Capabilities and choices of vulnerable, long-term unemployed individuals

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of choice as it applies 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 curtailed decision-making abilities when it comes to their pathways into employment. The outcomes can include protective resistance as a response to the extent of regulation, which may undermine engagement in job search and related activities. Despite attempts by benevolent staff in a charity to provide support and enhance capabilities that result in the overcoming of protective resistance, they operate within a broader institutional framework of choice as set by government policy. The end result is compulsion, not choice.

Key words: capabilities, choice, compulsion, decisions, employment, sanctions, support, unemployment, vulnerable

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Introduction

Autonomy and discretion have long been of interest to researchers of work and employment (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. A period of unemployment reduces employment opportunities (Gabriel et al., 2013) and choice decreases the longer unemployment continues. The choices of unemployed individuals are further constrained by increasingly draconian workfare interventions aimed at “complete and intimate behaviour change through coercive mechanisms” (Friedli and Stearn, 2015: 41). This contrasts 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. Although choice for jobseekers was an original aim in quasi-market provision (Finn, 2009), discussions of service provider logistics, payments and behaviour take primacy (Finn, 2011). The problem is that choice is an important contributor to subjective and objective well-being (Muffels and Headey, 2013). This paper investigates the extent to which employment support within a market-based system of delivery can damage individuals’ capability to make choices. To this end, the ‘institutional framework of choice’ (Blank, 2009) is assessed, though it can be argued that the employment and support provision is designed to reduce choice. More specifically, the focus is on the support provided by ‘Charity A’, a third-sector organisation working with long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals. The importance of researching beyond activation workers’ views has already been highlighted (Marston, 2013) and third sector organisations are responsive to local and individual needs (Egdell et al., 2016), especially in their work with the ‘hardest to help’ (Damm, 2012). It is argued that such settings highlight issues with choice in relation to employment options and the limitations of the supply-side orientation of employment services.

A changing policy framework for choice

The social security and support infrastructure available to unemployed individuals in the UK has changed substantially. The most significant developments relate to the Work Programme and the phasing in of Universal Credit. Introduced in 2011, the Work Programme is a payment-for-results
welfare-to-work programme that provides support to jobseekers in parallel to JobCentre Plus (JC+) (DWP, 2012). Participation can be voluntary but is compulsory for Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) recipients (if drawing JSA for more than three, nine or twelve months, dependent on category) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) recipients who are in the ‘work-related activity group’ (DWP, 2014c). In December 2015, just over 1.81 million people had joined the Work Programme and “32% of the most recent participants to complete two years on the scheme had a minimum of six months in work” (DWP, 2016, 6). Between 65% (ibid) and 77% (McGuinness and Dar, 2015) of all Work Programme participants return to JC+ at the end of the two-year scheme without entering into employment. The success rate of the scheme is thus questionable. Universal Credit combines in-work and out-of work benefits into a single taper rate (Jones, 2012), replacing separate payments of JSA, ESA, Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit. Payments are made into an individual’s bank account, making the system potentially difficult for couples and families. The introduction of Universal Credit acknowledges rising in-work poverty and underemployment, necessitating wide-ranging social security support, but its aims and direction were questioned in light of cost cutting to the scheme and benefits more broadly (BBC, 2016). Both the Work Programme and Universal Credit raise questions about choices, as can be exemplified by considering the role of claimant commitments (the revamped version of jobseeker agreements). To receive benefit payments whilst on the Work Programme and as a pre-condition to claiming Universal Credit, claimants are asked to outline their commitments, usually in relation to skill development, looking for work and/or increasing earnings if already in employment. As specified in the Welfare Reform Act 2012, an employment officer prepares the claimant commitment, which claimants are ‘invited’ to accept. Although supposedly “owned” by the unemployed individual, the document can be “reviewed and updated as the DWP sees fit” (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014: 38). Claimant commitments deliberately reduce choice and enforce a demand-side approach that focuses on the development of human capital, employability and adaptability to the labour market (Dobbins et al., 2013). Deviation from the enforced ‘choices’ is penalised via sanctions.
As Greve (2009) outlines, choices and preferences are socially determined and can be changed, offered or constrained by using financial incentives or sanctions (Zimmermann et al., 2014). The withdrawal of social security payments can apply to JSA and ESA claimants, with the length of the sanction period “proportionate to the degree of non-compliance” (DWP, 2014c: 132). Lack of funds can make job search activities difficult and the threat of sanctions is likely to make individuals compliant with the requirements and conditions imposed, irrespective of their usefulness. Sanctions have increased substantially since the Coalition Government came to power. The main reasons for sanctions are listed as ‘not actively seeking work’ or ‘failure to participate in work related activity’ (DWP, 2014a), but it has also been reported that JC+ has sanction targets (Hewison, 2014), though these are disputed by the DWP (Butler, 2015). Focussing on vulnerable individuals including those experiencing mental health issues or who have learning difficulties may be an easy route to achieve sanction targets as these groups are the most heavily sanctioned (Oakley, 2014; Daguerre and Etherington, 2014). The arbitrary nature of how sanctions appear to be implemented is likely to further confuse and intimidate those affected, with implications for choice.

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 deliberately prescriptive with regard to the type and frequency of job searching and related ‘steps’. The approach highlights the main focus of UK employment policy, which can be summarised in Bonvin and Farvaque’s (2005: 277) words:

> 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.

Similarly, the importance attached to choice is founded on economic goals (Lewis and Giullari, 2005). The underlying, neo-liberal assumption is that unemployed individuals should, but do not, prefer any job to unemployment (Dunn et al., 2014). 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 in 2012) based on individuals having to undertake activities against their wish or undertake work placements without remuneration (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014). The focus on macro-political objectives and commodity values means that any attempts at addressing or removing underlying barriers to employment are sidelined if not ignored (DWP, 2014c). Vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals who tend to have multiple barriers to re-employment tend to be hit hardest because they are least ‘job ready’, often discriminated against by potential employers and most likely to end up in poor quality jobs. David Cameron claimed that sanctions are in place to remove ‘lifestyle choice’ (Waugh, 2016) for those who ‘prefer unemployment’ to (any) work. Such rhetoric is part of the government’s position to stereotype 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.

Choice and capabilities

Choice can broadly be defined as a freedom to decide based on self-determined preferences (Blank, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, choice is conceptualised by drawing on and critiquing the capabilities approach, originally developed by Sen (cf. 1991). The capabilities approach argues for the primary importance of achieving well-being and posits that this is to be understood in terms of people’s capabilities (Bonvin, 2012, Orton, 2011). Choice is crucial because of its importance to determine and achieve the opportunities to do and be what individuals have reason to value (Muffels and Headey, 2013). Applying the capabilities approach, Bonvin and Orton (2009) argued that there are two conditions for successful labour market policy and interventions: 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). This capabilities-based definition of choice contrasts with competitive market mechanisms that underpin British employment support. The contrast is highlighted when considering the distinction between having choices that may be
available and having the ability to make choices (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). Whilst the former may exist for unemployed individuals in the form of different job openings that an employment officer might deem appropriate, the ability to make choices 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. As outlined above, such variation in values or lifestyles is not permissible under current welfare policies.

Theoretically, completely free choice should be possible when taking a capabilities approach, though Lewis and Giullari (2005) show that individuals and their capabilities are interdependent and context reliant. Considering limitations imposed by labour market demand provides further evidence of restrictions. An individual’s ‘dream job’ may be unachievable due to individual shortcomings but equally because of the local labour market. It may be that only low-paid, part-time or otherwise ‘inferior’ employment is available (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012). Such conditions form part of the institutional framework of choice (Blank, 2009), which is largely determined by the players providing employment services and the policies they implement and enforce. There have been strategic shifts within the provider landscape that have resulted in powerful prime providers dominating the field (Taylor et al., 2016). Although Blank (2009) considers a range of factors including: the role of markets (relative to public non-market welfare provision); the mode of resource provision to participate in markets; and the mode of publicly provided resources, it is, above all, his focus on the difference between voluntary and obligatory exercising of choice that is of relevance here. In his study, voluntary choice was expressed in choosing whether and how to use entitlement to health and care services, whereas obligatory choice occurs where health insurance is compulsory, with choices between different insurance companies. Similar scenarios occur for different groups of unemployed individuals.

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 the content of employment service; level (quantity of provision); identity of a gatekeeper (case manager, commissioners); and provider (of training
and/or support) (Greve, 2009: 546). On each of these counts, the degree of choice available is limited by the systemic approach to employment support contained within the Work Programme and the claimant commitment. Within this, different groups of unemployed individuals are likely to have varying degrees of voluntary and obligatory choices. For example, highly educated individuals with recent experience of employment who are mobile are more likely to have voluntary choices. The implications of unemployment take effect across the job spectrum, including managers and professionals (Gabriel et al., 2013), but are more likely to affect those with multiple barriers to the labour market. It is thus long-term unemployed and vulnerable individuals who undertake obligatory exercising of choices, or ‘involuntary choices’ in the terminology of the capabilities approach, that go beyond the constraints imposed by dismissal or disability (Muffels and Headey, 2013). Restrictions on choices are imposed by specific circumstances of the individual (e.g. ex offenders are usually barred from care and some service sector employment opportunities) and the location (traditional, local manufacturing industries no longer recruiting). Within an institutional framework of choice, there may be further constraints. Vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals may be unclear about what employment is of interest and/or more concerned with underlying barriers (e.g. homelessness, not re-offending, dealing with learning disabilities). Depending on individual circumstances including closeness or distance from the labour market, and the barriers that are experienced, knowledge about suitable available employment opportunities may be limited.

The issue of choice is complex and cannot be isolated from individual characteristics, contexts or the institutional framework. The capabilities approach’s focus on a broad conceptualisation of choice also means that it has been utilised in various interpretations and deployments, including by neo-liberal workfare proponents, and in situations where choice is ‘merely the perception of choice’ (Walby, 2012: 104). The quality of choice exercised, e.g. whether they are voluntarily or obligatory, is therefore crucial. Whilst involuntary choices have been considered within the capabilities approach (Muffels and Headey, 2013, Sen, 1991) this does not seem to have been extended to scenarios where there are no voluntary choices, as may be the case with Work Programme participants.
whose financial situation does not allow them to reject committing to employment possibilities that they are not interested in. This paper considers whether, in such situations, long-term and vulnerable individuals develop adaptive preferences (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005) to maintain self-esteem and ‘perceptions of choice’. The study of staff and service users of a third sector employment support provision allows an investigation into a particularly disempowered group who are not likely to have voluntary choices, despite attempts by the charity to open up options with the individuals. The approach taken 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 institutional framework of choice, the outcomes and options that may be valued by unemployed individuals. The overall aim of this research is therefore to establish the extent to which choice is possible for this group of vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals.

A (third sector) framework for choice?

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 moving into employment; younger and older individuals; lone parents; individuals with learning disabilities or mental health issues; ex offenders; and individuals with experiences of homelessness. Available employment choices may be limited by regulations (e.g. requirement for a home address, DBS checks) but also due to employer prejudice or discrimination (especially for ex offenders and individuals with learning disabilities). Overall unemployment figures have decreased (ONS, 2014) but Charity A reports little noticeable difference in employment opportunities for vulnerable groups. In 2013-14, a third of Charity A’s service users entered paid employment or volunteering opportunities, compared to a 10.5% success rate achieved by local Work Programme providers and a national situation in which the Work Programme struggles to support harder-to-help groups (DWP, 2016). The DWP (2014b: 34)
accepts that the payment by results model utilised 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 are thus less likely to receive the support they require (Greve, 2009, Damm, 2012).

Employment and support services 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)ii. 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 the harder-to-place are moved through various training schemes and work experience placements. Paired with policy directives to reduce social security expenditure and to end dependency on the state, it is clear that this system is based on workfare in which “…non-compliance will not be tolerated and will have serious negative financial consequences” (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014: 9). 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”. In this system, individual choice is discouraged.

Charities and other third sector organisations attempt to meet the employment and support needs and requirements of vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals (Damm, 2012). A lack of consistent and reliable funding streams is commoniii, as third sector organisations have to bid for sub-contracting arrangements with prime providers or for specialist funding (Egdell et al., 2016). One positive side-effect is a degree of independence, though there are links with the ‘official system’ of support structures as Charity A receives referrals from JC+, usually once the ‘churn’ through the Work Programmes has been unsuccessful. In content and aims, the differences in the work undertaken by Charity A are marginal, although there is determination to build better relationships with individual service users. As will be outlined below, Charity A had a deliberately service-user oriented approach in which choice is recognised
as a concern. The role of a benevolent service provider who takes the side of service user ‘against the system’ does lead to potential conflict with the charity’s aims and objectives. These issues made Charity A an ideal organisation in which to research the problem of choice amongst long-term unemployed and vulnerable individuals, and allowed an investigation into the relationship between regulation and compulsion on the one hand and individuals’ capability to make choices. Before Charity A’s approach is discussed, the following section provides an overview of the research undertaken.

**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 searching 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 through a referral from JC+ or another service provider, via their own outreach work, or through word-of-mouth, with only the former mandated to attend. According to Charity A’s Annual Report for 2014, they supported approximately 700 service users that year. Due to the drop-in nature of some sessions (e.g. job search clubs), statistics on service users are unreliable. The groups attending functional skills classes are easier to capture and broadly representative. The classes observed were 55% female; 68% ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds; 36% caring responsibilities; 9% young (under 25) and 18% in the 50+ category. The length of unemployed ranged from one person at 4 months whilst another stated they had been unemployed for 20 years. Issues with transport, childcare, and the structure of the local labour are common. The top preferred industrial sectors identified by service users were Care; Administration and Customer Care; Catering; and Cleaning.

There was agreement from the outset that the research had to be mutually beneficial. To this end, regular conversations with key staff within Charity A ensured that observations and interviews would not be disruptive and that the findings would be useful. This arrangement meant that anonymised and general
findings were discussed informally with service users, staff, volunteers and the CEO. The aim of the conversations was to include all participants in the on-going research but also aided the analysis and contextualisation of the findings. 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 attendance was clustered around when courses were running. A total of 150 hours were spent observing: open days in reception; Universal Jobs Match<sup>iv</sup> 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 last between two and six weeks and where possible one group was observed throughout to get to know them and see their development. Two discussions about the research occurred in such groups (total n=22). The balance between observation and participant observation varied depending on the activity and the group. Participant observation involved being asked questions (especially in job search group regarding IT issues) and engaging in formal (e.g. mock interviews) and informal (especially at break times) 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 from memory as soon as possible after the session had completed or at the end of the day. As a result, some field notes summarise events and already include a degree of analysis. In other groups and with other activities (e.g. open days, National Careers Service session), observation was strictly passive and detailed, descriptive notes could be taken throughout.

In the second research phase, all of the 19 Charity A members of staff and volunteers were interviewed. Charity A’s insecure financial position meant some respondents’ jobs were at risk, making discussions about unemployment
personal in nature. Whilst respondents thus had personal insights into service users’ situations, they were not necessarily objective and, at times, the focus of the interviews drifted away from the specific issue of service users and towards unemployment and labour market issues in general. The semi-structured conversations and interviews 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; the relationships between staff, volunteers and service users; as well as the issues of choice, time use and meaningful activity. The results presented here are based on the two focus groups with service users, the interviews with staff and volunteers, and observations. In capturing the views of a small group of individuals, findings are indicative rather than representative of the sector. The voices of long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals are difficult to capture and are underrepresented in this research though positions voiced by service users are highlighted. In the following, the issue of having to address resistance against engagement and how choice is approached by Charity A are outlined.

Overcoming resistance and approaching choice

The difficulties young people face in choosing an occupation or deciding what kind of work is right for them is well established (Brynin, 2013), but less is known about how individuals of different ages who have been out of employment long-term might struggle with such decisions. Hallqvist and Hydén (2014) reveal anxiety and doubts associated with career decisions of ‘mid-life’ workers who had experienced redundancy. The situation is complicated by limited employment opportunities and adults’ potential (financial) commitments that influence the suitability of choices. Discussions amongst service users included basic necessities such as paying the rent and providing for children, though the main reasons for wanting a job tended to be more complex:

…it keeps you going, instead of sitting at home you learn new things, you get money – it’s like achievement. It’s part of life, you’ve got to look for a job. (Young Asian service user, mother, English functional skills course)
The reality is often one of ‘getting by’ rather than aiming to achieve a dream job, although earning and learning are considered important achievements. Some service users had ideas about the occupations they aimed to apply for, including classroom assistant, care assistant and cook, but usually required basic numeracy and literacy skills to start the required training. In the mean time, or whilst establishing what their employment interests are, service users had to continue dealing with JC+ and what one service user called ‘its bullyboy tactics’ (observation note 11 March 2014). Complying with JC+ instructions at times undermined the efforts undertaken by service users (e.g. having to apply for jobs that were not compatible with the efforts) but more often added pressure, especially in the form of a threat of sanctions. In this situation, Charity A staff reported that new service users tended to display a high degree of ‘protective resistance’. 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) often without supporting their ability to address problems or shortcomings. Examples of protective resistance observed included hiding problems or covering up when mistakes had been made. At times, bravado was utilised to maintain a sense of self-esteem whilst also refusing to deal with difficulties 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). When long-term unemployment cannot be resolved by extensive employment search and application processes, the perception is that it is inescapable. This lack of success in terms of employment outcomes highlights the lack of attention paid to the demand-side of the labour market and suggests that protective resistance may be a healthy response to an obsession with the
supply-side. From the outside, this may be seen as a “more passive and adaptive approach” (Hallqvist and Hydén, 2014: 9) in which unemployed individuals do not engage, hide difficulties that are being experienced, and experience feelings of ambivalence and a lack of direction (ibid, 2014). What is less clear is what impact this has on vulnerable, long-term unemployed individuals’ ability to make choices about their own futures, whether employment related or otherwise.

Indirectly, protective resistance enforces dependency on others because, as is intended by directive and sanction-oriented policies, non-decision and compliance are sensible options when based on the belief that another person’s implicit choice is the best one (Greve, 2009). More specifically and 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.” Personalised and tailored provision, now a cornerstone of both JC+ and the Work Programme (Taylor et al., 2016) therefore does not equate to allowing individual service users self-determination and development of their own choices. The quality of provision and of individual relationships may be more important than the fact that it is individually delivered. Whilst blame for service users’ protective resistance was squarely apportioned to the ‘official structures’ by staff and volunteers at Charity A, their role may also be considered as ambiguous. Their work practices intentionally distinguished them from JC+ and Work Programme methods, even if only in the form of taking time, listening and engaging in conversations. In combination with critiquing the system and advocacy on behalf of service users, charities play an important public role (Finn, 2011) and support individual service users.

…I stand up for myself. Before, I was very, very quiet and got depressed for many years. And now, here, I open up to people. (Older, White European woman, English functional skills course)

When you’re in a smaller environment and you have fewer people with the teacher, I feel like I’m getting something done. (Middle-aged Black man, English functional skills course)
Staff, volunteers and service users have benevolent and personal relationships, which may be based in common experiences of unemployment, and which encouraged and strengthened self-esteem. Common backgrounds and experiences also result in a decreased power imbalance between staff and service users. During observation, relationships were perceived as individuals with equal status working together, rather than staff utilising their authority to instruct service users. Whilst this may have been the impression of equal status given that staff are employed to help service users, the latter responded by emphasising how different the atmosphere at Charity A was compared to other service providers and even talked about feeling “like a family member” (middle-aged, Asian woman). A member of staff who had previously worked at a Work Programme provider highlighted the contrast by recounting that, despite the tailored provision in the Work Programme, the development of relationships was not encouraged. By comparison, Charity A aimed for staff, volunteers and service users to: show awareness of individual needs; encourage group involvement; allow service users time to speak and ask questions; respect confidentiality; help service users support each other; and respect others’ opinions (from ‘ground rules’ displayed in teaching room).

Relationship building and levels of support help service users overcome protective resistance. 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”. However, if protective resistance is seen to be a healthy response to the requirements and compulsions of workfare, then overcoming it is likely to have mixed effects. On the one hand, and as the above quote indicates, without protective resistance it may be easier to ‘get things done’ and engage with the support and learning opportunities on offer. On the other hand, such change on the part of service users is equivalent to complying with attempts to change attitudes and behaviour by 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. As the next section explores, there is another side to Charity A’s work which ensures that unemployed individuals have to ‘make do’ with the choices imposed upon them (Dobbins et al., 2013).
The challenges of choice

In addition to the personal relationships, equal treatment, support and encouragement that Charity A builds into its service provision, there is an element of challenge. 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 to employment. This posits staff and volunteers close to the aims and objectives of JC+ and the Work Programme and creates tensions with the ‘benevolent aims’ that are typical for third sector and voluntary organisations (Finn, 2011). Further tension is visible in the attempt to make service users’ attendance at Charity A voluntary. 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. Characterising attendance as voluntary is appropriate for individuals who attend of their own volition but misleading for those who have been sent by their JC+ advisor or Work Programme provider. The practice aims to give vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals a degree of choice about the provider of employment services they want to work with (Greve, 2009) but the threat of sanctions or conditionality by ‘the system’ is likely to undermine attempts to achieve this aim (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). This highlights overlapping responsibilities as well as potentially conflicting approaches between JC+, Work Programme and other providers (Finn, 2011).

In an attempt to counter the confusion caused by conflicting demands and requirements Charity A engages service users via their ‘model of choice’. This is a very loose philosophy, which aims to develop service users’ capabilities and options. It is based on ‘voluntary’ attendance, a ‘support and challenge’ attitude on the part of staff and a degree of choice about the content of services (Greve, 2009). Service users can thus opt into and out of aspects of the provision of courses (e.g. which classes, whether to take the exam, try a practice lab) and the content of courses, where differentiated tasks may be undertaken depending on 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. It could be part of the information required to determine what an individual jobseeker has reason to value (Muffels and Headey, 2013) and therefore a foundation for developing capability.

*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)

It is questionable, however, whether staff help service users make decisions or influence what decisions are made via the process of ‘wringing it out’. The socially embedded way in which choices are made (Lewis and Giullari, 2005) are especially problematic for vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals because they are shaped by (a lack of) power and inequality (Walby, 2012). It is likely that the choices arrived at are not voluntary but based on adaptive preferences (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005) dependent on what is likely to be possible (Walby, 2012). As a result of the relationships with staff, and the belief that they are likely to know better, the personalised nature of the provision may make it more likely that choices are adapted and pragmatic (Dobbins *et al.*, 2014). There are further issues with the way in which decision making is encouraged when there is a lack of real choice.

During observation, groups discussed complicating factors that impacted on their ability to make choices about potential jobs, including health problems, caring responsibilities, anxiety issues and lack of employment experience. The local labour market and the constraints it imposes (especially in low or unskilled occupations) is a further consideration (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012). In response to this range of issues, Charity A staff in job-search or ‘Introduction to Universal
Jobs Match’ sessions encouraged 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 designed 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\(^v\). This might be considered a pragmatic approach but has considerable consequences for the issue of choice if one assumes that the first and second preferences are unlikely to result in employment opportunities. The third category is equivalent to an obligatory exercise of choice (Blank, 2009). Jobs that are considered as ‘doable’, once identified as such, become a compulsion, as non-take up of a ‘chosen’ job opportunity results in sanctions. The number of job applications required by JC+ is thus likely to 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. What has not been considered by the capabilities approach is what happens when the options available to an individual are restricted to involuntary choices within a framework dominated by the obligation to make choices.

Opening up the discussion about involuntary choice, inferior alternatives and obligatory exercising of choice may merely mask the various ways in which the most vulnerable groups are denied choice. Vulnerable and long-term unemployed individuals with significant barriers to employment are given conflicting messages about their options. On the one hand, the marketised approach to employment support relies on consumer choice, which in the case of unemployed individuals is expressed, for example, in their interest in certain employment opportunities and may be consolidated in a claimant commitment. This would, technically speaking, fulfil the first of the two conditions for labour market policy and success, i.e. the freedom of the individual to choose what they want to do (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). On the other hand, however, the system underlying JC+, the Work Programme and other providers does not allow for deviation from approved choices. The means for an individual to achieve their ambitions – Bonvin and Orton’s (2009) second condition – are not
provided. Employment support thus removes choice from individuals and replaces them with options that benefit the macro-political objectives that lie at the core of UK employment policy. In effect, even a charitable organisation aiming to support this group cannot protect, or hide the fact that available choices are dictated to individuals if not removed entirely.

Conclusion

This paper considered the issue of choice as it applies to a group of long-term and vulnerable unemployed individuals attending Charity A’s employment support provision. Choice is an important component of the UK’s marketized approach and, in theory, should apply to the provision of employment services. However, 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 Work Programme providers. Service users at Charity A seemed to use protective resistance against this ‘system’ to maintain their self-esteem. The work undertaken on building relationships and helping establish service users’ capabilities are, at first sight, positive steps to overcome protective resistance and encourage engagement in the process of re-/employment. Considering the constraints of the demand-side orientation of employment support that the charity works within, even benevolent attempts to encourage service users to think about possible or ‘doable’ jobs ultimately end up in further compulsion. The evidence presented in this paper therefore highlights the contradiction between the marketization of employment support – ostensibly based on a competitive system that should include choice – and any possibilities for choice on the part of vulnerable, long-term unemployed individuals. Providers are mainly driven by financial compulsion and macro-economic considerations in terms of the employment rate. Even if third sector and voluntary organisation have additional aims and values, this is the system they work within. The institutional framework of choice (Blank, 2009) as established in the UK employment support provision does not provide for the range of needs and requirements of service users who are at times dealing with fundamental barriers to employment.
Despite a broad range of providers that form part of the institutional framework of choice for unemployed individuals, including benevolent third sector organisations, the opportunities for choice are therefore limited. The broader framework in which service providers operate can be characterised as a hostile economic, social and ideological environment. As variations in lifestyles and values are not permissible, it is impossible to pay attention to the importance of the value attached to any choices (Sen, 1991), including the value of other activities, contributions and commitments than employment (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). This must also raise questions about the usefulness of the capabilities approach to explore the issue of choice for marginalised groups. The approach does highlight what choice would look like, for example in application to labour market policy and success (Bonvin and Orton, 2009). Theoretically, there should be the option of free choice, even if such choice is bounded (Lewis and Giulari, 2005). In a marketized context, it is important to differentiate what kind of dependencies exist between individuals and the broader framework within which choice is exercised. If choice is merely a perception of choice (Walby, 2012) then the capabilities approach needs reconsidering. In particular, there is limited theoretical and empirical understanding of what happens to capabilities in situations in which there are only negative choices, adaptive preferences and obligatory exercising of choice. The current study suggests that there is benefit in the protective resistance that service users develop but in-depth studies into the individual and social consequences of long-term withdrawal into such protective states are required for a more comprehensive assessment.

There are parallel considerations for policy developments. If a workfarist regime of compulsion and sanctions to achieve compliance results in protective resistance this may be counterproductive in terms of unemployed individuals’ lack of engagement in the development of their employment opportunities and in addressing underlying barriers. This is precisely the issue that the mandatory element of the Work Programme intends to address. Yet the small proportion of Work Programme participants who move into employment rather than back to the JC+ suggests that the rigidity of imposing values and choices is not a constructive approach. Equally, tailored provision alone does not guarantee engagement and a good relationship with individuals on the programme. A two-
fold reorientation is therefore called for. First, employment support cannot purely be based on macro-political consideration and needs to, secondly, recognise that the service delivered deals with individuals who have their own values and barriers. A ‘one-size fits all’ programme is therefore unlikely to be the solution, making research into the diversity in needs and requirements on the part of vulnerable service users, and possible corresponding provision a necessity.

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References


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


3 For Charity A the funding problems resulted in closure shortly after this research was conducted.

4 Universal Jobmatch is an online database to search and apply for job openings and record job search activities.

5 The next, intended research phase was to interview service users. The closure of Charity A prevented continuation of the research.

6 The JC+ travel requirement is 90 minutes each way (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014).

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**Author biography**

Vanessa Beck is Lecturer in Employment Studies at the University of Leicester School of Business. Her research focuses on unemployment and redundancy, including into those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and individuals with multiple and complex barriers to employment. She also researches older workers, extending working lives and the impact of changing retirement regulations. Her work has been published in a number of journals including Employee Relations, Management Learning and Work Employment and Society.