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Job expectations theorised as feasible work

Didier Demazière

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Abstract

The distance between unemployment and employment is highly variable and the path to be followed can be more or less unpredictable. Transitions between the two statuses have been extensively studied, much more than the hoped-for, targeted or anticipated job. How do unemployed people conceive their occupational goals and adjust them during their job search. Exploring this question, our empirical investigations have shown the general nature of the tensions between what they prefer and what they imagine they can achieve, between desires and realism. Here we develop the concept of “feasible work” to describe and model these tensions and adjustments. In doing so, we underline that these revisions do not only involve the unemployed themselves, but also the activation policies, the labour market actors, the networks of relatives, and any others contributing to give meaning to job search experiences. We therefore examine these processes through their institutional, relational and biographical dimensions.

Keywords

Job search, targeted jobs, realism, employment standards, feasible work, downgrading process

Introduction: targeted jobs and job search

The abundant scientific literature on job search tends to focus on the analysis of job search procedures or the measurement of its intensity (Benhabib and Bull, 1983; Van Hoye, 2018). In so doing it neglects the goals identified, their calibration and their revision. In contrast, we explore here the job expectations of the unemployed: how do they conceive the job they are looking for, how do they define the targets of their own job search? These issues require a comprehensive approach focusing on the lived experiences of the unemployed and, more broadly, of social assistance recipients. Several studies (Danneris and Herup Nielsen, 2018; Patrick, 2014, 2017) stress strong discrepancies between these experiences and political rhetoric behind activation schemes. The logics of activation and workfirst prioritize to getting any job in disregard of the job characteristics. But unemployed people are not looking for “just anything”; they do have preferences. Some want to work in what they consider their own occupation, others want to avoid certain sectors of activity, some prefer small companies rather than large establishments, others are looking for a permanent post, some favour part-time jobs, some want a certain level of pay, etc. Jobseekers thus have (more or less explicit) preferential or priority conceptions of their own ideal job. Yet the job offers they come across in the course of their job search always include highly-specific characteristics in terms of occupation, location, pay, contract, working hours, etc. The market dictates these characteristics independently of jobseeker aspirations and preferences. Job search is therefore much more than a simple matter of an encounter between jobseeker and job offers; on the contrary it always reveals a certain distance between jobs sought and jobs offered. The process is therefore one of narrowing gaps, and this necessarily implies a series of trade-offs, which may take different paths.

In recent years, we have analysed these adjustments and revisions on the basis of qualitative fieldwork on different job search situations: those that are successful and lead to a fairly sustainable job (Demazière, 2021), those that are deemed insufficient and lead to disbarment (Demazière and Zune, 2021), and those that last a long time and reinforce doubts about their outcome (Demazière, forthcoming). Here we extend these investigations by theorising the

dynamics of unemployed people's career expectations through the concept of “feasible work.” This is understood as the (ever-provisional) result of adjustments and compromises made between plural perspectives on what the “right” job is. From this perspective, job search is a flow of experiences rather than a set of steps. This flow is marked by a series of events such as: discovery of job offers, activities aimed at getting a job, exchanges with recruiters, interviews with professional advisers, interactions with relatives, etc. It is punctuated by a more or less erratic cycle of raised hopes and disappointments, certainties and doubts, encouragement and setbacks and recurrent failure – until the moment of eventual success. The resulting accumulation of information (part-convergent and part-contradictory) shapes the jobseeker’s position on the labour market, not only in terms of distance from employment and the likelihood of escaping it, but also with regard to how jobseekers interpret their own situations, and their own beliefs about the prospect of returning to work.

This heterogeneous set of events and meanings traces occupational perspectives and is capable of consolidating or revising them. It gives rise to what we call “feasible work.” Since any job search episode (including the absence of steps, or feeling discouraged) has the potential to impact it either positively or negatively, this is intrinsically processual and can be modelled in a bid not just to understand its movements, but (and above all) to identify the mechanisms governing its variations. The occupational expectations of unemployed people, crystallised in “feasible work,” are then considered the result of tensions and shifts between two poles: that of desirability (which crystallises jobseeker preferences) and that of realism (which organises their job search experiences). Our goal here is to clarify the analytical framework of this “feasible work” dynamic. We begin by pointing out that the unemployed people’s occupational expectations are traditionally considered to be factors that slow down their return to work. We then show that these perspectives are heterogeneous and vulnerable to the test of unemployment and job search, so that “feasible work” has multiple meanings, and these are modified in the course of the job search. Lastly, we discuss the processes of revisions to “feasible work,” successively looking at their institutional, relational and biographical dimensions in turn.

Escaping unemployment – but for which jobs?

Movements between employment and unemployment, as well as between jobs, are massive phenomena in labour markets both across Europe and in other OECD countries (Causa *et al.*, 2022); it is not necessary to be unemployed to be engaged in job search. However, the position of those who are unemployed is more precarious than that of those who are employed, and this tends to lead them to accept poorer jobs – whether in terms of pay, employment contract, working hours, working conditions, etc. This is the meaning of the distinction (derived from segmentation theory (Eichhorst and Marx, 2021)) between insiders, i.e. employees with a high level of job protection, and outsiders, i.e. the unemployed plus employees in an unstable situation (Saint-Paul, 1996). In the search for a job, the starting position matters. It has been established that job search outcomes for those who are unemployed or employed differ. The unemployed are more likely to obtain, or accept, lower wages, more unstable jobs, and less satisfactory working hours. According to statistical modelling, these differences reflect divergences in behaviour and choices between unemployed and employed job seekers (Longhi, 2015). This study shows that unemployed people may be under more pressure to find a job, leading them to widen the range of job offers that they consider acceptable.

Alternative methods have been used to assess the characteristics of the jobs obtained (that is, accepted and acceptable) by unemployed people. For example, comparisons were made between the job lost before the period of unemployment and the job found after. On this point,

the results of studies carried out in several OECD countries converge, showing that jobseeker mobility after unemployment is oriented towards a decline in job quality, regardless of how that quality is defined. The trend is that a return to work is accompanied by a deterioration in contractual employment conditions, professional prestige and status (Bethmann, 2013; Dieckhoff, 2011; Lippmann and Rosenthal, 2008), and pay (Arulampalam, 2001; Brand, 2015). Moreover, where it leads to downgrading, the period of unemployment can become a lasting disadvantage in the labour market (Gangl, 2006). The career scars inflicted by unemployment are not uniform, and vary according to multiple factors: characteristics of previous jobs, jobseeker qualifications, state of labour markets, strength of professional identity, or public policy (Blossfeld and Mayer, 1988).

Rather than showing the adjustments and compromises made by unemployed people, these approaches reveal the results and consequences as they are crystallised in the characteristics of the jobs obtained. Economic theory has long taken an interest in this, through the conceptual developments of job search theory (Mortensen, 1977), which inspired activation policies. Their aim is to model the conditions of job search “profitability” (Cahuc *et al.*, 2014), based on two postulates: (i) the jobseeker has rational and optimising behaviour and (ii) the information relative to available jobs is imperfect. Every unemployed person looks for a new job on the basis of initial preferences, derived from the lost job: an expected wage level (the wage below which he or she refuses a job offer, called the “reservation wage”) and certain working conditions (hours, distance, etc.). Rationally, the jobseeker rejects job opportunities that fall short of these preferences. In so doing, s/he arbitrates between the prospect of future gain and the gain provided by the situation of being unemployed. And when this last is less than the gain associated with a job opportunity, s/he accepts this job. But the equation changes over time, as the gain associated with unemployment deteriorates, with the reduction or the end of unemployment benefit, the rising economic and psychological cost of increasing unemployment duration, the deterioration of employability, etc. The jobseeker’s (postulated) rationality must then lead him/her to downwardly revise the expected gains of the future job, adjust his/her initial preferences. Over time, job quality and exit speed come into tension. The equation could be formulated as follows: unemployed people must choose between either exiting unemployment as quickly as possible (with the risk of involuntary occupational downgrading) or waiting and hoping for an optimal job offer as they see it, while remaining unemployed (Buchs *et al.*, 2017).

In this model, the dynamics of feasible work are univocal and universal, since they are aligned with a rational optimisation: jobseeker arbitrage leads, over time, to a decrease in professional requirements. Before showing the oversimplistic nature of this approach, we must stress that this is the principle upon which activation policies tend to be based. Playing with carrot and stick (Van der Klauw and Van Ours, 2013), the measures implemented in recent decades in the countries of the European Union (as well as more widely in the OECD) are extremely varied: reform of unemployment benefits in the sense of restricting the terms and conditions of compensation (OECD, 1994; Arcanjo, 2012), reinforcement of monitoring of unemployed people through statistical profiling (OECD, 2018; Desière *et al.* 2019), spread of the principle of conditionality in welfare services (Clasen and Clegg, 2007; Knotz, 2002; Wright *et al.*, 2020), multiplication of checks on unemployed people and the imposition of sanctions (Parent, 2014; Van den Berg *et al.*, 2004), etc. What they have in common is that they influence the parameters of the trade-off between job quality and speed of exit from unemployment. They modify (or seek to modify) unemployed people’s preferences by worsening the cost/benefit balance of unemployment in order to accelerate a return to work.

This is particularly striking when activation turns to “workfare,” the objective of which is to increase fluidity in the labour market and put pressure on unemployed people, forcing their return to work. More precisely, the notion of a reasonable (or suitable) job offer, i.e. one that “cannot be refused” (Lødemel and Trickey, 2001) shows the extent to which the compromises inherent to job search lie at the heart of activation policies. Within public employment services, this categorisation is defined variously, depending on the country, though the qualities retained are generally the same: occupation or qualification, geographical distance between home and workplace, level of remuneration, or working hours. A combination of these characteristics defines a floor above which the jobseeker cannot refuse the offer without facing a penalty (temporary reduction or suspension of benefit, and exclusion following two or three refusals) (Immervoll and Scarpetta, 2012). For each jobseeker, it is a question of defining the contours of a so-called reasonable target, by comparison with the previous job. What is normatively defined as reasonable is thus the result of a metric of distance from a reference point taken from the unemployed person's previous career: extent of professional mobility, reduction in salary, etc. This acceptability, negotiated to a greater or lesser extent with public employment professionals, is imposed on unemployed people; it functions as a lower limit above which “reasonableness” becomes mandatory. In some countries, the reasonable occupational target evolves as duration of unemployment increases: the floor goes down and the deviations from previous employment go up. The reserve wage (as fixed by the activation rules) falls over time, and more generally the characteristics (of what we might call by analogy the “reserve job”) deteriorate. Certainly, the effective application of sanctions for refusal of reasonable job offers comes up against several practical obstacles. But, as indicated by a study in Sweden, the potentiality of the sanction seems enough to accelerate the transition towards employment, albeit towards lower-quality jobs (Van den Berg and Vikström, 2014). By forcing (or accelerating) trade-offs in the direction of accepting a downgraded job, this undoubtedly serves to restrict the ability of unemployed people to compromise.

Many activation measures aim to accelerate a return to employment by targeting the acceptability of lower-quality jobs (Wright, 2002; Aurich, 2011; Van Berkel *et al.*, 2017). Activation can thus be analysed as an incentive to realism: it is a matter of modifying the trade-offs made by unemployed people by moderating their occupational aspirations so that they adjust to job offers. In this sense, realism in the job search is an institutional injunction. It also permeates job search experiences, though it is only one aspect of them.

The variability of jobs targeted by the unemployed

In order to analyse unemployed people’s job expectations, it is essential to understand their points of view, yet employment as seen by unemployed people remains little studied. Although it has been shown, from a governmentality of experience perspective, how unemployed people are encouraged to cultivate a passion for their profession and display this passion in their job search (Pulz, 2018), most analyses of job seeking behaviour are conducted at a distance from the experiences of unemployed people, their interpretations of their own situations and their categorisations of the jobs they target (Demazière and Delpierre, 2022). In some cases, employment is constituted as at once a vague entity and a homogeneous objective: it is devoid of characteristics, as if getting a job takes precedence over every other consideration. The only thing that matters is the exit from unemployment and the success of job search, whatever the job. But jobs can also be characterised by properties such as security, flexibility, salary, type of contract, working hours or autonomy. These properties differentiate jobs from one another significantly, and are codified in what is now called “job quality,” and leads to a hierarchy of high- and low-quality jobs (Findlay *et al.*, 2013).

Of course, the contract, salary, hours, etc., of jobs targeted or available are not negligible characteristics from the viewpoint of unemployed people. But the distinctions they make are not simply repetitions of institutional “job quality” categories; they are both more varied and more difficult to anticipate, because they stem from previous work experiences as well as from their attempts to find a job, with its share of hopes and desires, setbacks and disappointments, worries and apprehensions. The job as an object of the job search is more than just a position having various properties or qualities; it is also a projection or a potentiality, a way to imagine a better or possible future that hugely impacts how people deal with unemployment in their everyday life (Pulz and Hviid, 2018). As such, the imagined or targeted job is therefore characterised by conditions of possibility, levels of plausibility and degrees of desirability, and is caught up in a stream of definitions of what might be within reach, acceptable, desirable or feasible.

When talking about their job search and formulating their occupational expectations, unemployed people rip open the seams of employment - as well as of high- or low-quality employment: they use a much more varied vocabulary that designates a broader set of paid activities, in other words paid work. Moreover, they mention a range of options and reveal systems of preferences and constraints, and these are also expressed using an emotional register. This is well illustrated by in-depth interviews conducted in 2015 with a diverse sample of 57 unemployed people registered with the French public employment agency (Demazière and Zune, 2022). Their visions about the future and their occupational perspectives are very varied, as show the following few quotes:

“I want a real job, with a permanent contract at the end”

“What matters is to feed my children even if it is by moonlighting”

“Alongside my main plans, I take small jobs to earn a living”

“I am not afraid to do anything, even if it is undeclared”

“Working is about fulfilling myself anyway”

“I’ll take anything, I have no choice”

“A permanent contract is what I dream of”

“Telling me to be my own boss, it’s difficult to get there”

“I have to say, temping is easier as far as I can see”

“I need a job that’s not too hard at my age, I’ve given up factory work”

“I have a good profession; I’m not giving it up to do just anything”

“I’m not being pretentious; I’m looking for a job I like – it’s important to me.”

Several observations can be drawn from these verbatim reports, and from the whole corpus. These unemployed people mention multiple situations that have allowed them to escape unemployment, and oscillate between employment (*a real job, a permanent contract*) and informal work (*undeclared, moonlighting*). The perimeters of their targets are very elastic, ranging from the most precise and narrow (*a good job, my passion*) to the broadest and most limitless (*I take everything, do anything*). They express preferences by favouring certain situations (*I want the same thing, to take care of children*) and rejecting others (*I don’t want to be a salaried employee anymore, I’ve given up factory work*). They mobilise different registers of valorisation, between the instrumental dimension of work (*to earn something, to feed my children*) and the expression of personal taste and the quest for meaningfulness (*I am looking for a job I like, fulfilling myself anyway*). They situate the prospects they formulate in scales of possibility, distinguishing between what is within reach (*I’ll take small jobs to earn a living, temporary work is easier*) and other prospects that are far less certain (*be my own boss, it’s difficult to get there, a guaranteed contract but I don’t know if it’s possible*). Their occupational

aspirations are placed in multiple time frames, sometimes shortened and marked by urgency (*work right away, you have to make a living*), sometimes very long-term or even evanescent (*quite patient, an ideal I can dream of*).

The variety of unemployed job expectations is exceptionally broad; this reflects the vast heterogeneity of the unemployed population in terms of career paths, professional roots, training, length of unemployment, family situations, etc. This diversity also reflects variability over time: one hopeful perspective dims following several failures, another emerges in the course of the job search, others remain in the balance until one wins, another is postponed before being brought back to the forefront, etc. These shifts are a sign that the job search is conducted amid constant uncertainty, though the intensity of this uncertainty is uneven, depending in particular on the unemployed person's employability and distance from employment. Moreover, the fact that these shifts vary to such an extent means that the job search, rather than unfolding in line with a rational, optimistic logic, is made up of a succession of experiences of trial and error, experimentation and adjustment. And in terms of occupational expectations and targets, it is punctuated by successive movements between the poles of desirability and realism. The example of Jack, which is set out below (selected from the corpus already mentioned), illustrates the complexity of these shifts.

Jack was 52 when he lost his job. The DIY store, where he had worked for over 15 years, closed down after a competitor took it over. Jack had been taken on as a Store Assistant and later promoted to Department Manager. The loss of his job was completely unexpected – he had planned to stay in his job “until retirement in ten years’ time.” Jack had left school at the age of 19, having qualified as a plumber, but never became a plumber because there were no openings in the rural area he had lived in all his life. He began work in various temporary jobs as a farm labourer, then was recruited by a local road maintenance company. He worked there for 12 years, then resigned when the DIY store opened just nine kilometres from his home village. His own outlook on his career remained positive; he said that he had “done well,” “been lucky enough to find work in the countryside,” and always “provided security to (his) family.” The redundancy was a turning point in a career path that had been stable for 25 years. When we met Jack 14 months later, he was anxious because he had not yet found a job. And his situation was exacerbated by the fact that his wife had died, leaving him a widower with three children – all teenagers and still at school. Even so, he was actively looking for a job.

At his public employment service (PES) registration interview, his adviser told him immediately that job opportunities locally were very limited, and that he should widen the geographical scope of his job search. Jack, who was aware that it was “a bit dead here for jobs,” followed this advice, sending unsolicited applications to all DIY stores within a 50-kilometre radius of his home, then visiting some of these in person, as he was getting little response. A second meeting with his adviser, six months later, led to a further widening of his occupational targets to cover all major retail outlets, regardless of their specialism. Jack had already contacted a few supermarkets in the course of his search and been turned down, so he followed his adviser's new recommendation, though without really believing in it: “I knew it was inevitable, because when you've been to all the big DIY stores, if there's nothing there, there's nothing. That's why I already covered some of the other stores (he names a few big brands). The result's the same in the end, so I was already saying to myself: “all that for nothing.” Reviewing his career prospects in this way led Jack to further adjust the type of job he was targeting. He began applying for sales positions (rather than Department Manager) considering his experience less relevant in other types of shops, and that there were fewer opportunities to make the most of it. Thus, in the course of the first six to eight months of his job search, Jack's

occupational prospects evolved significantly and in different directions, while remaining relatively close to his initial target of an equivalent to the job he had lost.

However, his efforts were in vain, and he became increasingly concerned. His material situation was not yet compromised, since he had accumulated rights to unemployment benefit equivalent to 70% of his previous salary for a period of 24 months. He was however concerned that he had tried everything, in a local labour market that offered few opportunities. Jack shared his difficulties and doubts with several acquaintances in his village. A deputy mayor whose job involved training adults encouraged him to look at his situation from a different angle: he said that getting a job was more difficult after the age of 50, and that this is particularly true of the retail sector, where employers often recruit younger staff. This led Jack to see his position in the labour market differently, considering his age as a problem. With the help of the deputy mayor and two friends, he began looking for alternative prospects beyond the retail sector. His training in plumbing – a buried and forgotten resource, appeared to be a new string to his bow. He discussed this new opportunity with his PES adviser, who allowed him to take a technical test to demonstrate the strength of his skills. He was then encouraged to explore this new avenue by contacting plumbing companies. These were mainly small businesses unable to afford an employee. But in returning to this sector of activity, Jack confirmed his enjoyment of plumbing: “It was like a new discovery, I realised that I loved it, it's a beautiful profession.”

Because of the dearth of opportunities for salaried employment, the idea of becoming self-employed gradually emerged, and this was another important shift in his career prospects. With support from his adviser, who encouraged him to develop the project further and referred him to a business start-up consultancy, he received training in how to develop his project and test its feasibility. This enabled him to see that the market niche was promising, with “a shortage of plumbers,” and to reorient his job expectations. At the time of our interview with Jack, his project was not yet a reality, but he said that he wanted to set up on his own and was getting advice from professionals to guide him in this direction. In addition, he has now seen the downside of salaried work, which, in the light of his experience, now seemed insecure (“overnight, you become nothing”), and he saw self-employment as the best way of rebooting his working situation and supporting his family.

An examination of Jack's case helps clarify certain theoretical aspects of the notion of feasible work. First, it is a conception of work that evolves and is the subject of a series of compromises over the course of job search experiences. Jack started out thinking it was possible to find a job as a Department Manager in another DIY shop, even if it meant going further from home, but when this prospect failed to materialise, he extended it to other sectors of commerce, and then to lower-status jobs, such as salesman. When a conception of feasible work fails to translate into a job, it is modified (sometimes very significantly), and Jack ultimately turned to plumbing and craftsmanship. Second, feasible work is not the product of an arbitration between several options offered simultaneously to the jobseeker and between which he is able to choose. Jack was never in a position to arbitrate between competing offers, because he never received a concrete job offer. He was never in a position to compare offers, and so could not make reasoned (or rational) comparisons in order to choose the best option. His prospects were uncertain, and he had to assess their feasibility – weighing desirability up against realism. This, then, is a third property of feasible work: compromises are made in a situation of uncertainty about the possibilities of achieving one or other of the objectives in view. Preferences and choices are therefore accompanied by risk-taking, which fuels hesitation, bafflement and anxiety or, conversely, enthusiasm and excitement. Jack agreed to seek work beyond the DIY business, but then lowered his expectations because he assessed his chances as relatively low.

Similarly, the reorientation of his aspirations towards the plumbing trade followed a complex process of discussion with multiple interlocutors as well as new experiences, leading, ultimately, to the consolidation of his project. The fourth characteristic of feasible work is that it is embedded in contexts, several dimensions of which can be seen in this example. The context was spatial, corresponding to the territory of the job search, and even when Jack enlarged it, there was no changing the fact that there was a scarcity of jobs there. This context is also populated by actors – first and foremost those whose job it is to support unemployed people, but also members of his entourage, all of whom constituted relational supports that, in Jack's case, had convergent points of view and actions. Thus, the continuous and uncertain process of revising career prospects involves multiple factors that vary the trade-offs, and does not follow any single pattern.

Feasible work covers an infinite number of options and occupational expectations, and these vary from one person to the next. However, the formation and revision of feasible work can be mapped around a few major processes, and these invariably contribute (albeit differently weighted) to shaping it. We shall now examine the institutional, relational and biographical processes in turn.

Institutional processes for the revision of occupational expectations

Broadly speaking, these institutional processes have two major components: the labour market and its available job offers on the one hand, and social protection and unemployment benefit conditions on the other. The volume of available jobs affects the probability of access to employment, and the higher this probability, the less likely it is that jobseekers will have to revise their job prospects. The characteristics of the jobs available also matter. On this point, the divergences with unemployed people's expectations are considerable in a period when non-standard jobs are on the rise in labour markets (Kalleberg, 2011; Leschke and Watt, 2008). In brief, there is a tendency for the jobs on offer to include many short or temporary contracts, while unemployed people aspire to stable contracts. In France, for example – a country sometimes characterised by the “precarariat” (Murphy, 2016) – this imbalance is very marked, with permanent contracts accounting for less than 15% of recruitment (and this has been the case since the 1990s) even though such a contract is what is aspired to by between 80 and 90% of unemployed people (COE, 2014). It is true enough that temporary contracts can turn into stable jobs, where they are stepping stones rather than dead ends (Booth *et al.*, 2002). But such an imbalance forces many unemployed people not only to make trade-offs during their job search activities. With the development of activation policies, this tendency has become even more pronounced. As has been pointed out, these policies do more than convert the unemployed into active jobseekers (Boland and Griffin, 2015); they also reinforce the obligation to work (Brodkin, 2017) and push unemployed people to accept transitions to atypical forms of job – such as temporary contracts, interim assignments, part-time work or self-employment (Dengler, 2019; Jordan, 2018).

However, the influence of institutional processes on job expectations often takes a winding path and is dependent on multiple parameters. First, the labour market is not transparent, and the volume of job opportunities (or characteristics) is subject to perception and interpretation. It is not uncommon to hear unemployed people say, in interviews with social scientists, that “There are no jobs around anymore,” expressing their feelings of discouragement (Ezzy, 2001; Krugg *et al.*, 2019). As they search for jobs, these people therefore form representations of the labour market that fuel the dynamics of occupational expectations. Second, institutional processes are not uniform, because the labour market is neither unified nor homogeneous. Indeed, each

jobseeker conducts their own job search, given their own background, in a labour market limited by geographical and occupational boundaries that shift over the life course, as we have observed in the case of Jack. Unemployed people are rooted in geographical or sectoral segments of the labour market, and spatial inequalities have significant effects not only on the employability of unemployed people (Berntson *et al.*, 2006), but also on the behaviours of the working population (Hillmert *et al.*, 2017), and consequently on job expectations and projections. The same reasoning can be applied to activity areas and occupations; indeed, the relationship between job offers and demand for jobs is particularly unequal in sectors experiencing recruitment difficulties, in so-called jobs of the future, in declining sectors and in expanding activities (Holzer and Lerman, 2009). These differences have consequences for the conditions in which unemployed people get jobs, as well as for the speed at which this happens, and places them in unequal conditions for achieving their occupational objectives, and then for broadening their perspectives, changing their targets or rearranging their priorities.

The conditions of exit from unemployment are also defined by employment and social protection policies. Here, it is the effects of unemployment benefits on the preferences of unemployed people that have been studied in particular. These effects are usually considered in terms of preference rigidity, but the empirical evidence remains fragile and debated. The main observations are that the exit rate from unemployment rises as the end date of entitlement to benefits approaches, and that after having exhausted their entitlement unemployed people are willing to accept a job that is significantly less well paid than their previous job. This suggests that social protection and the unemployment benefits system may affect job search behaviour, including the way in which unemployed people define their occupational targets. From this perspective, adequate compensation for unemployment can (from the viewpoint of the unemployed person) be a means of supporting a search for a high-quality job while, conversely, inadequate compensation encourages the acceptance of downgraded jobs. These arguments (which have yet to be supported by empirical data) can be extended by considering other components of social protection. For example, the availability of alternatives to the social statuses of unemployment or employment (and the conditions of access to these alternatives) may influence the occupational expectations of some unemployed people: those who are less employable and/or most discouraged may be more inclined to give up work if protective alternatives are available. This is illustrated by the changes in the eligibility criteria for disability benefits in the Netherlands: both the widening of the criteria in the 1990s and their subsequent tightening in the 2000s have had direct and massive effects on the flow of people from unemployment into 'disability insurance' (Koning and Lindeboom, 2015). In other words, the existence of these benefits has, for some unemployed people, changed their perceptions of disability, including or excluding it from the scope of "feasible work." Thus, it goes beyond the contours of formal jobs or undeclared work and also include disability or retirement when the unemployed do not perceive a future on the labour market.

Institutional changes affecting labour markets or social protection have the capacity to modify the parameters of unemployed people's situations and occupational expectations. Moreover, the duration of unemployment weakens the position of unemployed people in terms of both the labour market and social protection. No matter how generous unemployment compensation is, entitlement always runs out over time. Similarly, regardless of the labour market explored, employability decreases as unemployment duration increases. Though the process is neither linear nor regular, the position of unemployed people inexorably deteriorates over time. As a result, the effects of institutions and regulations on occupational projections tend, in turn, to become more pronounced over time, leading the unemployed to revise their conceptions of feasible work and lower their aspirations and demands. Yet this movement, linked as it is to the

relational and biographical processes capable of accelerating it, slowing it down, or steering it in new directions, is not automatic.

Relational processes for the revision of occupational expectations

The configuration of feasible work is also played out in interactions with others who, like unemployed people themselves, hold views on the conditions of exiting unemployment. In part, this relational process is both an interpretation and a translation of institutional processes: PES advisers typically rely on their knowledge of the labour market to modify the unemployed person's relationship to jobs and their own career projections, regardless of the direction in which this influence is exerted. An abundant sociological and anthropological literature has studied the work of such advisers. It shows that their missions are based on a single central activity: assessment of the unemployed person's situation as a prerequisite for any action. In order to intervene in a way that is both relevant and suited (in the adviser's view) to the circumstances of the unemployed person, this activity must first be analysed and understood. In the profuse literature on the translation of activation into daily frontline work, however, not much has been made of this analytical and interpretative dimension (Tabin and Pierrard, 2016).

It is well established that frontline professionals, including PES advisers, still have a certain degree of autonomy in the local application of legislation, even though the contemporary period is marked by the introduction of performance measures inspired by New Public Management (Evans and Harris, 2004). Their work does maintain a discretionary dimension (Protas, 1979; Lipsky, 1980). Fieldwork on PES advisers in Germany shows that the evaluative work produced by advisers leads to a high level of variability in the practical implementation of activation policies (Senghaas, 2020). These advisers are keen for unemployed people to be able to demonstrate that they have a certain level of control over their situation as well as the ability to act to change that situation and modify their points of view and perspectives. The production of evaluations and judgements is at the heart of discretionary work (Hasenfeld, 2010a; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012; Zacka, 2017) and also aims to change situations and influence the perspectives of unemployed people.

Here we come back to the production of feasible work. As shown by the example of Jack, advisers contribute to this through the actions they initiate: an offer of training in a given field can indicate that a professional path has been identified as realistic; tweaking a CV to highlight a particular skill can serve to direct a jobseeker towards a given area of job prospecting; advising people to focus their job search on a given line of business is to designate a priority target, etc. These actions – carried out both on, and with, unemployed people, are based on the knowledge and interpretative routines that underpin their expertise; advisers mobilise this expertise to understand the unemployed person's situation, to describe it and modify it. Is this person correctly positioned on the labour market, what are their chances of accessing employment, what types of jobs can they apply for, and are these occupational expectations valid – or can they be validated? This confrontation between the expectations of the unemployed person and the actual potential of the labour market plays a key role here: a Franco-German comparison has shown that certain aspects of job offers – such as the contract duration or the number of contractual working hours – were important parameters to the work of advisers in their interactions with unemployed people (Clouet, 2018, 2019). Analysing individual situations, they ask themselves a wide range of questions such as: Should this person be dissuaded from seeking a permanent job? Should their eyes be opened to the jobs actually on offer? How can they be brought back down to earth without becoming discouraged? How can they be persuaded to consider less secure jobs?

In other words, advisers incorporate a dose of realism into their activities. And as they elicit information from unemployed people (Hasenfeld, 2010b), they seek to assess how realistic the expectations expressed by the unemployed person are. A research programme can then be outlined that focuses on implementation of this realism as well as on the parameters of its variation. For advisers, realism is an interpretative resource, based on a body of knowledge, skills and experience, and rooted in their professional expertise. There is therefore no universal metric of realism, based on rational economic calculation for example.. Realism is one aspect of judgements that are produced in context and relate to heterogeneous individual circumstances; these emerge out of discussions with the unemployed person. Some fieldwork has shown that advisers are careful to assess the chances of the unemployed people they interview ever returning to work. To do this, they consider classic employability factors such as training or work experience, as well as the way in which this distance to job is perceived by the unemployed person themselves (Dean, 1995). In this way, advisers can be led to consider some unemployed people as being outside of reality, that is, in a dream, delusion or illusion (Divay, 1999). Through direct interaction, then, a corrective action (which entails convincing the unemployed person that they must modify their perspective) becomes increasingly necessary, the greater the estimated degree of distance from reality. This has also been suggested through observation of advisers faced with what they consider inappropriate job search behaviour (Demazière and Zune, 2021). In this context, the threat of sanctions is one option available to force the unemployed person to become more realistic, taking on board the adviser's diagnosis. More generally, however, advisers often perceive cooperation from the unemployed person as a precondition for the effectiveness of their support work. Advisers therefore find themselves obliged to adopt strategies of persuasion – as highlighted in the German case (Senghaas *et al.*, 2019) – and establish relationships of trust (Penz *et al.*, 2017).

Changing the job expectations of the unemployed often, therefore, involves negotiating with them. And it can be argued that advisers have at their disposal a variety of argumentative resources designed to convince (or attempt to convince) unemployed people: arguing that any job, however fleeting, is better than unemployment; differentiating between the long term, in which high-quality jobs can be aimed for, and the short term, in which compromises can (or must) be made; maintaining an idealised (if not idyllic) conception of employment while putting forward more concrete outcomes, etc. The range of strategies implemented is worthy of further exploration. This was the approach followed around implementation of a reform to Disability Benefit, which was designed to radically change the horizons of disabled adults so as to encourage them to return to work. This made it possible to describe in detail the work of “persuasion and identity conversion” aimed at getting people to accept mediocre (or even voluntary) jobs (Angeloff, 2011). Despite this example, encouraging people to consider labour market constraints and pushing them towards realism does not necessarily mean promoting downgraded work. Advisers are much more than just zealous conduits for activation – and this is what is expressed in the concept of discretion. Their work with unemployed people can give rise to normative tensions between institutional prescriptions and professional norms, or between the demands of efficiency and ethics (Senghaas, 2020). Consequently, the consideration, recognition and validation of the unemployed person's point of view – his/her aspirations and occupational expectations – is likely to vary in line with the strength of the institutional frameworks and results-based steering that impact the advisers' activities. These remain linked to the national versions and interpretations of activation policies as well as to the room left within this framework for the expression of professional expertise and deontology (Jessen and Tufte, 2014). Enriching analysis of the dynamics of feasible work therefore requires international comparison of the work carried out at the employment and unemployment

counters (Van Berkel *et al.*, 2017). Every negotiation involves two parties, including the unemployed person. As a result, the biographical dimension of the production of feasible work must also be considered.

Biographical processes for the revision of occupational expectations

Through job search, unemployed people accumulate information about the labour market and the characteristics of available jobs. They discuss their situation with professionals (advisers, trainers, etc.), recruiters and relatives, taking steps that may expose them to repeated failure, may not elicit any response, or may remain in vain. In so doing, they seek to fulfil their aspirations, assess the possibilities of satisfying their expectations and consider alternatives (Demazière, 2021). A tension then arises between maintaining and revising occupational projections, preferences and tastes, as Jack's case illustrated. Therefore, the biographical experiences of job search and unemployment also frame the dynamics of feasible work. A recent research suggests that the analysis should be extended to other dimensions of the experiences. Based on interviews with Danish unemployed people, it explores how their plans to find a job interact with the demands of the public employment services and, above all, create tensions with other engagements related to everyday life (family life, ideas about quality of life, etc.) (Pulz *et al.*, 2021).

This tension between maintaining or revising expectations runs through even the most basic of activities: Should I widen my search? Should I respond to this job advert even though I consider unsatisfactory? Will I increase my chances if I lower my requirements? The questions it raises find extremely varied answers among unemployed people, and this variety reflects their heterogeneity in terms of profiles and employability, as well as the ways in which they look for work (Demazière and Delpierre, 2022). It also reflects the uncertainty that characterises job search and the difficulty of anticipating its results. The analysis of biographical processes prior to the revision of occupational expectations opens up multiple possibilities for investigation, and these have yet to be fully exploited. Among the most well-developed avenues, we have shown the effects of lengthening duration of unemployment on both estimation of the chances of access to employment, and job search behaviour. The evidence of job search weakening is well known (Cottle, 2001; Wanberg *et al.*, 2005), though these and many other studies focus more on discouragement than they do on adaptations to job search approaches and occupational targets (Brand, 2015; Wright *et al.*, 2020). Analysing the experience of unemployment and job search from the point of view of those who live it is a promising avenue (Ezzy, 2000), though most often it remains on the periphery of the dynamics of feasible work.

Numerous field studies focusing on activation programmes have underlined the injunction made to unemployed people to be responsible for both their situation and the management of their pathway (Garrett-Peters, 2009; Smith, 2010; Boland and Griffin, 2015b). This norm of personal responsibility implies that unemployed people should: be active and hardworking; adopt a positive attitude to job opportunities; adapt to job offers; review their aspirations, and take up any opportunities that arise. Though these analyses describe the disciplinary mechanisms at the heart of these policies, this has not, curiously, led to much study of how unemployed people adjust to the labour market and revise their career prospects. Some analyses have shown that difficulties in getting a job lead to adjustments in unemployed people's occupational expectations and anticipations (Brown, 2000; Gabriel *et al.*, 2013). The institutions and agents responsible for supporting unemployed people encourage these shifts and trade-offs (Sharone, 2013; Van Oort, 2015), even though so little is known about how biographical characteristics may facilitate or hinder, slow down or accelerate these revisions.

How significant are the variables determining employability? Are there past experiences and events that have fixed (or capped) expectations? To what extent do life conditions favour (or disadvantage) the adaptation of employment expectations? In short, which components of biographical pathways and experiences influence unemployed people's perception of feasible work?

One study in the UK has however examined the extent to which unemployed people are willing to consider broadening the range of jobs they seek. Its aim was to assess whether or not unemployed people having previously worked in “traditional” sectors were willing to work in the service sector – known to offer unattractive jobs of the type sometimes referred to as “McJobs” (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). The results show that unemployed people are reluctant to take low-paid jobs in which working conditions are harsh. This reluctance comes in two varieties: first, it is much stronger towards call centre jobs than it is towards retail and hotel jobs. Secondly, not all unemployed people share this attitude, though older men are least inclined to broaden their occupational targets. Relevant biographical variables may also include unemployed people’s perceptions of their own position on the labour market. For example, fieldwork carried out in France shows occupational expectations shifting from waged employment to self-employment among those who have experienced a series of setbacks in the search for a waged job, to the extent that they feel they have little chance of obtaining one (Demazière and Zune, 2022). In such cases, the experience of unemployment and job search leads to significant changes to occupational perspectives. However, this revision of feasible work takes two different forms, corresponding to contrasting biographical resources. Those who strongly value self-employment projects have accumulated fairly strong occupational expertise and experience, and benefit from the advice and support of others (whether these are professionals, family members or friends). The plans of those who have resigned themselves to aiming for solo-work tend to be fragile, made following discontinuous (or haphazard) careers by people who lack the relevant relational networks. So, the effects of unemployment itself are combined with biographical processes, and these are far from uniform; their characteristics and variations are worthy of further empirical investigation.

Conclusion. The dynamics of employment standards at both micro and macro levels

The concept of feasible work opens the way to an ambitious analysis of unemployed people’s occupational expectations, understood as the concrete forms of job and work, or even inactivity, they envisage for themselves, the dynamics of these perspectives during their experience of unemployment, and the process of accepting forms of employment that have different (not necessarily inferior) characteristics to those initially envisaged. We argue, then, that sociological research would benefit from studying the relationship between unemployment and employment by redefining this last as feasible work, and examining how this category is invested (with meaning or content) in given institutional contexts – by unemployed people themselves, by those frontline professionals whose job it is to support them, and even by those in their entourage. For social scientists, reasoning in terms of feasible work allows us to shed light on the revisions (and adaptations) made in the face of the constraints and uncertainties of the unemployment situation. This approach is intended to allow the subjective perspectives of the unemployed to be grasped in a processual manner by embedding this dynamic within a set of institutional, relational and biographical regulations. The articulation of these three dimensions through fieldwork is a challenge yet to be met, but in any case, such a perspective invites us to study the gaps between unemployed people’s expectations and the possibilities of satisfying these on the labour market, and to get to grips with the evolution of these gaps. A detailed understanding of the processes leading to the bridging of these gaps (and the resistance

that may be encountered) would enrich our knowledge of the experience of unemployment. It would also make it possible to identify the discreet underground movements that are transforming the labour market. For the concept of feasible work ultimately refers to the effects of unemployment on employment. Empirically these are captured by what the unemployed consider to be their own achievable and/or realistic occupational goals. But what unemployment does to employment - condensed in the expression “feasible work”- has wider and global meanings since what is at stake is the acceptance, or not, of changes in employment norms. In this sense, the concept of feasible work could enhance our understanding – at a micro level and while staying as closely as possible to the experiences of the unemployed – of macro changes that affect the conditions of integration into employment, destabilise employment norms and rearrange the meanings invested in work.

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