strengths and weaknesses and elicit ideas about suitable routes into employment.

People sometimes just don't quite know where to go and so here they get to talk to someone and kind of wring it out of them. And sometimes I think it's just the fact they get some time to talk to someone about it instead of trying to figure it all out by themselves. (N:25:15)

A question remains over the balance between staff helping service users make decisions or influencing what decisions are made via the process of 'wringing it out'. Platman (2004) outlines how choice and control might be aspired to but may not form part of daily practices. Dobbins *et al.* (2014) equally suggest that a lack of choice forces unemployed individuals to be pragmatic in accepting any

available, and at times precarious, job. During observation, groups discussed complicating factors that impacted on their ability to make choices about potential jobs, including health issues, caring responsibilities, anxiety issues and lack of employment experience (in the UK). Job search strategies are thus constrained by necessity and require a degree of pragmatism (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012) in particular when aspirations are unrealistic. The following quote relates to a member of staff discussing a service users' desire to work for MI5, an option that was unlikely to open up for them, and attempting to find alternatives of interest to the individual.

There's an essence of not crashing somebody's dreams but working out how they can realistically do that. Pushing people but in a supportive way. So you might not want to do your Maths and English but if you want to get here, you've got to do this. So how can we work together to get you here rather than, well, 'no, you've got to go and do it'. (D, 25:15)

A priority in searching for jobs (especially in low or unskilled occupations) is the local labour market, though it can equally act as a further constraint (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012). In job-search or Introduction to Universal Jobs Match sessions, Charity A staff encourage service users to think about job applications in three categories: the job you want to do and should apply for first; a second choice; and something to 'fill the void' or to do 'in the mean time'. Whilst jobs in the first category are likely to motivate job seekers, the final category aims to avoid service users being sanctioned for not undertaking sufficient job applications or 'steps', or due to applying for jobs that they cannot do or travel to^{vi}. A cynical view might be that the ideal jobs in the first category are merely the carrot being dangled in front of service users to (usually) get them into employment in the third category. The number of job applications required by JC+ may thus add 'inferior alternatives' to the options an unemployed individual may have to choose from. According to Sen (1991) additions of inferior alternatives are insignificant when there is freedom of choice, however they have a negative impact when there is uncertainty. Given that the outcome of a job application is by definition uncertain, imposing inferior alternatives is likely to result in having

to make 'involuntary choices' (Muffels and Headey, 2013). The end result may still constitute compulsion.

Service users' capabilities are improved when choices are aligned with individuals' own values (Orton, 2011). Aspects of decision-making processes within the constraints and opportunities of an individual's biography are built into the opening exercises of courses such as a literacy class at A Charity. The initial writing assessment is for each person to write a page about themselves and their ambitions. *There is anxiety about the amount of writing they are being asked to do* (observation note 27 May 2014) but the exercise encourages conversations amongst service users and between service users and staff to discuss interests. In this way, capacities can be assessed in situation and context (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005).

During formal in-class discussions and informal conversations information about different types of employment is also imparted. A lack of knowledge about what certain work might entail and lack of experience in the labour market is an established problem for youths transiting into the world of work (Brynin, 2013) and similar issues emerged for adult job seekers.

... if you genuinely don't know what direction you want to go in and then you speak to people who've worked in care or catering or whatever, they may be able to give you more of an insight into that. If they've raved about a job they've had or they've absolutely hated it, then 'I don't want to do that, I didn't realise that was involved'. (A:17:30)

There are possible drawbacks to pooling information in this way as accuracy may be compromised and decision-making processes exposed to group pressure. The emphasis of the work undertaken is nevertheless to develop individual service users' abilities to make informed choices by providing them with opportunities to discuss options in an open, safe environment. The focus thus moves away from individual responsibility for the development of human capital, and towards individual and institutional conversion factors (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005). Individual values and the freedom to express preferences are as important as social and institutional constraints and opportunities. Within these processes,

discussions allow a development from adaptive preferences to capabilities (Sen, 1991) with the latter a realistic option for the individual and their context.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the choices and capabilities of long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals. Whereas in many areas of social life, choices have increased, for those on the margins of the labour market and of society, decisions tend to be imposed or, at least, the extent of choices available are reduced. Practical choices about the provision of support and the extent of job searches have been severely curtailed by the compulsion and threats of sanctions that characterise the work of JC+ and its prime contractors such as the organisations delivering the Work Programme. Extended exposure to 'the system' can result in protective resistance and degrees of learned helplessness. A side effect of such developments seems to be a reduced capability to make choices. This means that a reduction in the ability to develop choices coincides with a reduction in the options available to choose from. Compliance may become a necessary means of survival, even though it may lead to further demotivation and frustration. The choices and preferences, as well as the democratic voice of the workless (Newman, 2011) become obfuscated. There are clear implications for the integration of long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals, not just into the labour market but into society more generally. The fallacy of seeing employment as the main means for social inclusion is made evident by the rise in precarious work and in-work poverty (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Adding further compulsions and sanctions is therefore only likely to make the situation worse.

Unlike previous experiences of unemployed individuals, which tend to result in adaptive preferences as a result of arbitrary coerciveness, the work at Charity A aims to develop capabilities by leaving "space for the beneficiaries' capability for voice" to emerge (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005: 271). In doing so, a refuge or safe space for long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals is offered along with the time and attention to detail to allow individuals to challenge and overcome their protective resistance and lack of trust. The gradual teasing out of

preferences pays attention to the importance of the value attached to any choices available (Sen, 1991), including the value of other activities, contributions and commitments than employment (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Cole (2007) equally highlights the shortcomings of unemployment research that focuses exclusively on paid employment at all cost. Utilising the capability approach to investigate the choices available to unemployed individuals thus allows a consideration of values and preferences that is distinct from the government's tactic of coercion to reduce unemployment figures. For long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals and perhaps the unemployed group more generally, there are indications that this approach is more successful. Third sector organisations have been shown to work well with the hardest to reach (Damm, 2012). This paper has added evidence to this argument by showing how Charity A is able to re-establish the capability to voice preferences and make choices. Considering the employment outcomes of the work undertaken would be the next step in analysing the model of choice.

There are clear social and policy implications if a section of the population is disenfranchised due to difficulties to re-/enter the labour market. This paper has argued that there is a fundamentally negative impact - and possibly an undemocratic effect - of the government's approach to unemployment (Newman, 2011). Negative consequences are confounded by a lack of attention to the demand side, in particular local labour markets, (mental) health problems and social constraints such as a lack of easily accessible care provisions for job seekers. There is unlikely to be a change to this situation as long as unemployed individuals lack a voice in political organisations, be they political parties or trade unions, influencing policy development. This marginalisation is about to become more precarious as the Conservative government rolls out further cuts as part of their austerity agenda. Even if the speed at which these cuts are to be implemented has slowed, as Bradshaw (2015, p. 3) states: "More is to come."

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ⁱ Between 50 and 59% of participants on the Work Programme require further support following their two years of participation (DWP, 2014b). According to McGuinness and Dar (2015) 77.4% of participants who have completed the Work Programme are returned to JobCentre Plus provision.

ⁱⁱ The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) replaced the former CRB, Criminal Records Bureau, and ISA, Independent Safeguarding Authority checks in December 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ The government also wanted to make sure that SMEs had access to government contract opportunities by making sure that 25% of government spend, either directly or in supply chains, goes to SMEs by 2015, See: www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-government-buying/2010-to-2015-government-policy-government-buying#appendix-1-making-sure-government-gets-full-value-from-small-and-medium-sized-enterprises (accessed 14 May 2015).

^{iv} For Charity A the funding problem resulted in closure shortly after the research that this paper is based on was completed.

^v Universal Jobmatch replaced the JobCentre Plus job search tool and is an online database to search and apply for job openings. It does not store all vacancies but is used by JobCentre Plus to record job search activities. This makes it necessary for job seekers to enter notes on jobs applied for via different routes on Universal Jobmatch.

^{vi} The JC+ travel requirement is 90 minutes each way (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014).