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DILEMMAS OF LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT: TALKING ABOUT CONSTRAINT, SELF- DETERMINATION AND THE FUTURE

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Abstract

This is a paper on how young long-term unemployed people manage their identity as job seekers in semi-structured interviews about their experiences of unemployment. The paper draws on discursive psychology to highlight some of the patterns of common sense reasoning about their predicament in the context of UK's third wave neoliberalist welfare provision and philosophy of 'personalised conditionality'. In contrast to studies that tend to consider the individual psychological impact of unemployment, particularly with regard to mental health issues, or resilience, this paper shows how a discursive approach can be a fruitful avenue to understanding how people account for their experiences of unemployment. The analysis shows how the thesaurus of everyday psychological states is used as a rhetorical tool for managing accountability for actions and motivations. The situated uses of psychological states allow speakers to engage with the tension between constraint and self-determination, and that between a 'desirable' (based on institutional priorities) and individually 'desired' future (based on subjective 'choice' and 'preference'). In describing their experiences of unemployment, participants talk into being the contradictory themes lodged at the heart of neoliberal ideologies of employment.

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Introduction

This paper starts from the observation that there is little research into how unemployment is experienced and its impact on identity. Much of the literature tends to look at the psychological impact of unemployment (Delaney, Egan, & O'Connell, 2011; Carroll, 2007), at correlations between being unemployed and mental health issues (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005) and developing resilience (Moorhouse & Caltabiano, 2007; Gauntlet & White, 2011). The drive to consider the correlation between long-term unemployment and mental health issues or resilience focuses predominantly on the relationship between psychological variables. The consequences of long-term unemployment are considered to be the reflection of the inner psychological world of individuals. Although not denying the existence and long term effects of long-term unemployment on mental health, and/or link with resilience, an exclusive focus on psychological variables, can lead to two kinds of problems: first, the psychologization of some of the issues that people face, and second, a minimization of the social and political context in which unemployment is experienced and the actual ways in which people talk about it.

Although one can find studies that explore people's experiences of unemployment, especially around issues of dignity and rights (Neville, 2008), studies looking at the views of people receiving benefits (Dwyer, 1998; Rolfe, 2012), young people's views of unemployment in the context of citizenship (Gibson, 2011) or employment opportunities for women (Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987), to date, much of the psychological and sociological research tends to place concerns with unemployment *within* the psychological make-up of the (unemployed) person. The general view is that the 'problem' lies not with society, but with the unemployed individual. The most common assumption is that there is something 'wrong' with these young people, and that this state of affairs cannot continue; it needs to be 'fixed'. The media portrays young unemployed people as 'unmotivated', 'lazy', 'generation on the dole'. Public opinion polls do not paint a positive picture either.

In order to understand in more depth how long-term unemployment is

experienced, and to feed more directly into ongoing debates on support services, it is necessary to examine not just the psychological consequences of long-term unemployment and/or its public perception, but also how it is talked about by unemployed people themselves. A crucial dimension that is missing from public sphere and academic accounts is the dimension of self-presentation by unemployed young people themselves. Furthermore, since unemployment is by nature 'political', a focus on the actual ways in which people talk about unemployment would demonstrate how the politics of unemployment provide the context for how people shape their subjectivity/identity as 'long-term unemployed'.

Data used in this paper come from a study designed to explore and help develop interventions/support for long-term young unemployed people aged 18-24. The project developed out of consultation meetings with the Department of Work and Pensions in the UK and focused on improving the service provision for long term young unemployed people who were perceived to be 'hard to reach', disenfranchised' and, for the most part, 'unemployable'. The project grew out of a partnership with a training organisation in a socially deprived area of London with high incidence of youth unemployment. The study's main aim was to devise 'support protocols' for young unemployed people and their 'advisers' (the name given to personnel hired to work with them and facilitate their job searching activities).

If one wants to understand fully the individual and social consequences of what some researchers call 'welfare rationalities' related to unemployment (e.g., Harris, 2001), one needs to delve deeper into individual and social discourses of and around (un)employment, and their identity construction function in the context of a framework of government-led 'back-to-work' support. In order to achieve this aim one needs to focus on the language used by long-term unemployed people themselves, and incorporate into the existing theoretical and analytical apparatus approaches sensitive to the use of language and social organization of talk.

This paper makes the case for a discursive psychological approach as a stepping-stone to building a more secure empirical foundation for deeper insight into how long-term unemployment is actually experienced. As an approach that conceptualizes and analyses 'experience' as linguistically constituted in and through discourse, discursive psychology is well suited to addressing how people experience their (un)employment situation. As Potter

argues, in discursive psychology, experience is treated as ‘as a loose term that collects together knowledge, feelings, emotions, thoughts, understandings and other items from the psychological thesaurus’ (2012, p. 583). This paper argues that, in order to describe what it means to be long-term unemployed one does not need to ‘move to a phenomenological realm supposedly existing behind the talk’ (ibid., p. 582). One should not attempt to read through accounts to ‘experiences’ or subjectivities, but, instead, *look* for experience in the social organization and action-orientation of talk about long-term unemployment. Before introducing, in more detail, the analytic approach, and discursive analysis, the next section will consider briefly the context of welfare provision in the UK.

Neoliberalism and welfare provision: the emergence of 'conditionality' discourses

At a time when many western societies have a long-standing tradition as welfare states, one can identify what Rose and Miller (1992, p. 191) have called a ‘mode of government ... constituted by a political rationality embodying certain principles and ideals, and is based upon a particular conception of the nature of society and its inhabitants’. One of the most recent political rationality of the welfare state is that constructed around the principle of ‘no rights without responsibilities’, a particular version of ‘welfare rationality’ based on the idea of ‘mutual obligation’ of individual and state. In the UK, in the mid 90s, New Labour introduced the idea of ‘no rights without responsibilities’ in the form of the ‘Flexible New Deal’ (FND).¹ At the core of FND lies the principle of ‘conditionality, the idea that in order to be allowed to receive benefit one needs to show evidence of job seeking behaviour. The principle of ‘conditionality’ holds the view that eligibility to the basic right of entitlement to welfare should be dependent on individuals agreeing to meet compulsory duties or patterns of behaviour (Deacon, 1994; Dwyer, 2004; Neville, 2008). Non-compliance with the framework results in benefit sanctions (DWP, 2008).

‘Back-to-work’ programmes are a form of service provision that is used to enforce ‘conditionality’. Embedded within such programmes is the promise of personalised support for jobseekers. Attendance to ‘back-to-work’ programmes is mandatory, and the unemployed person is ‘supported’ in this

process by specially trained advisors (DWP, 2012a, b). The ‘jobseeker’ and the ‘training provider’ are jointly responsible for the ‘success’ of the ‘back-to-work’ process. In order to formalise and centralise the role of the ‘personal adviser’ the notion of ‘personalised conditionality’ was introduced (Gregg, 2008; DWP, 2012a). Gregg’s (2008) ‘vision’ for ‘personalised conditionality’ is a good example. Gregg sets out five main objectives for the ‘jobseeker’. Virtually everyone claiming benefits and not in work should: a) be required to engage in activity that will help them to move towards, and then into employment; b) have an advisor with whom they will be able to plan and agree a route back to work; c) be obliged to act on the steps that they agree will help themselves have a clear understanding for the expectations placed upon them (and why) and what the consequences are for failing to meet these; and d) be able to access a wider range of personalised support on the basis of need not what benefit they are on.

From the initial vision of ‘personalised conditionality’ steady moves toward harsher versions of ‘conditionality’ have been made. One of the more recent reports of a conservative think-tank justifies the introduction of harsher measures by appealing to ‘public interest’ (Doctor & Oakley, 2011). The introduction of the mandatory ‘Work Experience programme’, including the Future Jobs Fund and Community Task Force (which offer temporary jobs and work experience opportunities, and enforces sanctions) (DWP, 2011) is considered ‘the most cost effective way of moving large numbers of claimant customers into work more quickly’ (Doctor & Oakley, 2011).² Advocates of ‘conditionality’ believe that it facilitates active search for work, reduces dependency and increases movement into work. Conditionality principles clarify the rights and responsibilities of individuals receiving state support. in a nutshell, conditionality principles are grounded in the idea that only those that ‘take charge’ of their lives are seen as responsible. This has produced a climate where government can shift responsibility and blame onto claimants who are commonly blamed for the predicament they find themselves in (Dwyer, 2004; Pierson, 1996).³

Critics of ‘conditionality’ have expressed concerns that vulnerable people may suffer disproportionate financial hardship or are pushed into unsuitable and short-lived employment. Also, the use of sanctions is perceived as undermining a fair and equitable principle of welfare (Manning, 2005; Griggs & Bennett, 2009; Griggs & Evans, 2010). In the context of the current

economic and political landscape of the UK, what emerges from accounts critiquing 'conditionality' principles is a complex picture of the constraints and challenges that young people have to face in an environment that is designed to purportedly meet their needs, but which, in practice, seems to stifle their genuine attempts to 'get a job', and their 'search' for an acceptable identity in the job market.⁴ Research that explores the effectiveness of unemployment services shows that there is little evidence that 'back-to-work' programs work (Dolphin, Lawton, & McNeil, 2011). It is argued that the personal advisers are under-trained and ill equipped to deal with the complex problems presented by long-term unemployed people (McNeil, 2009).⁵

Analytic approach

DP is a broadly constructionist approach that starts from the assumption that individuals construct objective, as well as subjective features of the world/reality through the intermediary of descriptions they use in talk (Edwards, 2006b; Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007; Augoustinos & Tileagă, 2012). Discursive psychologists focus their study on the subtle, complex, context-sensitive nature of talk and its orientation to social action. People use language to *do* things, to construct versions of the world depending upon the function of their talk. People's talk is not 'just' talk. Discursive psychologists are interested in the rhetorical and argumentative context of descriptions, and seek to identify how people justify their stance and criticize competing views (Billig, 1996). This type of methodology also allows for the identification of prevailing political and social discourses and how people manage these in the context of constructing and managing their subjectivity (Tileagă, 2010, 2011). As discursive psychologists have argued, it is better to treat talk in terms of its role in interaction rather than trying to characterize it using notions such as 'attitudes' or 'opinions' (Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Discursive psychology goes beyond the semantic and grammatical levels of linguistic analysis. It focuses instead on the descriptions that are offered by people when they are invited to account for themselves and others.

In this paper we turn to the analysis of 'being unemployed' as an identity that needs to be managed within the constraints offered by the set-up of the welfare state and 'back-to-work' programmes. The sample group were

twenty young unemployed people who were starting a thirteen week mandatory FND training programme at a West London training centre. Young people are sent to the training from their local Job Centre Plus after 12 months of continuous unemployment. All participants had been unemployed for more than one year and were aged between 19 and 24; gender 60% male, 40% female; ethnicity was varied, participants identified themselves as mixed race, black British, black African, Asian, white British/ European. Semi-structured interviews were used to give young people an opportunity to talk about their experiences of long-term unemployment. The aim of the interview was to describe their psychosocial experience of long-term unemployment, and reveal some of patterns of common sense reasoning around unemployment. The key question that guided the design and conduct of the semi-structured interviews was how long-term young unemployed people manage the tension between 'choice' and 'preference', and a regime(s) of 'conditionality'?

We treated the encounter between the research interviewer and young people as a delicate accomplishment that required careful attention to how talk is organized. In this, as in other contexts, such as news interviews (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), teachers talking about bullying (Hepburn & Brown, 2001), or interviews with majority group members about ethnic minorities (Tileagă, 2005), the form of the answer is occasioned by the form of the question. In order to understand the quandaries of the young long-term unemployed, one needs to understand what is going on in the interview. This is perhaps a good example where the research interview is 'flooded' with a social science agenda (see Potter & Hepburn, 2005, 2012).

The interaction depends at least partly on accomplished intersubjective agreement that there is something to talk about: the various types of difficulties that young people encounter when trying to get a job. By virtue of its design, theoretical and analytic concerns, the present study has *collected* young people under the category of 'young long-term unemployed'. Yet 'long-term unemployed' is not only the research category that has been used to recruit participants. The category also reflects a personal, institutional and political 'reality'. It is the basis for participants negotiating a particular story of hardship. It is both the position *from which* young people speak, and the position they speak *under*. The category 'long-term unemployed' is the tool, lever, which both interviewer and interviewee use to derive a set of inferences, assumptions, about personal and social arrangements.⁶

The young people (the interviewees) were projected as having full access to, and rights to, their experience with unemployment and the organisation. When the interviewer asks questions he or she presupposes a number of assumptions about interviewees. According to Heritage (2010, p. 47), ‘all questions embody presuppositions about the states of affairs to which they are directed’. Interviewees can confirm/disconfirm presuppositions, affiliate or disaffiliate with the stance presupposed or made explicit by the question, or the relevance of assumptions mobilized in the question. If one conceives of the research interview as an unfolding of question and answer sequences, one should conceive of the speakers as positioning themselves in what Heritage and Raymond (in press) have called, a ‘multidimensional space of rights and obligations’. In this study, the questions of the interviewer embodied presuppositions about a lot of things, including, but not limited to, the psychological state of the interviewee, the value that they may attach to the ‘help’ they are receiving from the organisation, how they imagine their future, and so on. Young people had to tackle the generic problem of how to explain their predicament to a seemingly sympathetic interviewer.

As the analysis will hopefully show, young long-term unemployed people portray themselves as responsible thinking citizens, who are well aware of the constraints put before them and aware of the narrow choices available to them in the current economic climate. They orient their talk to their personal situation and institutional context in which they find themselves. They locate their conundrum in objective arrangements, but also in subjective conditions.

Constraint and psychological states

One of the crucial features of recounting their experience of unemployment was the product of describing, formulating, defining a certain psychological state. In the majority of our interviews we have found instances where the description or formulation of a psychological state was an integral part of, or was tied to, accounting for constraint. Extracts 1, 2 and 3, below, are examples of that.

Extract 1

- 32 SC What I'm getting from you is you would have liked
33 in terms of support, is something that would be
34 tailored to your individual circumstance
35 (2.4)
36 Bob it's like, I mean I talk to my advisers (.hh) who
37 have long (.hhhh) deep conversations about stuff
38 and at the end of it (..) yeh um (..) I got an
39 interview for you at the end of the
40 week and in a week and it'll be yeh it'll be OK (.) OK yeh I
41 come in in a suit and everything and then they
42 will tell me its with a company where I have to
43 clean trains and it's like please I don't want to
44 do this. I don't want to sound ungrateful but
45 it's doing that, but I would be angry I don't want
46 to do it, don't make me do it, I don't want to do
47 it, do you know what I [mean=
48 SC [I can understand that]
49 Bob =it's frustrating.

At lines 32-34 the interviewer reformulates a previous complaint related to tailoring help in finding a job to individual circumstances. As argued earlier, the notion of 'personalised support' lies at the core of the 'regime' of conditionality that informs the 'programme' in which these young people participate. Yet, this promise of personalised support is not always kept or experienced as such. The reformulation is recipient-designed, displaying an orientation to the co-participant to the interaction (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). 'What I am getting from you is' is the preface to signalling that the story/complaint of the interviewee is on the record, has registered with the interviewer. 'You would have liked in terms of support, is something that would be tailored to your individual circumstance' acknowledges the feeling that accompanied the complaint, and the subjective 'liked' indexes a particular psychological state. Its role is to position the issue (and the discussion around it) as a matter of personal, subjective reaction and preference. In the same construction with the modal verb *would* it introduces an implicit contrast between the actual state of affairs and a more desirable state of affairs based on personal preference (for other uses of 'would', see Edwards, 2006a). The

reformulation is done in a declarative stance, and does not receive immediate uptake from the interviewee.

The uptake, which eventually comes at lines 36, places the conversation in the direction of the tension between generic support and subjective want. Bob indicates his experiential access to the problem. He speaks from experience. By recounting his experience with the service, the interviewee can construe the genuineness of his predicament, his reaction, and relationship to, the institutional set-up. In his story at lines 36-43, he operates a series of rhetorical contrasts between promises and expectations. His description (turning up in his suit, etc.) conjures the image of respectability and responsibility ('work identity') and is contrasted with his construction of the job offered - cleaning trains (metaphor for menial work).

The emphasised 'please' followed by 'I don't want to do this' at lines 43-44 (and later lines 46-47), constructs the speaker's account as a plea backed up by the construction of a particular psychological stance. Note how it is formulated as 'reported speech' and mobilized as a psychological reaction. In doing so, Bob gives authenticity and veracity to his description. Holt (2000) argues that reported speech is common to complaints followed by an assessment by the second speaker (note the interviewer's 'I can understand that' at line 48).

The particular psychological state that the interviewer's reformulation has projected (personal *preference*) is expressed here by the interviewee in terms of a qualitatively different psychological state (subjective *want*). Bob uses a psychological state to do an assessment of self and situation, and provide the grounds for 'refusal'. 'I don't want to sound ungrateful ... but I would be angry...', at line 44-45, and 'it's frustrating' at line 49, are emotion descriptions used to build the reasonableness of the speaker's actions, and undermine the reasonableness of the advisers' offer. The first part, 'I don't want to sound ungrateful', is a way to *claim* 'sincerity' and 'independence' as the basis of what the person is saying, on occasions when the speaker might have a stake in the matter (cf. Edwards & Fasulo, 2006). As Edwards (1999) has shown, emotion discourse can be used flexibly to mobilize oppositions and contrasts between different narrative versions, and manage accountability for a certain course of action (i.e., refusing a job). If 'ungrateful' places accountability for actions within the subjectivity of the person, 'anger' and 'frustration' point to a source that is located elsewhere.

'Anger' or 'frustration' are not simply descriptions of internal cognitive/emotional states, but rather are discursive tools to mobilize a contrast between the institutional work of advisers (the 'offer') and the subjective want of the long-term unemployed. 'Anger' and 'frustration' construct 'reactions *as* reactions, and *as* emotional ones' (Edwards, 1999, p. 277, emphasis in original) motivated by the circumstances, rather than, a biased view or attitude, or vested interest. The objective details of the 'offer' ('cleaning trains') is portrayed as the psychological trigger of dissatisfaction. As a consequence, the potential problem with refusal does not lie with the person, but rather with the nature and type of job offered. In this context, refusing an offer of a job is justified by appealing to a psychologically temporary, rather than enduring, state of mind. Gratitude, anger, frustration, are all part of everyday emotional thesaurus of feelings. This thesaurus can be mobilized to accomplish various social actions. By drawing upon emotional thesaurus, the issue of thwarted subjective wants is produced as a 'legitimate' complainable matter (Pomerantz, 1986).

Most of the young people we have interviewed found themselves in a situation where they did not want to be seen as refusing employment, but nonetheless wishing to retain a sense of independence and freedom over the choices they made. Extract 2 is a further example of that. The extract comes from an interview with a young woman who has been unemployed for twelve months. She has been talking with the interviewer about her unemployment history and the difficulties she was having finding a job.

Extract 2

72	SC	Was it hard (1.2) can you tell me (.)
73	Rima	I'm getting interviews, um (1.5) but I'm just not
74		getting anywhere in the interviews (0.6) I've been for
75		loads of interviews and I think um (0.5) the fact that
76		even (...) council now,
77		before there was a time when I been looking I
78		applied for so many in (...) council, but there was a
79		time when they were accepting loads of applications,
80		but now at the moment they cutting down on loads of
81		jobs as well (0.6) so I've heard from (...) council
82		their reassessing each department and cutting jobs
83		down that they already got, cutting them down so the
84		ones advertising are very limited (.hhh) so I'm just

85		finding it hard to look for something that I want to
86		do.
87		Uh hmm (0.5) You seem it sounds to me that you
88	SC	have got quite a good [idea]=
89		
90	Rima	[yeh]
91	SC	=of what it is [you] want to do
92	Rima	[yeah](0.6) I want to find a secure job because I
93		don't want to just go into something just for the sake
94		of having a job like something like that I'm not
95		really happy with and
96		I don't enjoy doing (0.4) such as a receptionist

One can notice how at line 72, the interviewer uses a construction that includes a formulation of the interviewee's psychological state: 'was it hard'. 'Can you tell me' places the onus on an account from the interviewee, and subtly manages the epistemic asymmetry between the interviewer's access to, and rights to, the interviewee's psychological state. It manages the epistemic relationship between interviewer and interviewee by treating the interviewee as the 'authority' over their own feelings (Hepburn, 2004).

'Can you tell me' can be heard as a sympathetic account, an affiliative move. The ground is set for the interviewee to confirm or disconfirm the psychological state. In the context of explaining why it is so 'hard' for her to get work (lines 74-85), Rima unpacks the tension between objective conditions of employment and subjective 'want'. Her story ends at lines 85-87 with 'I'm just finding it hard to look for something that I want to do'. The interviewer's 'hard' is confirmed, and qualified at the same: the difficulty lies in finding work that corresponds to a subjective, not objective, constraint. The use of 'want' indexes the personal, reasoned, motivated, commitment to a course of action. It indexes what some might call 'intrinsic' rather than 'extrinsic' motivation. As in extract 1, Rima is managing the tension between compliance (having to comply) and independent choice based on a subjective psychological state. At line 88-91, the interviewer introduces a formulation of her motivation, punctuated with acknowledgment tokens, in overlap, at lines 90 and 92.

As Childs (2012) has shown, formulating 'wants' in interaction can follow a previous formulation of someone's actions or motivations. The function of 'I want to find a secure job' is to formulate an alternative

(subjective) sense of agency, opposed to a normative sense of agency ('just go into something just for the sake of having a job') (ll. 92-94).

The operative contrast here is between 'finding a secure job' and 'just having a job'. The contrast points to two different ideologies sourced in personal and institutional motivations: the former is long term, whereas the latter short-term. The contrast is further qualified at lines 95-96, with the use of psychological state constructions 'not really *happy* with' and 'don't *enjoy* doing', followed by an actual example of a job: 'receptionist'. The situated uses of emotion words allow the speaker to construct contrasting versions of accountability, and contrasting motivations for actions.

Extract 3

62	SC	What kind of things do you think you need to have to be
63		like to be job ready?
64		(1.8)
65	Tim	CVs are always up to date, always up to date CV always
66		has to be up to date, er (1.2) always got your shirt and tie,
67		always got your suit, shoes so you know when someone
68		calls you for a job the day before you know <u>yeah</u> your
69		ready, got all my things, you know what I'm saying (0.8)
70		You know wanting to work that's what job ready I think
71		[means]
72		
73	SC	[Wanting to work?]
74	Tim	You want to work like your ready to work; you be ready to
75		work you're ready to go to an interview any time any day,
76		that's what it kind
77		of means
78		(0.5)
79	SC	And do you think you're job ready?
80	Tim	Yeah, I'd love to be in work rather than coming
81		here

In extract 3, the question of the interviewer is deployed as a way to test the interviewee's views on the matter. The question is delivered in an environment where there is a relevant and highly salient category membership of the interviewee as a person seeking employment. The notion of being 'job ready' is another term for what in lay terms we would describe using words like

commitment, motivation, and dedication. Being 'job ready' is one of the key assumptions of the programme in which these young people are enrolled. Compliance is predicated on being 'job ready'.

The interviewer's question seems to assume that there is only one, unambiguous meaning to the phrase, and that one can list the various features of being 'job ready'. This is how the question is heard (note the detailed description of the various aspects involved at lines 65-71) with a caveat at line 71 ('You know wanting to work that's what job ready I think means'). The caveat at line 71 introduces an implicit distinction between objective aspects of being 'job ready' (CVs up-to-date, suits, ties) and subjective aspects such as 'wanting to work'.

The question invites Tim to consider explicitly what his expectations are, what he sees as his own responsibilities in the process, and so on. Yet, 'wanting' to do something, used to qualify being 'job ready', seems to puzzle the interviewer (line 73). The interviewer's follow-up treats lines 71-72 as some sort of unexpected answer, and therefore further 'inspectable' by the interviewer.

The introduction of a subjective psychological state seems to upset the balance of expected aspects of job readiness (objective aspects). 'Wanting' to do something is in this case *dispositional*, that is, it indexes a readiness to behave in a particular way (take up a job). This is a different version of 'readiness' to the scripted, institutional version of being 'ready for work' (up-to-date CV, suit, and so on). After a brief account at lines 74-77, the interviewer introduces a more direct question at line 79: 'and do you think you're job ready?' There is a shift from the initial question asking the interviewee to identify general aspects of job 'readiness' to inviting a personal account. This is responded to in subjective terms: 'Yeah, I'd love to be in work rather than coming here' (ll. 80-81). The use of 'would' and 'love to' are ways of managing agency by expressing a wish as a potential/likely scenario of action. The statement also implies reasonableness and awareness of external constraints. The operative contrast here is between 'being in work' (freedom) and 'coming here' (constraint).

Extracts 1, 2 and 3 show how formulating psychological states can be powerful rhetorical devices for managing accountability for actions and motivations. Emotion talk performs social actions. The emotional thesaurus of everyday talk provides the 'potential for rhetorical opposites and contrasts' (Edwards, 1999, p. 278). These accounts implicitly point to two problematic

dimensions of personalised conditionality: the lack of choice, and the tension between normative compliance framework instituted by the welfare state, and subjective want, as alternative normative framework underpinning 'choice' (freedom of choice). Speakers formulate psychological states, and use these to construct a justification to behave in a particular way. The situated uses of emotion words allow the speaker to construct contrasting versions, and contrasting motivations for actions, like refusing a job, and engage with the tension between objective arrangements and subjective feelings, between compliance, and self-determination/freedom of choice.

Imagined futures

It can be argued that in a context such as this one, both interviewer and interviewee have their own 'territories of knowledge' (Heritage, 2012). Although knowledgeable about the situation that the youngsters find themselves in, the interviewer has little epistemic access to the interviewee's 'experience of unemployment' domain. The interviewer positions herself in a relatively unknowing position by inviting a reflective commentary from someone who is projected as knowledgeable about their own experience. Interviewer and interviewee can be seen 'interlocked in a reflective exercise' (Sarangi, 2010, p. 252). This is no more the case then when the issue of the 'future' is being discussed. Uncertainty about one's situation is a pervasive feature of these programmes. Uncertainty about the future, rather than certainty, is the norm (see extracts 4 and 5 below).

Extract 4

100	SC	So when you say career it's quite an interesting word
101		(0.3) when you say career you say you want a
102		career what do you mean by that (0.5) What do you
103		envisage happen?
104		(0.8)
105	Bob	It's very difficult because obviously I have
106		studied musical management for three years so I know about it
107		and I know that unless you are going to be a big entrepreneur
108		you're not
109		going to make any money,

110 that's what I've learnt and I find that very difficult to get into
111 (0.8) Probably something I will look into in the
112 future, but until then it was just a case of something with a future
113 something with progression (0.2) do you
114 know what I mean (0.5)
115 working in offices is good for some but
116 working in Nando's in a factory and certain things they were
117 offering wasn't suited to me (0.4) and I
118 know I am unemployed but I still (0.2) have a
119 choice sort of thing (0.4) Like I have been
120 offered a job now with Barclays.

In extract 4, the interviewer is probing on the meaning of the word 'career' used previously by Bob. The interviewer uses a reflective question that invites disclosure about the person's 'imagined' future (Antaki, Barnes, & Leudar, 2005). The interviewer treats Bob as having a stake in the available course of action (wanting a career). What is interesting that what triggered the interviewer's question is the reference to 'wanting' a career rather than 'having' or 'succeeding' in a career. Bob is invited to qualify his subjective involvement in his own imagined future. Bob is addressed in direct personal terms ('you') as a way to ask for the display of a personal stance.

Bob contrasts an 'ideal' ('big entrepreneur') and a 'realist' employment scenario (what can be *reasonably* achieved given the circumstances: 'just a case of something with a future, something with progression'). 'Just' indexes reasonableness, and points to the idea that the judgment has a rational/empirical basis (Weltman, 2001). At lines 115-117, Bob further qualifies what he means by 'something with a future': 'working in Nando's in a factory and certain things they were offering wasn't suited to me'. He operates a rhetorical contrast between the organizational offer (of employment) and personal expectations or motivations. 'Wasn't suited to me' personalises the accountable action of taking up a job, and acts as a *warrant* for refusal. This is followed by a direct expression of a dilemma of coercion and choice ('and I know I am unemployed but I still (0.2) have a choice sort of thing (0.4)') that underpins the conundrum most of the young people we spoke to had to resolve. 'I know I am unemployed' is a way to *claim* awareness of one's constraining situation tied to a specific category membership. The membership category 'unemployed' is both the position *from which* young people speak, and the position they speak

under. The category 'unemployed' is self-ascribed as well as ascribed by the state. It is a category embedding various rights, but also responsibilities, constraints, normative behaviours attached to the category.

In extract 5, 'what would you see ideally happening' and 'what would you like to happen' at lines 150-151 sets the issue of the 'future' as a scenario on the 'subject side' (Edwards, 2005, 2007). The first part is phrased in terms of subjective perception of the future, whereas the second part is phrased in terms of subjective preference. 'Ideally' invites an imagined scenario, theoretical rather than practical, whereas 'what would you like' highlights personal preference as an alternative, and relevant, dimension of choice (choosing a job, a career). The interviewer treats the interviewees as holding a special epistemic position with respect to their own predicament and (imagined) future.

Extract 5

- 150 SC What would you see ideally happening in the next few months
151 (0.5) what would you like to happen?
152 Sara In my dream world I would like to be rich (0.8)
153 seriously I would just like to have a job and
154 know that it's going to be a permanent after
155 Christmas thing I don't want something that's
156 just going to hire me for a few months and then
157 afterwards I'm going to be back in this position
158 (0.6) I mean I know there is quite a high chance that
159 that will be the situation but at the same
160 time (0.4) you know I would like to think I can
161 have a permanent (.) more permanent job even if I
162 go and look for other jobs and find something
163 else I still like to know that after Christmas
164 I've there's still that opportunity to have a
165 long term job and (0.2) it's down to me whether I
166 take it. Um (0.8) hopefully (.) in the next few
167 months I would have a job and be feeling like a
168 human.

Like Bob in extract 4, Sara shifts from an 'ideal' (but unrealistic) employment scenario ('In my dream world I would like to be rich') to a more 'realist' employment scenario ('I would just like to have a job and know that it's going to be a permanent after Christmas'). As previously argued, 'just' indexes

reasonableness in a context where subjective preference/wish might be seen to clash with the objective constraints of the 'job market'. At lines 158-161, a similar dilemma of coercion and choice is highlighted: 'I know there is quite a high chance that that will be the situation but at the same time (0.4) you know I would like to think I can have a permanent (.) more permanent job'. The issue of personal choice is, again, offered as the *preferred* alternative to 'objective' constraints: 'it's down to me whether I take it' (ll. 165-166). But there is more to this; personal choice is not limited to the contrast between personal wish and objective constraint. Having a 'choice' is tied to *identity* transformation: 'feeling like a human' (ll. 167-168).

It is usually argued that the philosophy of 'conditionality' places constraints on people and determines how they are treated and how they construct their identity in the context of 'being' unemployed. Yet, as these extracts show, in practice, discourses of conditionality are qualified by the particular ideological value of freedom of choice. As our analysis has shown, the philosophy of 'conditionality' is not experienced as an abstract set of rules or values. Our participants' philosophy is a *practical* philosophy that stems from and goes back to real life concerns, and takes into account both subjective wishes as well as objective constraints. One can think of this as a practical dilemma. As Billig et al. (1988, p. 144) have argued, 'dilemmatic aspects do not only concern contrary ways of talking about the world; they exist in practice as well as in discourse ... dilemmatic aspects can give rise to actual dilemmas in which choices have to be made'. Long term young unemployed people have to make decisions not only about how to talk about their lives, but also how to live their own lives, and how to envisage/imagine the tension between constraint and personal wishes. The value of self-determination and freedom of choice can help young people 'imagine, articulate, and realize futures that challenge those prescribed by dominant discourses' (Dunmire, 2005, p. 483).

The visions of the future presented in extracts 4 and 5 are rational and grounded in general, but also particular circumstances. The future is the site where change is possible. On one hand, the coercive nature of the programme constrain the kind of future that can be imagined, on the other hand, personal agency and freedom of choice, can tilt the balance in favour of the person. For institutions in charge of reinsertion/redeployment of young unemployed people in the job market, managing the future, or expectations of young unemployed people is linked predominantly to managing what future realities are

‘desirable’. In these accounts, one can notice a tension between the ‘desired’ (the subjective aspect) and the ‘desirable’ (the objective, institutionally managed expectations), a tension between a normative future (the institutional promise) and a contingent future (the vision of an individual endowed with wishes and desires). Contingent futures are based on subjective choice and preference; normative futures are based on institutional priorities. The tension between normative and contingent futures underlies the predicament of long term unemployed young people. For the majority of long term unemployed young people the future (getting a job) is the ‘sublime object’ of desire; always an expectation, but practically, as yet, not attained.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has argued that researching the language used by unemployed people can shift the focus towards the study of the actual dilemmas, quandaries of the unemployed. A discursive approach can show *how*, what some researchers have called ‘neoliberal rationalities’, work to construct ‘docile bodies’ rather than ‘active citizens’ (cf. Hartman, 2005). It can also help researchers uncover the crucial dilemma at the core of neoliberal welfare rationality. On one hand this emphasizes individual freedom, agency (as opposed to coercive compliance), on other hand, it reproduces coercive compliance; it stifles individual freedom and agency by identifying and promoting ‘conditionality’ regimes.

Long-term unemployed young people are aware of the opportunities and constraints of employment in a neoliberal world. They are able to generalize, as well as particularize, their experience of unemployment. They do not promote a simple view of their predicament/situation, and their place and responsibility. Instead, their talk (and thinking) is commonly characterized by a complex, multifaceted, view or views, and, sometimes, opposing *topoi*. In describing their experiences, they talk into being the contradictory themes lodged at the heart of neoliberal ideology of welfare. Their responses are not standard, or clichéd, they do not fit a neat pattern of talk. Their answers to the interviewer’s questions do not spill out common places, but their discourse shows the awareness of contrary themes that characterize dilemmatic thinking (Billig et al., 1988). Whether they are talking about their own situation, or about how things are in general, they are also talking about the *ordinariness* of an

exceptional situation (being without a job for a very long time). Their ways of talking about constraints and lack of opportunities involve expectations related to subjectivity: personal wishes, wants, freedom of choice. Conversely, their ways of talking about their wishes and wants involve expectations related to constraints and coercion. The language of wants and freedom of choice includes within itself the language of obligation and constraint. As the former is being articulated, the latter is laid bare.

Participants' discourse draws upon a lay psychological leitmotif which stresses the importance of subjectivity, the freedom of the person, and its wishes, and wants. The discursive management of subjectivity cohabits with the demands of social requirements. Participants perceive themselves as agents of their own potential future transformation, with the associated freedom of agency. Yet, simultaneously, participants also see themselves under the pressure of social constraint. Participants' quandaries reflect the social, material and ideological conditions under which contemporary British society operates. Other socio-cultural contexts will have their own.

As the analysis has shown, one of the crucial features of recounting their experience of unemployment is the product of describing, formulating, defining a certain psychological state. One might argue that formulating or defining a certain psychological state, and the subjective expression of wishes and wants makes it possible for ideological values to be expressed. It would be very hard to imagine how long term unemployed young people could talk about their situation without involving ideological themes or values ('choice', 'agency', 'constraint' and so on). Analyses of unemployment often mistakenly treat ideological themes or values as simple discursive justifications used by young unemployed people to skirt around the lack of personal responsibility taking. Instead, they should be treated and analysed in their own right, and for the functions they serve. A discursive psychological approach can support such a project. Instead of theorising questions about 'choice', 'conditionality', etc., one needs to explore how people *actually* talk about these notions by drawing on their everyday experiences.

The neoliberal ideology of employment and welfare 'flows' through the interstices of argument about constraint and freedom. It flows not in the shape of single values, but rather presupposes counter-values. It produces personal and institutional quandaries. When some individuals become the object of 'government', their individualities are stifled, are framed by an ideology that lies

outside the person. 'Political rationalities' (the 'philosophy' of governmentality contained in official reports, institutional guidelines, etc.) are contested by 'subjective rationalities' (actual ways in which unemployed people talk about their predicament). The language used in government 'think tank' reports constructs particular subjectivities that are seen to be lacking the requisite virtues of self-governance and enterprise. Yet, as this study has shown, analysing talk paints a very different picture. Whereas political rationalities are reduced to a set of non-controversial ideologies, set of conditions or standards, subjective rationalities are more complex, made up by multiple, dilemmatic ideologies. It would be a mistake to consider what is socially 'desirable' and what is individually 'desired' as a dilemma that involves a simple choice between one or the other.

As Blumer has argued, 'a social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in a society instead of being an objective condition with a definitive objective makeup' (1971, p. 300). The philosophy of 'personalized conditionality' identifies the objective conditions which cause the 'problem' (lack of engagement, lack of responsibility, idleness, on the part of the 'unemployed'). These are all psychological descriptions, they *point* to the inner psychology of the unemployed person. In addition to this, the generic definition of 'personalized conditionality' determines the way young people are perceived and treated, their 'career' through and in the system. Yet, when you consider actual accounts coming from young unemployed people one can see how an antithetical psychological thesaurus of psychological states becomes 'live' in talk. As our analysis has shown, one can see how this antithetical lay psychological vocabulary is mobilized and used to justify both an individual and social predicament.

Notes

1. The Flexible New Deal (FND) was financed from a windfall tax on privatised utilities and between 1997 and 2002, and was expected to cost about £2.6bn. It was introduced in October 2009, holding out the promise of personalised support for jobseekers. The DWP were traditionally the public providers of unemployment services, with private sector providers commissioned, more recently, to devise more flexible programmes, which would address individual 'needs'. FND contracts were awarded by competitive tender, with close attention to

positive outputs in securing employment or training at the end of the FND intervention. There are no specific guidelines for how the back-to-work (DWP, 2011) training takes place. The main idea is that young people are required to attend back-to-work training and consistently apply for jobs, in the context of support from a personal 'advisor'. Under the threat of sanctions, the young people have to engage with a regime that includes hours of endless meaningless job searching. 'Success' for the training provider is based on securing any kind of employment for the jobseeker. Modified and repackaged versions of this inform current provision (see for example, Work Programme Provider Guidance, DWP, 2012b).

2. Unemployed people are often referred to in the literature as 'customers'; those employed to help/support the back to work process are referred to as 'employment/customer advisors'. Attendance at job training is mandatory, referrals to the programme occur only after 13 weeks of unemployment. One of the central aims of the programme is to address barriers in obtaining/securing work, ideally helping those that have little or no understanding of what behaviours are expected at work. Participation in work placements is compulsory, claimants need to attend for 30 hours a week for 4 weeks. Failure to comply or loss of place due to misconduct will result in benefit sanctions for 13 weeks, a second failure in a 12 month period will lead to a 26 week sanction.

3. The rhetoric of government 'think tank' publications supporting and prescribing conditionality principles, is concerned more with the so-called views of the 'working public' than with how unemployed people talk about their experiences of unemployment. These publications are littered with references to the public perception of unemployed people as 'lazy' and needing to be 'forced to work' (e.g., Doctor & Oakley, 2011).

4. The number of young people (aged 18-24) receiving Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) has risen sharply, in early 2008 before the recession. 240,000 were receiving benefits, by May 2010, the numbers rose to 430,000, with a high proportion of this amount on JSA for 6-12 months some even longer with little or no change between 2010 and 2012 (DWP, 2012a). One and half million young people are currently not in education or employment, this approximates 1 in 5 people in the UK (ACEVO, 2012). Although unemployment across Europe is high, the rates of unemployed youth are even higher in the UK. The identified causes are poor early intervention strategies, poor employer engagement policies and an imbalance between sanctions and interventions. In light of the situation, there have been several calls for a re-examination of policy driven service provision (e.g., Crowley et al., 2013).

5. The role of personal advisors is by nature contradictory: on one hand, their role is to offer personalised support with 'reinsertion' into the job market, on the other hand, they have targets to reach (i.e. income is based on the numbers placed in work). They are asked to facilitate as well as enforce (ACEVO, 2012).

6. On categories as the basis for social inferences about people, events, circumstances, and so on, see Eglin & Hester (2003)

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