



SPECIAL ISSUE

Young People's Work, Employment and Careers



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Special Issue on Young People's Work, Employment and Careers

Contents

Editorial	81
BELGIN OKAY-SOMERVILLE AND ANGELA CARTER	
Contributing to the bigger picture: How work and organizational psychology can inform policymaking for improving youth employment	88
INTERVIEW WITH ROSALIND SEARLE	
The wider community benefit of youth employment: An interview with Police Scotland	96
INTERVIEW WITH COLIN CONVERY	
Non-academic, lazy and not employable: Exploring stereotypes of NEETs in England	102
BETH SUTTILL	
European Youth Parliament won't change the world: But it will change the people who do	127
INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW CAINE	
Participation in career development communities of practice: Perspectives from low socio-economic background students	135
MICHELLE TROTTIER	
Career guidance on online platforms in the Covid-19 context	156
INTERVIEW WITH HANNAH COURTNEY BENNETT	
A suitable marriage: Careers and identities at work	164
SAKSHI BANSAL	

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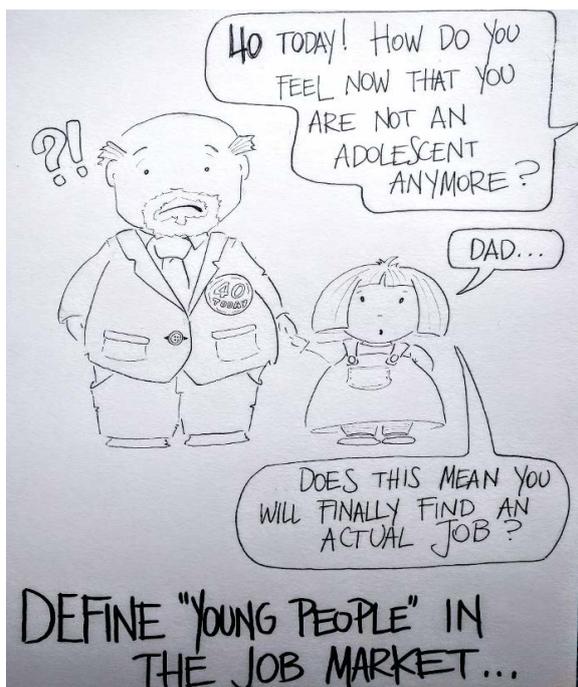
Special Issue on young people's work, employment and careers

Editorial

Belgin Okay-Somerville & Angela Carter

Youth employment is a global social and economic challenge. The difficulties young people face in accessing work that allows skill use and development, and a decent living wage, have multiple scarring effects (McQuaid, 2017) not only for young people's future employment and career outcomes but also for organizations (e.g., underutilisation of labour) and society (e.g., community welfare). The challenges of youth employment are therefore multi-faceted involving numerous stakeholders. This *Special Issue* features a mix of full-length empirical papers and stakeholder interviews focusing on key themes related to youth employment.

The idea for this *Special Issue* was conceived during the five-day *Small Group Meeting* (SGM) on *Young People's Work, Employment and Careers*, which was held online between 29th June – 3rd July 2020. Throughout the week, we worked with an artist, Carlo Tramontano, who illustrated key ideas from our discussions. We hope you will enjoy these drawings that say so much more than words.



This SGM was organised by Belgin Okay-Somerville (Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow), Dora Scholarios (Department of Work, Organization and Employment, University of Strathclyde) and Rosalind Searle (Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow). The meeting was funded by EAWOP and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK. Satisfying the requirements of each funder, the SGM had two main aims: a) to advance empirical and conceptual understanding of young people's work,

employment and careers; and b) to bring together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to set agendas towards improving young people’s current and future work prospects, with implications for more inclusive and prosperous societies.

The programme was divided into three key themes: diversity and inclusion; employability and career management; and young people’s work and well-being. Each day of the SGM started out with invited stakeholder talks, followed by discussion of empirical research by work and organizational psychology (WOP) researchers, and ended with a group reflection on key issues. The SGM attracted 43 attendees from nine countries. The final programme featured contributions from 14 non-academic stakeholders (e.g., European Youth Parliament, Scottish Youth Parliament, Resolution Foundation, Mental Health Foundation, Centre for Work-based Learning and Youth Futures Foundation) and 17 selected WOP research presentations. Final day of the event was reserved solely for cross-fertilising ideas for improving youth employment. The SGM keynote was delivered by Dr Angela Carter, titled *The wicked problem of youth employment: Context, issues and ways forward*.



The SGM not only started an active dialogue between WOP researchers and stakeholders, but also contributed towards identifying further research questions that are grounded in real-life challenges. Feedback we received from participants showed that the SGM served to increase researchers’ appreciation of the policy relevance of WOP research (e.g., “*The meeting made me more aware about the relevance of being in touch with and trying to influence*

policymakers and social agents”) and highlighted the significance of WOP empirical research for policymaking (e.g., “*The meeting re-emphasised the value of research and practice/policy working closely together on this important area*”).

Discussions identified there are still many areas relevant to improving youth employment to be explored, including:

- How do we facilitate a 'systems' approach to improving young people's prospects and experience of the labour market?
- How do we help young people to navigate the career choices available to them?
- How can education systems contribute to young people's career management skills and self-efficacy?
- What are the different types of experiences that are gained from work? Why is work particularly important for young people?
- What role do employers play in preparing young people for the world of work?

The collection of papers we have assembled in this *Special Issue* contribute towards addressing the first three of these core questions. We mimic the format of the SGM in delivery and introduce the stakeholder view first (in the form of an interview) followed by empirical research or our new feature 'career paths' piece. The *Special Issue* starts with an interview with *Prof Rosalind Searle*, the inaugural director of the EAWOP Impact Incubator (EAWOPii). Ros' interview sets the tone by highlighting the unique contributions WOP research can and does make to improving youth employment. As the director of EAWOPii, Ros shares insights into how WOP researchers can best engage with policymakers and thereby making positive contributions to youth employment and accomplishing ground-breaking, topical research.

Following Ros' emphasis on WOP contributions to policymaking, the first theme the *Special Issue* covers is diversity and inclusion. Our interview with *Colin Convery* from Police Scotland focuses on the community benefits of youth employment. Noticeable in this interview is a focus on removing barriers to employment for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., young offenders) and doing so in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., Social Services and the Prince's Trust, a global charity providing opportunities for young people to build confidence and start their careers). Addressing one of the SGM key themes this interview reminds us of the importance of a systems approach.

Enabling young people's access to work is top priority when focusing on community benefits of youth employment relevant for inclusion in society. The first empirical paper in the *Special Issue* is an ethnographic study within a training centre for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) by *Beth Suttill*. This paper challenges the common policy and practice view that marginalises NEET young

people based on stereotypes (e.g., being un-employable and disengaged). The study demonstrates young people’s attempts at distancing themselves from stereotypes and emphasises the multiple barriers they face in accessing labour markets.

Our interview with *Matthew Caine* from the European Youth Parliament (EYP) offers some answers as to how we can help facilitate young people’s navigation of career choices. The EYP’s youth-led events show acknowledgement of the importance of developing and utilising career skills. We observe that the EYP achieves this by means of social and interactive activities. We can relate this to the psycho-social definitions of employability (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004), considering not only human capital but also social capital, identity, and adaptability. The interview further strengthens the arguments for a systems approach to tackling youth employment challenges, involving multiple stakeholders.

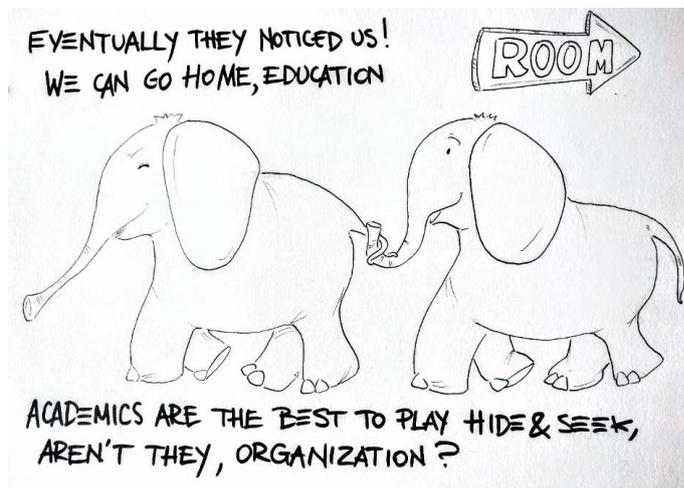
Also taking a peer-led approach to career skills development, *Michelle Trottier’s* empirical research confirms the relevance of social learning theory (e.g., Bandura & McClelland, 1977). This research shows the efficacy of an online peer-led community of practice intervention for improving careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Findings demonstrate student concern for enhancing their own, as well as their peers’, employability. There is also evidence of passive career engagement through vicarious learning. For careers practitioners, supporting a social learning theory approach, this research clearly shows value of online, peer-led interventions.



We continue with the theme of career guidance presenting a practitioner interview with *Hannah Courtney Bennett* a Chartered Psychologist and Career Coach focusing on the place of career practitioners in schools preparing young people’s transitions into further study and employment. Hannah has been one of the pioneers in the UK in adapting delivery of the single interaction model

of career guidance (Reid & Fielding, 2007) to the online platforms, following Covid-19 lockdown and remote working. The interview provides clear support and guidelines encompassing issues of safeguarding young people in their homes.

Our final contribution is a ‘career paths’ piece, where *Sakshi Bansal* shares experiences of career crafting and the conflicts and dilemmas of following multiple interests and activities. *A suitable marriage* describes a happy ending with the realisation that while this myriad of activities may appear to be a puzzle consisting of many unconnected pieces these goals sit within the area of Humanitarian Psychology. We hope by offering this and other career path accounts that work and organizational psychologists will be able to make decisions and identify with their disparate choices to enable fulfilling and diverse careers.



Reflecting on the SGM and the contents of this *Special Issue*, it is clear that WOP research and practice has much to offer for improving youth employment. Our emphasis seems to be heavily sided with equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and abilities that will enable them to secure work. While this may be empowering some young people in the

labour market, such strong emphasis on individual responsibility may run the danger of blaming the victim, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for their predicament. The SGM questions that are left relatively unanswered in this *Special Issue* (e.g., surrounding with a systems approach, the specific roles of various stakeholders and the importance of work for young people) suggest a need to re-centre our focus and increase our emphasis on young people’s work. A plethora of WOP research, especially from a vocational psychology perspective, focus on education-to-work transitions. Yet, we rarely examine crucial ‘work-related’ questions such as ‘*what explains employer motivation/reluctance for engaging with and employing young people?*’. Accordingly, although we write about the importance of work and work experience for young people, our empirical evidence is limited. This is partly because most of our outcome measures are rather short-sighted (e.g., focusing just on a binary measure

of employment or education status). We also observe similar emphasis in short-term solutions in policymaking such as the EU Youth Guarantee programme which aims to provide all young people employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed. In order for WOP research to influence policymaking for improving youth employment, we need empirical evidence on what ‘good work’ looks like for young people, including the impact of ‘good work’ for sustainable labour market integration (Fuentes, McQuaid & Robertson, 2021).

We hope you enjoy reading this *Special Issue* and that this content raises your awareness of the challenges young people are facing finding their place in work. Looking ahead, we are putting together a general edition of InPractice with a focus on *broadening the boundaries of WOP*. This should be with you in the autumn.

We also look forward to your contributions either as a full-length empirical paper, a case study, career paths discussion, reflections on practice, or a presentation of practice-oriented tools used in WOP. Please contact us (InPractice@eawop.org) with your ideas and a short plan of the paper and we will be delighted to work with you to bring this material into publication.

Finally, we are sending you greetings from Glasgow where the 20th EAWOP Congress will take place from 11 to 14 January 2022 (see www.eawop2022.org/0). Our attention is drawn to this date as we are currently completing our submissions. Most importantly we look forward to meeting you at the congress face to face! There will be a strong Science + Practice theme throughout the congress and pre-congress workshops. Look out for the S+P logo and the InPractice editors. There will also be a youth employment policy panel as part of the EAWOPii presentations and Sakshi and Angela will be joining an *International Humanitarian Panel* making the case to improve the well-being of workers around the world.



DR. BELGIN OKAY-SOMERVILLE, SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR
belgin.okay-somerville@glasgow.ac.uk



DR. ANGELA CARTER, SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR
angela_carter@justdevelopment.co.uk



DR. DIANA RUS, EDITOR
d.rus@creative-peas.com



PD DR. ROMAN SOUCEK, EDITOR
roman.soucek@fau.de



DR. COLIN ROTH, EDITOR
colin.roth@blackboxopen.com

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Contributing to the bigger picture: How work and organizational psychology can inform policymaking for improving youth employment

Interview with Professor Rosalind Searle, Inaugural Director of EAWOP Impact Incubator, Professor in Human Resource Management and Organizational Psychology at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, Scotland.

Rosalind.Searle@glasgow.ac.uk



About the interviewee

Rosalind Searle holds the chair in Human Resource Management and Organisational Psychology at the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School. She is also director of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology's Impact Incubator, which translates scientific research in work psychology into practical ideas for policymakers and practitioners. She is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the Royal Society of Arts, and an academic fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personal and Development (CIPD). Her research focuses primarily on organizational trust, particularly the role of human resource management, change and decent work in organizational trust. She is an associate editor for Group and Organisation Management and the Journal of Trust Research, and her research has appeared in a range of leading international journals.

Introduction

Work and organizational psychology can have significant potential impact on the productivity and well-being of individuals and organizations. Although often our unit of analysis is at the individual-, group- or organization-level, we have substantial scope to influence policymaking. To this aim, in the 2019 Turin meeting, the EAWOP General Assembly decided to set up the EAWOP Impact Incubator (EAWOPii) initiative. In 2020 Prof Ros Searle was appointed as the inaugural director of the EAWOPii. Since her appointment, Ros has been busy appreciating what other people understand by work and organizational psychology (WOP), where we have particular voice and expertise, and thereby setting up a strategy for improving WOP's impact on society. The strategy is designed to make the science of work psychology more accessible to policymakers across Europe. EAWOPii translates WOP insights and evidence into plain language, and produces briefings directed at senior policymakers, and thereby informs, guides, and contributes to work-related policymaking in Europe. It therefore aims to become a 'go to' repository of WOP evidence-base for policymakers.

Young people have been one of the five key streams that Ros and her team have identified as a priority area where WOP has significant positive impact. Other streams where EAWOPii currently displays resources on are threats and securities, decent work, marginalised groups, women, and ethnic minorities. I spoke to Ros in April 2021 about why young people are an important stream for EAWOPii and how WOP science can further contribute to improve youth employment.

The interview

Belgin: *Young people have been identified as a key stream in the EAWOP Impact Incubator. Why is youth employment important for EAWOPii?*

Ros: What we are trying to do with the EAWOPii is to identify key topics, where we have (or the potential to have) greatest impact. Marginalised groups, such as young people, face the greatest challenges in terms of access to and experience of work, and therefore are at the risk of being left behind. This is particularly so in the current Covid-19 situation. We are trying to identify and provide resources for policymakers; to help them understand why youth employment matters. We have got such exciting science that shows how and why this matters. Our science shows, for instance, the mechanisms by which work can be made more meaningful, or how role identity development can be achieved at, and through, work for young people.

The previous recession in 2008–2009 showed to us what goes wrong for young people without access to work, in terms of their engagement in society. We were able to observe the added stress that joblessness creates, not only for young people themselves but, also for their families and, through that, into their communities and society as a whole. These issues are clearly highlighted in our Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) youth employment white paper (Searle, Erdogan, Peiró & Klehe, 2014). In that paper, we discuss how youth unemployment is a global phenomenon that is adversely affecting young people across the world for a variety of reasons. A key argument we make is that it is something that we really need to pay attention to because otherwise it means that young people are stalled in their development into adulthood, and into becoming economically independent. It also means that if we don't do something about youth unemployment, their pensions are under-funded, and their life experiences and potential are under-developed. We are wasting all that talent. So, not surprisingly young people are feeling very dissatisfied and disengaged. This then means they could potentially become threats to society. If you look at political groups such as ISIS, they are often composed of young people, particularly young people who have been excluded from work and society; and are preyed upon by these groups. At the EAWOPii, we feel that work has a huge role to play in society, in giving people a sense of meaning, in validating them and making them self-confident, and reducing their stress. Particularly with young people, therefore, we really need to make sure that they are actively included in the labour market and in society.

Belgin: *How can WOP impact policymaking, and in particular help improve youth employment?*

Ros: It's about thinking about who the stakeholders are, identifying who would be interested in what you are researching. So, if we are talking about research looking at young people, we could think about education and training providers, employers, careers advisers or policymakers who might be interested in what you have got to say. It is important to connect with these stakeholders. Your research questions will be much better if they are informed by those who are working in the practice. It's about sharing your research and having those conversations to be able to shape your own research enquiry. This helps in identifying real world issues that people are facing. That way your research is not only much more exciting and impactful but also, you will actually be doing some cutting edge, topical research. Charis Rice and I wrote about it in a paper looking at impact in health services (Searle & Rice, 2020), in which we say it's about the dialogue between research and practice coming together, where policymakers and practitioners help us ask better research questions. They help us thrive as scientists because they push us to solve problems that matter to them. We have got so much we can help them with.

When I think about my own research journey in this field, it was about going to events where Human Resource (HR) practitioners were at (e.g., HR professional organizations, policymakers or regulators in a specific field) and asking questions. It can be very scary. But it is all about engagement and participation. So, through the EAWOPii, we will try to create opportunities for active engagement with policymakers. Personally, I was asked by the Professional Standards Authority to come and talk to them about trust because trust is a huge component of regulation. From that first engagement we started a voyage of many conversations. Initially I was part of a small event with many different people, including lawyers, HR professionals and regulators. That gave me opportunities to talk to people in different countries, who were interested in the things that I was interested in. From these initial conversations they moved on to fund our research (see Searle, Rice, McConnell & Dawson, 2017). Most recently, the Professional Standards Authority came and asked for insights to contribute to their Covid-19 response. So, I know from experience that those partnerships are very important. Understanding who are the key stakeholders and having conversations with them is important. It's a journey from research to impact.

One of the most important ways we can help improve youth employment is to engage with local authorities and schools. Work and organizational psychology can share

important insights, for instance on career decision-making, role modelling, job search and job choice. Sadly, particularly young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, often have no or limited access to work experience. So, if you are a young person, particularly a very able young person, you may be held back because you cannot navigate the labour market. You cannot easily answer questions relevant for your career development such as *How do I become a lawyer or an accountant*, because you have no role models, and you have no resources to help you understand how to become an accountant or a lawyer. As a result, these kinds of professions are often barred to people; not because of actual physical barriers but because of these knowledge barriers. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds just can't navigate to some destinations because they start off in the wrong place. They are therefore more likely to make the wrong decisions, for instance in terms of the subjects they are choosing at school. They then end up in a maze of bad job choices, in which they get exhausted because it is not a good fit with their interests and capabilities. This makes them more likely to defer a less hard option, but in doing so they don't get to fulfil their potential.

If you look at what is going on with the current Covid-19 situation, the starter jobs that give young people work experience while at school, those have disappeared. So, what happens to young people who haven't had the experience of work? This will affect their choices about what they want to do and what they can do. Sometimes it's more about understanding what you don't want to do and why you don't want to do something, rather than what you do. When I look back over my life, I was all set to become an economist until I worked in an economics and finance office and realised that it was the last thing I wanted to do. It was only through that experience of doing the job, or trying out the job, that I learned.

In a previous role, we worked with a team of engineers. They were using engineering and science in primary school to inform the curriculum. As a result of that they were creating new ways for young people to explore engineering careers. This was aimed at particularly changing young girls' understanding and enthusiasm about sciences and engineering. They were enabling young people to see how they could use the things they were doing in the school and how these experiences would lead to jobs and occupations. These students were as young as seven or eight years old. It's about working with teachers, providing them with resources to show it's not only about the knowledge of engineering but, maybe more importantly, about young people's self-efficacy and confidence.

Often people from lower socio-economic groups do not have a financial buffer. If they make a mistake, then it has significant consequences for them. This often means that they can't pursue their dreams, if they have got to make big decisions such as how to pay off their student loans. If they don't see themselves in higher education and if they don't understand how to navigate to where their dreams may be, it is psychologically and financially safer for them to take a lower road into employment. Sadly, in today's labour markets, we know these roles are subject to obsolescence due to automation (e.g., in low-skilled manual work). It is important to build resilience in our society through education, through different provisions, so that young people have options; and can switch between different things. That means we need to think carefully about work.

Belgin: *How does the EAWOPii connect WOP researchers with policymakers and practitioners?*

Ros: We are creating resources. These resources will be briefings, cartoons, animations, anything that help distil the science into manageable chunks. These will be easily accessible on our dedicated website.

We will also continue to organise meetings. It is very important to have opportunities to engage with stakeholders and to pursue these opportunities. One of the things we can do better is around putting together steering groups. We can work with practitioners to carefully refine topics. An example is a research grant that I worked on about threats and security, we had stakeholders from a variety of different organizations. We came up with this toolkit. Yet, they were saying that they were interested in the most basic, the beginning bit, of our toolkit. Having those conversations, so you understand what works for the stakeholders and where they need your input, is very important. It is challenging. But if we can identify the right people for the steering groups, they can be hugely instrumental in taking your research to a different, much more informed place where you can have impact because they will be there opening the door.

We had similar engagement with our EAWOP Young People's Work, Employment and Careers Small Group Meeting (Okay-Somerville, Scholarios & Searle, 2020). We had stakeholders from many areas relevant for youth employment; along with representatives of careers practitioners, apprenticeship providers, policymakers, HR professionals, and WOP researchers. We created a really exciting opportunity. Each day of our five-day meeting began with hearing what policymakers and practitioners think are the key issues in youth employment from their perspective. Then in the second half of the day, we fed back our WOP research to them. When researchers were giving their talks they then

had, in the back of their minds, how have I addressed the points raised earlier by these stakeholders in my research. This was a good challenge for all involved. We saw this in the feedback we received. We just need to keep those conversations active as we go along with our research.

Belgin: *How can WOPs and stakeholders engage with the EAWOP Impact Incubator?*

Ros: We are just finishing our website (see <https://www.eawopimpact.org/>). This is going to have different streams of WOP research where we see impact, one of which will be youth employment. Each stream will have resources listed. If you see there are gaps in those resources and you think you can complement, please do get in touch with us. There will also be events coming up that researchers can take part in. These will include Small Group Meetings (SGMs). We would like to work with the organisers of the SGMs by adding new streams of information and resources. They are the scientists who know the stuff.

Similarly, practitioners and policymakers can get in touch on the Impact Incubator website to let us know of the topics they are interested in. The website offers an option to register, during which we also gather information on what different stakeholders are interested in and what they would like to see more of. We don't have all the answers. We have some of the questions we think are important. We have some of the resources. We are trying to understand the questions that people are interested in and make sure that we align these with the resources we have from our WOP science.

A better world for employees, makes a better world for families, makes a better world for communities, makes a better world for society. Work is a hugely undervalued way of helping financial capability but also mental health, identity, and well-being. Make sure to follow us on Twitter (@EawopI). There are some amazing resources we share there. This is a journey and we're on this journey together so come and help us be pilgrims. Come and help us work out how to make our story and our science hit that sweet spot!

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The wider community benefit of youth employment: An interview with Police Scotland

Interview with Colin Convery, Chief Inspector for Scottish Safer Communities Division, Police Scotland.

Colin.convery@scotland.pnn.police.uk



About the interviewee

Upon graduation from university Colin worked for the Enterprise Network focusing on creating and maintaining safe environments for new and growing businesses. In this role, Colin was responsible for community and business development, and grant processing. Colin has been in the police for 21 years. For the past 18 months, Colin has been working as the Chief Inspector for Scottish Safer Communities Division, Police Scotland. He is responsible for a diverse range of issues, including all issues to do with young people policy and youth justice; other than child protection. Importantly his remit covers mental health and suicide prevention. Colin also leads work on missing people and is the head of the National Missing Persons Unit.

Introduction

Youth unemployment is a social challenge. During the EAWOP Small Group Meeting, we heard from Police Scotland more about why youth employment is important for reducing crime and improving community well-being. I interviewed Colin Convery, Chief Inspector for Scottish Safer Communities Division, Police Scotland, to hear more about initiatives Police Scotland are involved in that support youth employment. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the interview took place online and lasted about an hour. This is a summary of my conversation with Colin Convery.

The interview

Belgin: *Why is youth employment important for Police Scotland?*

Colin: In modern day policing the importance of youth employment is primarily about the wider community benefits and impact that employment brings. This would include, for instance, community well-being and values, as well as tackling poverty and factors that affect criminality, for instance substance abuse. A lot of the work we engage in is preventative.

Youth employment is important because it creates the leaders of the future, those who can lead communities or businesses. Youth employment and volunteering provides people with a lot of strong values, that they can then take into supporting themselves, their families, and their community.

Employment brings a lot of support for young people. It brings moral support (e.g.,

instilling work values) but also financial support and health benefits as well. Through employment young people can start to get an understanding of the working life and enhance their opportunities. Specifically, from a policing perspective, employment also gives young people opportunities to overcome some of the factors that might lead to offending, which could include mental health issues or substance abuse. For instance, young people in employment are arguably more likely to avoid substance abuse or to seek treatment.

Belgin: *How does Police Scotland support youth employment?*

Colin: There are a number of ways through which Police Scotland supports youth employment, some direct, some indirect. Police Scotland employs young people; you can become a police officer or part of the police staff at the age of 18 years. We also have a significant number of recruits aged 21 years and above.

Focusing particularly on young people who have been brought up within the social care environment (we call this group *care experienced* young people) our trauma-informed approach to policing is important for supporting youth employment. Care experienced young people refer to ‘*looked after*’ children and those who have left social care (care leavers), and they often have poorer life experiences and outcomes, including education and employment outcomes. The Promise, the Independent Care Review published by the Scottish Government in 2020, also emphasises increasing opportunities for care experienced people to access employment, training, stable housing, and support.

More specifically, we are currently focusing on our National Corporate Parenting Plan (see Police Scotland, 2018). Police Scotland joined other public bodies and organizations in Scotland to become a corporate parent to improve the lives and futures of Scotland’s care experienced young people. We have a specific strategy which sets out how we will work with and support those who are care experienced. Our strategy recognises the trauma that they have experienced in previous life and the unique challenges that they face, being in care. We work closely with a range of organizations to stay informed about issues that could have a negative impact on care experienced young people.

One of these organizations is Who Cares? Scotland, who are the national champions of care experienced people throughout their lives. One of our ongoing objectives as part of the National Corporate Parenting Plan is to help care experienced young people become successful learners, and confident, responsible, and effective contributors. For instance, we are promoting volunteering opportunities within Police Scotland Youth Volunteers.

This is a group consisting of young people who volunteer to support their communities. These young volunteers are provided with training from the police but also from our partners. This offers invaluable opportunities for young people to volunteer, develop skills, and become part of our team. Similarly, we work with the Prince's Trust in order to engage with the hardest to reach young people; with the aim of diverting them away from crime and anti-social behaviour. With this partnership, we try to promote positive relationships between officers and young people in local communities.

Another youth employment initiative we engage with concerns specifically young offenders. We have a police officer who works with Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution in Polmont whose role is to promote positive lifestyle choices for young men in prison. They work with small groups along with a range of other partners to promote good choices. Part of this programme is also about supporting young people when they return to their communities. For instance, young people may have been in prison at 16 years old and are released at 22 or 23 years of age. This means they missed out on a significant period for development and maturity. So, with local partners, we work towards supporting young people to make better life choices when they return to communities. The success of this, of course, depends on the individual and on the services that are available or third sector provision to support them through that process.

We are also reviewing our recruitment processes to allow easier access for young people to apply for positions available in Police Scotland (including information on police officer, special constables, and support staff roles). We are trying to promote the police as a legitimate, realistic, and also rewarding career for young people to pursue. A career in the police may be one young people may not consider because of misconceptions about previous offending, which does not necessarily stop them being eligible candidates for employment by the police.

In terms of the indirect work, we are part of the Community Planning Partnerships across Scotland. These partnerships bring together all public agencies (e.g., local authority, fire, police, National Health Service) and charities for the general benefit and development of the community, including employment and the economy. They all have different priorities and objectives depending on local need. Supporting young people into employment is often in the objectives of most partnerships. We have a key role to play as a strategic partner in all the Community Planning Partnerships, with senior officers from Police Scotland as part of the partnership. We may not lead these initiatives; but we will certainly support local partners.

Belgin: *What do you think makes good youth employment?*

Colin: I would say that any youth employment is good; any opportunity that employment brings can only be good for an individual. Specifically, for the youth, there are certain characteristics that make it particularly good. These would be work that will give young people skills and develop their skills further. Jobs where they will be able to get meaningful experiences that are perhaps transferable to other industries, to other jobs.

Belgin: *What do you see as the key challenges or key issues in youth employment?*

Colin: I think it is about creating an environment where youth employment can happen; where employers will give young people a chance, whether it is taking them on without any experience and particular skills or helping them to further develop their skills. This will depend on what training and development opportunities there are in place to develop a young person's skills in the workplace, in education, or in volunteering. Some of it is also about how we let people young people know about the opportunities available to them so they can take advantage, and make choices, about what they want to do.

Relatedly, resources are needed to support employers to provide opportunities for young people and take away some of the risk that comes with employing someone who has little/no skills or experience. I mentioned geography as a barrier to accessing work earlier. We need to consider how we can get young people (who may not be able to drive) to a place of employment; and what public transport may be available to them. It is important to think about this in a community to enable sustainable access to work.

Conclusion

We are grateful for the insights Colin has shared with us in contributing to this *Special Issue* on youth employment. This interview clearly highlights the importance of public safety nets for those young people who are most disadvantaged in society and in labour markets. Moreover, the initiatives and the challenges discussed by Colin shows that just as 'it takes a village to raise a child', it takes a whole community approach to tackle the youth employment challenges, including support from the policymakers, public sector bodies, employers and non-governmental organizations.

Inclusion and diversity was a key theme in our *Young People's Work, Employment and Careers* Small Group Meeting. Within the workplace, work and organizational psychology (WOP) research informs diversity and inclusion policies (e.g., for cultivating better

workplace relationships). This interview shows that our research has further significant potential impact on those members of society who are furthest away from work and labour markets, such as young offenders and care experienced young people. Mimicking the community-based initiatives Police Scotland is involved in, WOP research would be most impactful if it can incorporate views from multiple stakeholders who have intrinsic interest in tackling youth employment.

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Non-academic, lazy and not employable: Exploring stereotypes of NEETs in England

Beth Suttill



BETH SUTTILL
Lancaster University, UK
b.suttill@lancaster.ac.uk

About the author

Dr Beth Suttill completed her PhD at the University of Leicester, UK in 2017. It focused on the self-identities of young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Prior to this she worked on a research project which explored the learning transitions of students taking the Access to Higher Education diploma (a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university). Beth is now a Senior Teaching Associate in Management and Organisation Studies at Lancaster University. Her current research interests are based around youth transitions, unemployment, and identity.

Abstract

For most young people being not in education, employment, or training (NEET) is transitory. However, the term NEET is often used to refer to young people who may go on to become socially excluded as adults. Although NEET represents a heterogeneous group, they tend to be stereotyped by policymakers and society as 'other', whether being labelled as disadvantaged or 'on the margins'. The present study gives NEET young people a voice and the ability to challenge these stereotypes. Ethnographic research was undertaken at a centre for NEET young people in central England, to hear from those with experiences of being NEET themselves. The research demonstrates that these young people highlighted their individual deficiencies when discussing their unemployment. They were influenced by the stereotypes associated with being young and unemployed, trying to distance themselves from these by emphasising their 'student' status. They were keen to show that they were 'doing something with their lives' despite the barriers they faced. They were 'ordinary' young people, like others in their age group but had differing experiences of unemployment and education, and were facing different challenges in their lives, making it difficult to treat them as a homogenous category.

Keywords: NEET, unemployment, stereotypes, young people, ethnographic research

Introduction

During the 2008–2013 recession NEET young people were viewed as one of the most vulnerable groups, leading to fears and warnings over the creation of a 'lost generation' (Wearden, 2010) and questions about a 'generation at risk' (International Labour

Organization, ILO, 2013). Similar concerns are now being raised due to the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The most recent statistics suggest that 797,000 young people (aged 16 to 24 years) in the UK were NEET in October to December 2020. This accounts for around 11.6 per cent of the 16–24-year-old population (Office for National Statistics, ONS, 2021). Within the EU, 12.6 per cent of the population aged 15–29 years are NEET (Eurofound, 2020).

Existing research has criticised the term NEET and its use as a service intervention label (Furlong, 2006; Hutchinson, Beck & Hooley, 2016; Yates & Payne, 2006), challenging negative connotations and homogeneity associated with the term. Despite this, few studies have asked those who are NEET how they define themselves and their situation. Other than the negative perceptions associated with NEET, little is known about how these young people see themselves (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Instead, research has tried to categorise certain groups who are in this situation; looking at the size, composition, and characteristics of the group, and attempting to outline possible ‘triggers’ of NEET status (Eurofound, 2012; Nudzor, 2010; Yates & Payne, 2006).

Hearing from young people themselves allows those who are associated with the category of NEET to be better understood, giving insight into the support these young people need. Parry (2020) discussed the importance of breaking down unhelpful stereotypes to support young people’s transition to the workplace, acknowledging the difficult situation they face within the labour market and myths around ‘millennials’ being lazy, entitled snowflakes. Research can play a role in challenging some of the more entrenched and inaccurate assumptions about young people that infiltrate political discourse and public opinion (France, 2007, p.165 cited in Simmons & Thompson, 2011).

NEET as a policy category

The term NEET is a constructed category. In the 1980s, as part of the UK government’s response to a record rise in youth unemployment, changes were made to the official status of the young unemployed (Yates, Harris, Sabates & Staff, 2011). Due to these changes, the unemployed young person essentially ceased to exist; those under 18 years were denied recognition as unemployed workers as they no longer appeared on the official register of those who were ‘unemployed and seeking work’. In a speech given at the 1989 Conservative Party conference, referring to the withdrawal of social security benefits for those aged 16 and 17 years, the British Prime Minister of the time Margaret Thatcher declared that “at 16 [years] unemployment should not be an option” (Griffin, 2013, p.63). This led to a group of ‘undefined’ young people who were out of work but

were not classed as unemployed. Researchers and government officials attempted to look for a new way of labelling those experiencing 'difficult transitions' to work. The term NEET was coined by a senior Home Office official in 1996 (Thompson, 2011). In 1997 the tackling of youth unemployment under the new label 'NEET' became a key youth policy for the new Labour government as part of a wider initiative against social exclusion. It has since remained a major focus of research and policy interest.

According to policy in the UK, a person identified as NEET is either unemployed or economically inactive and is either looking for work or is inactive for reasons other than being a student or carer at home (Delebarre, 2016). Since its conception, the category has expanded. Initially NEET was defined as "those 16–18-year-olds who neither participate in education or training nor have a job" (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p.15). Now the term covers those aged between 16 and 24 years, reflecting growing concerns over graduate unemployment and labour market engagement of other young people over the age of 18 years (Simmons, Russell & Thompson, 2014).

The category is determined by a process of exclusion; if individuals are 'not in education', 'not in employment' and 'not in training' based on the Labour Force Survey (2015). The number of NEET young people is estimated by deducting those in education, employment or training from the total 16- to 24-year-old population. The term NEET is a label of deficit of a group outside the norm. The category supports a totalising discourse that seeks to normalise participation in education and training (Smith & Wright, 2015). The NEET individual is 'othered' making policy intervention desirable and necessary.

The NEET category continues to dominate UK youth policy, being the subject of intensive debate amongst policymakers, media and other social commentators (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). It has also started to be used more widely beyond the UK context. In 2010 NEETs were specifically referred to for the first time in European policy discussions. Within this context it is used to refer to young people aged 15 to 29 years, with the aim of broadening the understanding of "the vulnerable status of young people and to better monitor their problematic access to the labour market" (Eurofound, 2020). Yet the term lacks clarity and is problematic. Yates and Payne (2006, p.329) claim that it "defines young people by what they are not and subsumes under a negatively-perceived label a heterogeneous mix of young people whose varied situations and difficulties are not conceptualised." Young people are grouped together because of their current status, but have different experiences and characteristics, and are facing different challenges. Uncertainty remains over who NEETs are and how they should be defined (France, 2016). The NEET categorisation can be viewed as more inclusive and complex than measuring

youth unemployment; providing evidence of the diverse ways young people are vulnerable and keeping disadvantaged young people on the political agenda (Furlong, 2006). The category covers those who are available for work and seeking employment and those who are not, drawing in a range of individuals who would not traditionally have been regarded as unemployed. It is misleading to assume that the most vulnerable or marginalised groups comprise the majority of the NEET group, even though policy interventions tend to focus on these groups (Maguire, 2015a). Research by Eurofound identified five main subcategories of NEET which included a mix of 'vulnerable' and 'non-vulnerable' young people: a) the conventionally unemployed; b) the unavailable; c) the disengaged; d) the opportunity seekers; and e) the voluntary NEETs (Eurofound, 2012, p.24). However, the policy category is often reduced to the issue of unemployment with the reduction in numbers of NEET young people used as a performance target for youth services (Yates et al., 2011).

Understanding the young people who are placed into the NEET category is important, as how the interaction between young people and the world around them is viewed dictates the nature of intervention which is favoured in any type of youth orientated programme or institution, and the social goals which should be met through such intervention (Wyn & White, 1998). The practices in which young people engage and the meaning they construct therefore cannot be viewed in isolation from broader discourses and practices, and must be interpreted in relation to the discourses constructed by policymakers, researchers, and the media (Simmons et al., 2014). Language and ideas used by organizations can structure the ways that young people see themselves and the social world.

Stereotypes of NEET young people

The impact of negative stereotyping matters to the lives of individuals, including the individuals within this study, as it can lead to stigmatisation, demonisation, and exclusion. Goffman (1968) argues that stigmatising groups is one way in which society controls their behaviour. The government establishes normal-abnormal categories and people are expected to stay within the boundaries of normality (Tyler, 2013). Stigma can therefore be seen as a relationship of devaluation in which an individual is disqualified from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1968). Political rhetoric, policy documents and news media can create stigmatising depictions of marginal populations and groups.

Through stereotyping, NEET young people can come to be seen in certain ways. Simmons and Thompson (2011, p.117) argue that the discourse surrounding NEET "tends to highlight the situation of young people who conform to its stereotypes, constructing

them as more typical than they really are". The negative connotations of NEET status in policy documents and the media "have come to stigmatise and marginalise young people" (Thompson, 2011, p.792).

Many employers not recruiting recent school leavers report deficiencies in 'soft skills', such as time management and self-motivation, as reasons for rejecting young applicants (UKCES, 2011 cited in Simmons et al., 2014, p.100). Employers complain that young people lack the right attitudes and personal qualities, and work experience (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). Media portrayals of young people who are NEET highlight worries that young people are 'unfit' for work; they lack grit, aspiration and the 'right skills' (Adonis, 2013; Cohen, 2013). Young people are therefore not viewed as 'work ready', with employers having to bear the 'risk' of taking on workers who are likely to be a burden rather than an asset (Simmons et al., 2014).

Being NEET is also associated with being lower attaining and as 'practical' rather than 'academic'. Those with low levels of education are three times more likely to be NEET compared to those with tertiary education (Eurofound, 2012) and those who are "disaffected with schooling in the form of exclusion, truancy or bullying" are also found to be at an increased risk of being NEET (Maguire & Rennison, 2005, p.196). A report by the Fabian Society (Brooks, 2014) suggests that the defining characteristic of most 18-year-old NEET young people is low qualifications, especially in English and Mathematics. They therefore tend to be treated as a homogenous group who would benefit from basic skills and work-related learning. The focus is on enhancing skills (e.g., literacy and numeracy) associated with 'employability,' referring to "a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment" (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p.5). They are seen as requiring an alternative to the academic curriculum which failed them at school.

Whether they are viewed as 'unemployable' or non-academic, being NEET is attributed to young people themselves, constructed in terms of their alleged deficits such as lack of skills and motivation or being viewed as delinquent and dysfunctional (Yates et al., 2011). This focus on the individual has led to an often-unrelenting negative discourse that constructs NEET young people as 'other' (Russell, Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Being NEET tends to be seen as a 'problem' with young people (MacDonald, 2011) and they are viewed as needing help. David (2014) argues that much of the literature aiming to address the NEET issue has been written by local government authorities, educational institutions and central government bodies viewing NEET as a problem; with the young

people either being viewed as victims or as individuals who are incapable of changing their circumstances.

Concerns about young people outside education and employment are often motivated by notions of youth as in trouble or at risk of social exclusion. Yet these worries lie alongside concerns about idle and troublesome youth. Simmons and Thompson (2011) suggest that there is a 'dual narrative' in NEET policy where these young people are simultaneously regarded as *in trouble* and *as trouble*. They are a source of trouble in need of control, or victims of trouble in need of protection. These are people who require help to prevent negative consequences now and later in their lives, yet they are also viewed as people who engage in criminal or anti-social activity. As well as low educational attainment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy and care needs, the NEET label has been associated with gang membership, early criminalisation, drug culture and dependency, and prostitution (David, 2014). It has been claimed in government reports (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) that those who are NEET are more likely to offend and be anti-social.

Stereotypes and stigmatisation have been acknowledged in previous studies of NEET young people. Thompson, Russell and Simmons (2014) suggest that political and media discourses around benefits, unemployment and early parenthood were seen to shape the lived experiences of the NEET young people in their research. Several participants were also concerned about stigmatisation brought about by stereotypes. Furthermore, Miller, McAuliffe, Riaz and Deuchar (2015) found that the young people in their study felt situated on the margins of their communities due to the way they were perceived and treated. Age, gender, and the local area in which they lived were all seen to impact upon how they believed they were perceived, with incidents of labelling and stereotyping mentioned frequently.

The assumptions and stereotypes linked to being NEET are inadequate in understanding the lives of these young people. The Children, Schools and Families Committee report (2010) in the UK acknowledged the imperfection of the term; "its use as a noun to refer to a young person can be pejorative and stigmatising". However, the category continues to be used within the development of policy and programmes. Therefore, it is important to understand the individual experiences of young people, exploring how they view their status, how they label themselves and how stereotypes and assumptions related to the NEET category have impacted upon them. It is essential to look at the young people who are associated with this category as individuals and acknowledge their different

experiences. This can help to generate a better understanding of these young people, through which the relevance of NEET as a policy category can be explored.

This research focuses upon how a group of young people on a course for those who are NEET see their own lives. It explores some of the misconceptions and underlying assumptions about those who are NEET, offering different conceptions of them by looking at how they describe themselves. It is important to focus on who they are, rather than rendering them as invisible within a homogenous population of "uneducable and unemployable" (Simmons & Thompson, 2013, p.7). Discourses can shape experiences, and the negative discourses associated with this group could be having a negative impact upon young people who are classed as NEET. This paper will go on to discuss the methods used to uncover the participants experiences, before exploring the findings of the research.

Method

As the aim of the research was to focus on young people's understandings of themselves and their experiences a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the understandings and perceptions of individuals, and how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives; looking at how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others (Berg, 2009). An ethnographic approach was used to gain an understanding of the individual experiences of the participants; attempting to capture the meanings they created through immersion in their world. According to Montgomery (2006) an ethnographic approach can illustrate and illuminate young people's lives and is one of the best ways of getting information about them. It enables a preference for adapting the focus to what proves available and interesting, rather than imposing an outsider's sense of what is going on; it can be viewed as a 'method of discovery' (Gilbert, 2008).

A specific case was chosen to illuminate the experiences of young people who have spent time being NEET. The chosen organization, a centre for NEET young people run by a charity in central England, allowed me to gain insights other organizations would not be able to provide (Siggelkow, 2007). At this centre young people can gain qualifications in Mathematics, English, Information Communication Technology (ICT), and Digital Arts and Media. They also do one week of work experience and get help with job searching and interview skills in their 'employability' sessions. The students are encouraged to go on to further education or to get a job. This centre was found by

talking to a contact who works with institutions running programmes for NEET young people in central England; and they responded to an email asking for participants.

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Leicester ethics committee. All participants gave informed consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms. To further protect anonymity, the centre where the research took place, and the location, are not referred to by name.

While at the centre, I volunteered as a classroom assistant and worked with two groups of young people between 16 and 24 years of age. One of the groups comprised of 17 members (nine female, eight male), while the other was made up of 10 people (seven female, three male). These were the first two groups to start at the centre and therefore the sample was one of convenience (as they were the only young people I had access to). Due to the ethnographic approach of the study, the sampling was less focused on the people to select for the research, than on the selection of a site for observation (Angrosino, 2007). Sampling proceeded from the relevance of the participants' experiences of being NEET, rather than their representativeness in relation to the NEET population. At the time of the research the young people were not NEET, as they were in training, but they had experienced periods out of education, employment, and training.

I spent two days a week at the centre over a period of four months from January to May 2014. I left when the research came to a natural end with the groups finishing their course. The ethnography was overt, with both the young people and staff at the centre aware that I was a researcher. I carried out observations of classroom sessions, chatted with the young people, and had access to the materials they created in their lessons. I kept a research diary in which I wrote about my observations, conversations, and reflections, generating much data from detailed field notes. I did not ask specific demographic questions, as I wanted the young people to define themselves in their own terms. Therefore, some of the participants ages are not listed as this never came up during my observations and discussions.

In addition, I also collected written accounts to find out about the participants' experiences of unemployment. This activity included an element of photo elicitation. I asked participants to look at images used to illustrate news stories about NEET young people. These images reflected the following description by Brooks (2014, p.17) who asks the reader to close their eyes and imagine two young people who are NEET: *"Many readers will have imagined a pair of male teenagers leaning on an estate wall or standing on a*

street corner. They are probably wearing hoodies, tracksuit bottoms and trainers. There might be a tower block, chain link fence or a battered playground in the background, under a grey sky or neon lights.” I did not tell the participants what the images were about and asked them to write down their first impressions of what they saw. They then chose one image and wrote a story about what they thought was happening in that picture. For the second part of the activity the participants created their own newspaper articles which discussed their experiences of unemployment. This offered a different way to capture the narratives of the participants, giving them a chance to tell their stories in their own words. These texts allowed me to generate a more detailed and in depth understanding of the young people, providing a fuller picture of their experiences. Using different ways of collecting data reduced opportunity for bias that may have resulted from pure observation (Angrosino, 2007).

Analyses

The research explored how the young people described themselves, how they related to the term NEET, how they viewed their current situation, and what their aspirations were for the future. Data was coded and analysed thematically. I searched for patterns in the data compressing it into several themes. Open codes were derived from the data that describe, name, or classify the object under study, or a certain aspect of it. Single words and short sequences of words were used to attach codes to the data line by line. The initial codes were looked at for similarities and differences and grouped together to generate themes. The codes themselves included both constructed codes, taken from the literature, and in vivo codes, taken from the expressions of the participants (Flick, 2009). The individual participants were identified by numbers during analyses, before being given pseudonyms. The findings presented in this paper are focused on the following themes identified in the research: Experience of unemployment, Experience of education and training, and Self-portrayal and reaction to stereotypes.

Findings

This study found that these young people identified individual deficiencies when discussing potential reasons for their unemployment, which impacted upon their confidence and self-esteem. Yet, this was alongside an acknowledgement that they faced other barriers. They were viewed generally as disengaged learners; however often wider issues had impacted upon their ability to engage with education. A focus on gaining certain qualifications led to frustration and a churn between different

training providers. The participants were viewed as young people (or 'youths'), and were negotiating stereotypes associated with this, alongside those linked with being unemployed. Many of them used the category of 'student' to combat their association with these stereotypes. These findings will be further outlined and discussed in more depth below.

Experience of unemployment

The participants described their experiences before joining the course; one had been kicked out of college, and a few were 'on the dole' (on unemployment benefits) and 'feeling lost'. Unemployment felt like a personal failure for some of them and there was a focus on their individual shortcomings, with the most common reasons for being unemployed viewed as a lack of work experience and of qualifications. This can be observed in John's (18 years-old) self-description below:

"A young boy now aged 18 has been out of education for the past year...he now has no education or training to get a job so that he feels he has let his self down and he has failed his family."

Low confidence and self-esteem were common. When asked to describe herself Bella (20 years-old) wrote the word 'self-conscious'. These feelings were exacerbated by a failure to find employment; *"Having to go out, look for work, going to interviews and not getting a job puts your confidence down, making you lose motivation of looking for work, makes you feel like you want to give up"* (Tim, 19 years-old). Participants spoke about being unmotivated, feeling down, and feeling dreadful when you keep getting rejection letters. Fear and lack of motivation were discussed as barriers by some participants.

One of the aims of the staff at the centre was to build the confidence of the young people, and a number of the students did feel like this had been achieved. Reflecting on their time at the centre on the last day Olivia stated, *"they have helped me loads with my confidence and stuff"* (Field notes, 01/05/2014). However, for some this confidence was tied to the context of the centre and this sense of self-esteem diminished once they left the course. For example, Charlotte (23 years-old) clearly grew in confidence during the programme. She claimed that before she attended, she did not talk to anybody and did not ask for help, but now she *"talked a bit more"* (Field notes, 16/04/2014). The tutors noticed that she had become a lot more vocal and had more confidence. However, this newly found confidence was linked to how comfortable she felt around the other staff and students. When Charlotte attended a different course, she reverted to being disengaged and quiet.

In addition to individual barriers related to qualifications and confidence, wider issues were also acknowledged. This study found that some of these young people felt discriminated against. One participant claimed they were 'unemployable' due to their age:

"Many teens in local areas where there are lots of jobs going are ready for work, some qualified and some not. Just because of how old they are and the price of insurance cost to companies means they are exempt from employability and therefore bracketed as an 'unemployable' age range".

There was a feeling amongst some in the study that employers were not giving young people an opportunity.

Other barriers highlighted were associated with the economic pressures the young people faced, with lack of money, issues with transport, no internet access and instability (including lack of a secure place to live). They needed money to get a job but needed a job to get money. Issues related to physical and mental health were also identified. Amongst the two groups there were students with depression and anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, body dysmorphia, cerebral palsy and epilepsy. In addition to this, the impact of the recession on the job market was discussed; *"there is not enough availability of jobs because quite a lot of people try applying for the one job."* (Gabby).

Being unemployed was generally constructed as a negative situation; *"It makes me feel down when I don't have a job"* (Tania). Nathan suggested that *"unemployed young people feel they have nothing to live for"*. Being out of work was related to having no social life, not meeting new people, being lonely, and being homeless. Feelings of boredom were common:

"Unemployment for me wasn't good at all. Although I tried doing stuff around the house and friends' houses, I got so bored. I tried keeping up with hobbies like football, and painting, but there's only so much you can do. I always used to try and do something to keep me occupied." (Liam)

Other negative consequences of being unemployed were listed as having no money, having no experience, losing motivation, having no routine and lacking independence: *"Being out of work is a horrible feeling, not having no money in your pocket, not able to treat yourself or others. Everyone loves money."* (Tim, 19 years-old)

However, one of the young people suggested that being unemployed and 'on benefits' was not a problem:

"I am not bothered about having a job or not, as you don't need a job to be happy... You don't need money to (make a living) have a healthy lifestyle. The way you live your life and the people around you is what makes you happy. When someone else is providing for you, you don't need to provide." (Ian, 19 years-old)

Other participants were conflicted. Nathan struggled with the idea of whether being unemployed and on benefits was a good or bad thing; "*this country does not make it easy to choose*". He described how he would like to be in full-time employment someday and he knows that he cannot live on benefits for the rest of his life. However, he felt he could do so much more with his time while he was unemployed and being on benefits meant he could get everything like medicine for free. Being unemployed was therefore not always viewed as problematic.

Experience of education and training

Alongside experiences of unemployment, the participants also discussed their education and training. Many of them had negative experiences of previous education. Some told stories of struggle and disrupted learning due to health or behavioural issues, or changes in living arrangements or circumstances. One participant had been in a serious car accident which affected his final year of school, while another had been kicked out due to anger issues. Bella (20 years-old) was not allowed to finish her college course when she got pregnant, even though she had been willing to take the work home. Others did not enjoy school or felt that they had not been supported.

Amongst the young people who struggled in education, it was not a simple story of them being non-academic and choosing to be disengaged. There were wider issues in their lives that impacted on and affected their ability to engage. In addition to this, disengagement for some young people was only related to specific subjects which they struggled with and therefore lacked confidence in. During their time at the centre Mathematics was particularly problematic for some of the participants; "*I hate Maths. I want to throttle Maths.*" (Olivia, Field notes 28/04/2014)

Some of the young people in the study did see themselves as academic, describing themselves as 'smart' or 'nerdy'. Bonnie suggested that she was 'literate', John (18 years-old) liked Maths, while Matt was good at coding and enjoyed doing puzzles and Sudoku. Some at the centre suggested they were there to work and learn. They got annoyed if it seemed like they were having their time 'wasted' in lessons; they wanted to be productive. A few of the participants complained that some in the centre were there for the wrong reasons or messed around too much. For example, some of the students did not want to work in a group with one of the participants as they thought that she was there "*just so that she had something to do during the day*" (Field note, 05/03/2014). Similarly, during the morning session a couple of the students were talking about those who were absent; "*If they cannot be bothered to come in, they should not be on the course.*" (Field notes, 02/04/2014)

Despite having differing attitudes towards education, training courses were seen as important as they enabled the participants to gain skills and qualifications which would help them into work. There was a focus on getting qualifications in Mathematics and English; subjects which were seen as essential to getting a job or going on to further education. Due to this, a process of churn between different training providers was apparent among the participants as they strived to get these qualifications through a series of short-term programmes. Altogether the students mentioned five other providers which one or more of them had engagement with. Most of these courses were based around functional skills (i.e., Mathematics and English), work experience and confidence building, offering something similar to the current programme the participants were on.

Frustration was evident amongst some of the participants that they were just being moved from one course to the next; *"I have had some help from school and [from a specific youth service] but so far all I have been able to do is college courses"* (Gabby). Demi (24 years-old) described how she has been at 'college' (by this she meant engaged in education with different providers) for six years and was hoping that this current course could guarantee her a job (Field notes, 12/2/2014). Due to the frustration of being unable to find a job, participants questioned the education and training they had done; *"for me, I've gone through school, college and training, all for what? I've had no job; come out of the training I've had and sometimes I think 'What is the point?'"* (Nathan)

Self-portrayal and reaction to stereotypes

As well as their experience of education, training and unemployment, participants demonstrated an awareness of stereotypes linked with being young and unemployed, however this did not expand to labelling themselves as NEET. When asked what the acronym NEET stood for none of the participants knew. The young people all thought that the 'T' stood for something to do with teens or teenagers: *"not employed...not even employable teens."* (Field notes, 10/03/2014)

The category seems to be associated with 'youths' however the participants had different understandings of themselves in relation to the notion of being a 'youth' or an adult. Leanne (16 years-old) who was the youngest on the course got offended by people calling her a kid:

Ian: *"You are 16. You are not an adult"*

Leanne: *"I can still go swimming for free, but I have to pay full fare on the bus."*

(Field notes, 03/02/2014)

Some of those over 18 years old saw themselves as adults. When asked to describe themselves some of the most common personality traits listed were mature and responsible, however one of the students listed immaturity as a barrier to gaining employment. Ian (19 years-old) argued that at 20 you are an adult. While Bella (20 years-old) suggested *"when you are 20 you are not a teenager but not quite an adult."* (Field notes, 30/04/2014)

The role of the media and negative stereotypes associated with young people was acknowledged by the participants. Simon argued that young people in general are stereotyped even though there are lots of positive things which they do such as community work. He described how he went on a scheme where they went camping for two weeks before carrying out community projects. (Field notes, 7/4/2014)

Alongside being 'youths', the participants were also negotiating stereotypes associated with being unemployed. Being 'on benefits' was linked with feelings of shame and embarrassment; *"sometimes I feel embarrassed to tell people I don't work because I don't like relying on others"* (Nina, 18 years-old). Some of the participants suggested that they were claiming money they did not deserve, with one of the young people describing how she felt like she was 'stealing' from the *"people who go out all day and work for this money."* (Katy, 19 years-old)

The participants felt that they would be judged by others for being unemployed:

"Telling someone that you sign on (to unemployment benefits) and them judging you saying that you're a dole dosser (someone taking unemployment benefit and doing nothing) ...the feeling is horrid" (Tim, 19 years-old).

Some of them suggested that their age made the situation worse, with society seen to be 'looking down' on them:

"When I'd get off the bus, I'd walk the 10-minute walk to the Job Centre where I'd hand in my booklet and get told by the women on the desk to sit down and wait for my name to be called. I can see the disgust in her eyes 'that girl's only 18 and has no job." (Katy, 19 years-old)

"I feel that as an unemployed youth I am looked down upon...A lot of people completely removed from the situation have a lot to say and do about the subject. That is a problem." (Bonnie)

They therefore felt they needed to show that they did want to work, and they had been looking for work:

"I tried almost every way of getting at least some money with no success, I tried applying/getting a job...it is bothering me massively as to where I was starting to hate myself and everyone around me." (Neil)

Participants demonstrated that they were trying to get a job and their current situation was not down to laziness or lack of effort. Some of the students focused on how many job applications they had put in to highlight how hard they were working; *"I have Job Centre today I've applied for 15 jobs but still no reply"* (Katy, 19 years-old). Similarly, Olivia suggested that she had handed out over 30 CVs (referring to a curriculum vitae document used when applying for jobs) but had not heard anything back yet.

To further distance themselves from stereotypes around unemployment, while they were on the course the participants constructed their identities around being 'students'; *"I go to a charity-based education centre, thus pushing me out of the NEET bracket"* (the use of the term NEET by this young person came after they had been introduced to the term by me). The staff at the centre referred to them as students and the young people would even update their social network to let people know that they were *'at college'*. (Field notes, 5/3/2014)

The findings demonstrate that the participants were impacted by stereotypes linked to NEET young people, as well as wider discourses around 'youths' and unemployment. However, for many young people, NEET is only a temporary status. Being unemployed was not central to who the participants in this research were; their employment or educational status was not a main aspect of their identities. They defined themselves through their personal characteristics, their relationships with others and their interests and hobbies. While some young people did see themselves as 'different' this was not related to them being unemployed or disadvantaged, it was based on them viewing their interests as being at odds with, or outside of, what is seen as 'popular' or 'mainstream'. It was not seen as a negative thing but was linked to the idea of being 'unique'.

Overall, the research outlines the experiences of these young people in relation to both their education and unemployment, as well as their reactions to stereotypes related to being young and unemployed. The implications of these findings in relation to some of the NEET stereotypes outlined previously will be discussed below to demonstrate the potential impact and issues with the misconceptions and assumptions associated with the category.

Discussion

The main stereotypes identified in this research were associated with NEET young people being 'not employable', non-academic and lazy. The implications of these labels for those who are associated with the category, and the usefulness of these stereotypes in helping

us to understand those who are NEET will be outlined in this discussion, alongside an acknowledgement of the limitations of the research and potential applications.

Young and unemployable

Similar to previous studies, this study found that young people do not describe themselves as NEET, nor do they identify with the concept, placing the category firmly within the discourse of policymakers (Rose, Daiches & Potier, 2012; Yates & Payne, 2006). However, stereotypes and generalisations linked to the category did have an impact upon them. Lack of qualifications, work experience and low confidence were seen by most as reasons for them being unemployed. The findings are consistent with prior research that shows how NEET young people feel hampered by their low skill levels (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016), and they often attribute their status to individualised factors (Simmons & Thompson, 2011).

Alongside this discussion of individual deficiencies linked to unemployment, there was also an acknowledgement of other barriers which these 'not even employable teens' faced. Like previous studies of NEET young people, there was some discussion of age discrimination by employers (Pemberton, 2008) and age being felt to be a cause for prejudice among young people (Miller et al., 2015). A local report on employment skills and training supported the participants' views, suggesting that employers were not creative in encouraging the employment of young people through a failure to provide apprenticeships and support their progression (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). Other barriers were associated with a lack of money, reflecting the feelings of young people in Russell's (2016) study who expressed frustration regarding their financial situation, and issues related to physical and mental health. Goldman-Mellor et al., (2016) argue that NEET is an economic and mental health issue, rather than a motivational one. However, the focus on the individual deficiencies within policy and programmes aimed at NEET young people means that other barriers young people are facing may not be taken into account.

Interventions aimed at NEET young people can sometimes focus on achieving a change in status, rather than sustaining this change. While the aim of courses based around 'employability' are to increase the confidence of those they work with, focusing on individual reasons for unemployment can contradict this aim as young people concentrate on what is wrong with them, rather than on their strengths and abilities. In addition to this, while confidence may be boosted in the short-term, if students struggle once they leave the programme, they will continue to blame themselves, negating this

impact on self-esteem. This became apparent among some of the young people in this research. Soft skills and self-esteem cannot be taught directly but need to be developed through positive learning experiences and relationship building (Beck, 2015).

Non-academic and disengaged

As well as the focus on individual deficiencies, NEET young people are often viewed as a homogenous group of learners, who are non-academic and different to other young people (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). However, this research demonstrates that the assumptions made about these young people being disengaged does not take into account their wider lives and experiences. Disengagement appears to be represented as a choice rather than something which can be forced onto young people. In addition to this, disengagement for some of the participants was related to certain subjects. The problematic relationship of some of the students with Mathematics does not make these young people different to other learners. Previous research has demonstrated that students experience Mathematics as difficult, abstract, boring and irrelevant (Osborne et al., 1997 cited in Hodgen, Küchemann, Brown & Coe, 2010, p.155). Stereotyping those who are NEET as non-academic and disengaged therefore does not help to understand the experiences of these young people.

The rejection of conventional academic educational approaches in programmes for NEET young people is based on the assumption that all NEET youths have negative experiences of education, however this is not the case (Beck, 2015). Whilst the majority of the participants in this research did have negative experiences, some did not. They were a varied and diverse group, with different experiences and abilities, similar to the young people in the work of Simmons and Thompson (2011).

As well as courses generally being aimed at the non-academic and disengaged, there is also a lack of focus on the quality of programmes. Young people can take part in a plethora of training programmes which tend to be offered by providers outside of mainstream educational institutions. These are usually aimed at enhancing employability, however, often make little to no difference in moving them towards meaningful employment (Miller et al., 2015). Churn between different training providers was evident in this study and has previously been highlighted in the research of Thompson et al. (2014) who found the young people in their study became trapped in a cycle of 'inadequate provision'. The frustration demonstrated by some of the participants was similar to the young people in the work of Simmons et al. (2014) who were becoming dispirited due to repeated participation in training courses. Being in education or training

can be disaffecting if people get disillusioned with the programme they are on, or if they find that it does not lead to anything (Russell, 2016).

Lazy, unemployed 'youths'

Alongside problematic assumptions about NEET young people being non-academic, the view of the participants as 'youths', which was evident amongst the practitioners on the programme, suggests that there is a lack of understanding of the much wider and older age group that have come to be associated with the NEET category (Maguire, 2015b). This is also reflected in media representations of NEET young people which tend to portray images of hooded young people on housing estates.

As well as being 'youths', the participants in this research were also negotiating structures that positioned them as unemployed, lazy and dependent on benefits (Russell, 2016). They highlighted strategies, such as dropping off CVs to employers, to demonstrate that they did not want to remain unemployed. Simmons et al., (2014) argue that in some cases these 'unsolicited applications' of dropping CVs off at employers' premises serve a partly symbolic function to demonstrate that the young person is doing something to find work. The participants generally did not attempt to challenge stereotypes around being young and unemployed, instead trying to distance themselves from them, particularly through labelling themselves as 'students'. Their association with the notion of being a student allowed them to 'become somebody' (Beck, 2015). Being in a learning situation constituted being 'somewhere' rather than 'nowhere'.

Due to this categorising of diverse people into one status, there is a contradiction within the literature, with NEET being viewed as a problem group of young people from poor backgrounds, or as a normal phase which a lot of young people experience. While one of the young people identified herself and the others on the course as '*disadvantaged*', the research highlights how they are 'ordinary young people with interests like others their age'. Viewing this group as NEET does not help to understand them or their lives. For most NEET is only a temporary status. The things which matter to young people themselves, such as their interests and relationships, should be acknowledged. NEET is not a central element of their self-identities and therefore focusing on other aspects of their lives will help to demonstrate what they have, rather than what they are seen to lack (Phillips, 2010).

Limitations

There are limitations to the data that was collected. The period of my research was limited by the length of the programme and I lost contact with the participants once they left the centre. I was therefore unable to track their progress or to go back to them with the themes which emerged from the ethnography and explore some of the issues further. My research only provides a snapshot of the lives of these young people during their time on the course. I have also not managed to capture the full heterogeneity of the category. As they were taking part on a course, they had chosen to engage with education and training, and therefore they were not NEET at the time of the research. The way they defined themselves and their situation was influenced by the centre they were attending. They were able to describe themselves as students. In addition to this, the generalisability, and the ability to summarise and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of studies within one setting has been questioned. Yet, while the findings of this study relate to the specific context within which the research was conducted, it may have wider implications.

Practical applications

The potential practical applications of this research relate to the support those who are classified as NEET may require. The findings suggest that there is a need for diverse, quality programmes and courses for young people, and that they would benefit from individualised, longer-term support. The focus of policy tends to be on access to and participation in education and training, however the quality of this provision matters. Courses need to be developed which outline clear progression opportunities and meaningful destinations. What is 'meaningful' will vary. The category covers a diverse group. There is therefore an argument for a more individualised focus, and a range of different courses (which go beyond a focus on employability and functional skills).

Focusing on education or work-based progression can be too narrow for certain young people who are experiencing a range of problems. There is a need for an approach to understanding young people and targeting intensive support that takes into account characteristics, situations and difficulties they actually experience, rather than an overriding focus on their NEET or EET status (Yates & Payne, 2006). A young person's NEET status may not be the most salient or useful thing to know, and a focus on this may divert attention from other more immediate risks which might exist in their lives. Learning and employment may not feature prominently on their list of immediate priorities. They may need to overcome other problems before being ready to move into

education, training, or work. There needs to be a wider focus and an acknowledgement that young people can make progress in different ways.

The focus on 'inclusion' in education, employment, or training can also lead to a lack of acknowledgement of the value of care work, voluntary work, friendships, and other spheres of inclusion (Axford, 2008 cited in Rose et al., 2012, p.258–259). A focus on 'soft outcomes' (e.g., building confidence and self-esteem) is discouraged by the setting of NEET reduction targets. There is a case for setting these 'softer' targets. Creating more positive alternative discourses based around wider notions of progress and success could help to challenge the discourse of deficiency currently evident in policy and provision.

There should therefore be a focus on developing longer-term, more specific and specialist support, for example the development of individually focused programmes that value the contribution of young people to society. Longer programmes would offer more consistency and longer-term social and emotional support. The approach taken should be concerned with meeting the needs of young people in a purposeful manner and should not be principally concerned with reducing jobless figures for short-term political reasons.

Conclusion

It can be argued that NEET young people have been stereotyped, with the blame being placed on the individual rather than looking at wider social issues and other aspects of their lives. Policy and practice remain focused on the value of education and training, and the assumptions made about young people could be adding to the barriers they face by generating negative stereotypes. This research went beyond the stereotypes, to explore how a group of young people with experience of being NEET define themselves and their situation.

The research highlights how they are 'ordinary' young people. However, they have been labelled in policy as different and set apart due to the course they are attending and their experiences of being out of education, employment and training. They are viewed as different types of learners and as disengaged and deficient, with a need to overcome individual barriers to become 'employable'. The participants did not reject stereotypes related to being young and unemployed but attempted to distance themselves from these. They also acknowledged some of the wider barriers they were facing such as the impact of their age, economic factors and mental and physical health issues. The focus of short-term training programmes is on qualifications and work experience, meaning there is

little opportunity to focus on these wider issues. The emphasis on individual deficiencies limits the impact of policy and initiatives aimed at NEET young people. There is a need to look more widely at young people's lives and take into account the structural, as well as the individual, barriers.

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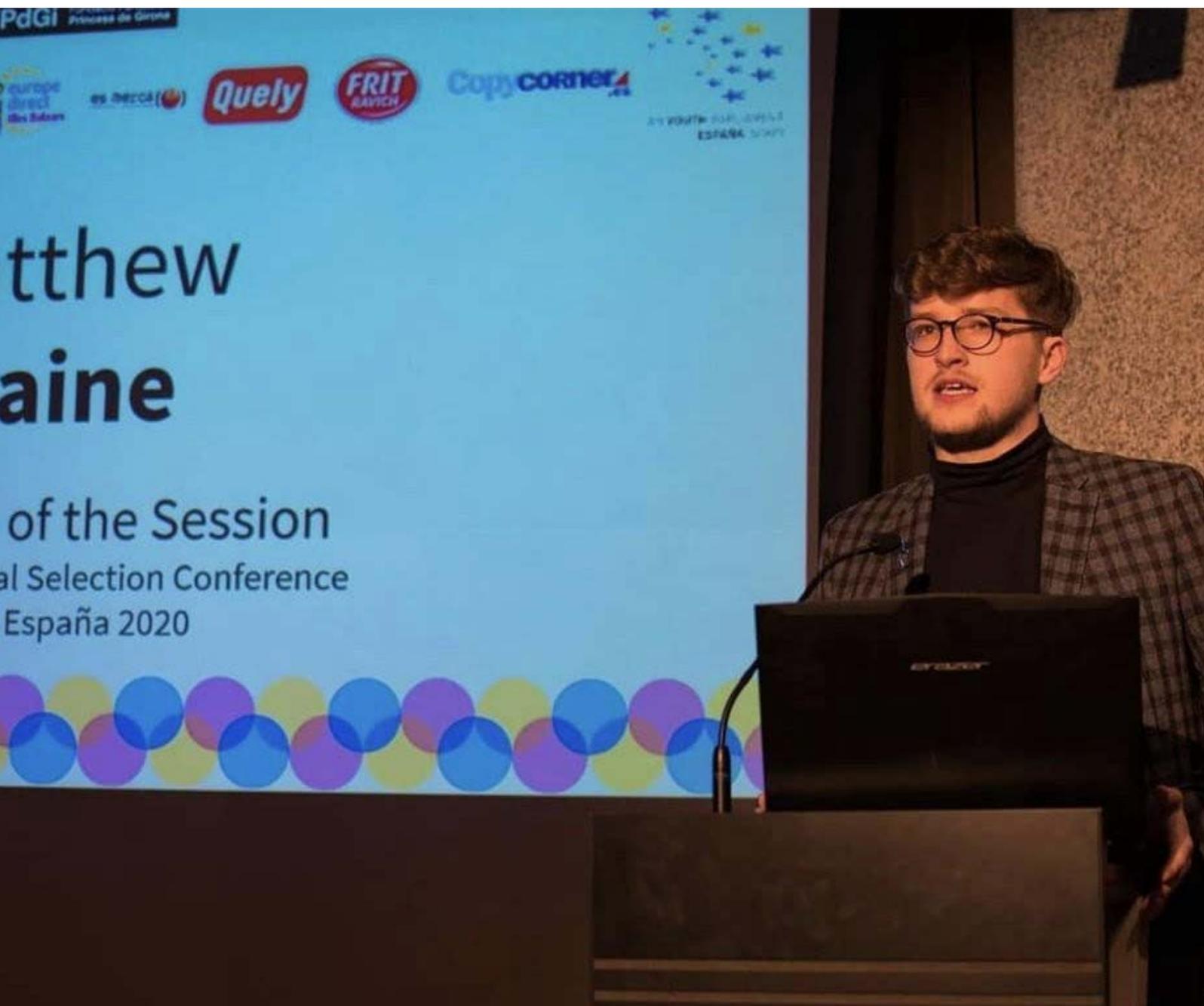
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European Youth Parliament won't change the world: But it will change the people who do

Interview with Matthew Caine, Communications Trustee of the European Youth Parliament (EYP) UK.

matthew.caine@eypuk.co.uk



About the interviewee

Matthew is the Communications Trustee of the European Youth Parliament (EYP) in the UK (EYPUK). Matthew manages an elected group of communications coordinators, who run EYPUK's social media and public relations. The role includes coordination of international communication across the different country committees. He is also responsible for making sure the organization is on a sound financial footing. Matthew joined the EYP in 2015 by joining his school delegation in one of the national debating events held by EYPUK each year. He is involved in EYP in several ways, supporting the work of EYP organizations across Europe. In particular, he has led capacity building efforts across the EYP network through roles such as the Head Trainer of the Summer Academy in 2019.

Beyond his role in EYPUK, Matthew is a philosophy, politics, and economics graduate from the University of Manchester, where his research into development politics was Highly Commended by the Global Undergraduate Awards. He currently works as a trainee auditor at the UK's National Audit Office, where he also studies for the Institute of Chartered Accountants qualification.

Introduction

One of our plenary speakers during the Young People's Work, Employment and Careers Small Group Meeting (SGM) was Iain Wedge, Communications Coordinator of the EYP. Iain provided us a broad overview of the EYP, its values, organization, and its key purpose, and discussed the EYP perspective on the key employment-related issues facing European youth. To hear more about this youth-led organization and how it supports youth employment, in February 2021, I interviewed Matthew Caine, the current Communications Trustee of the EYPUK.

I asked Matthew about the importance of youth employment for the EYP, the key initiatives they engage in and the key challenges relevant for youth employment. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, we conducted our interview online. The interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. This is a summary of my conversation with Matthew Caine.

The interview

Belgin: *Why is youth employment is important for the EYP?*

Matthew: The EYP, as a youth-led organization, is run by young people, for young people. Youth employment strikes at the heart of everything we do. The main goal of the organization is to encourage and enhance active citizenship in Europe. We aim to provide a forum for young people in Europe where they can develop and express opinions on a broad range of social and political topics. We promote intercultural dialogue and produce a network of future leaders in Europe. We, therefore, equip young people with the knowledge and skills that are necessary for them to become change makers in their local communities. Being youth-led, our activities are peer-led informal educational activities. These provide opportunities for both personal and skill development.

Regional, national, and international events are at the core of the EYP's peer-led activities. Through these sessions, we bring together over 30,000 young people from across Europe every year. We offer them a safe space to develop and express opinions, while building intercultural experiences and developing active citizenship.

Each EYP session consists of a combination of several activities. We have team building activities for international working groups to engage in indoor and outdoor games. There are cultural programmes where young people get acquainted with each other's culture and traditions. We also have committee work, in which international groups of young people discuss current topics and propose solutions in the form of resolutions. These resolutions are then debated during a General Assembly, which mimics the European Parliament procedures.

There is a Think Tank element to our work. For example, most recently, following the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and in partnership with the Wellcome Trust and European Institute of Innovation Technology (EIT) Health, we ran a Health Think Tank for the *Young European takes on "Healthy Lives and Well-being for all"* project. In a series of events, young people from across Europe debated key issues of health and well-being with stakeholders. Almost 1,000 young people from 40 countries contributed towards a policy recommendations paper (see EYP, 2021). More relevant for youth employment, in 2014 in partnership with Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland we ran a Think Tank on *Fighting youth unemployment*. This policy paper was discussed with candidates for the European election in Berlin and was then presented to the President of the European Commission, Mr Jose Manuel Barroso and European Commissioner Laszlo Andor (see EYP, 2014).

Our events and activities correspond well with youth employment because a lot of these skills are soft skills. The work we do in our committees mirrors essential group working skills. Solving problems in a collaborative and democratic way is one of the key features

of EYP sessions. From personal experience, I can tell you that having just started a new graduate job in September 2020, skills such as confidence in your own ideas and in public speaking are important for employability. In our work there is emphasis on developing social and professional skills and growing as a person. Through our discussions, we engage with a range of stakeholders (such as politicians) building intercultural understanding and a valuable international network of peers.

Certainly, across the EYP, enabling youth employment is a very important goal, as building these skills and developing young people is at the heart of everything we do. So, supporting youth employment is a prominent feature in the work that we do towards building those soft skills that young people need. In the events we organise, there is a heavy emphasis on teamworking and good communication skills. There are also a lot of problem-solving elements trying to come up with creative solutions to big issues.

Belgin: *Can you tell me about some employment initiatives the EYP is involved in?*

Matthew: Our international mentorship programme is a good example. The EYP has been running since 1987. So, we have quite a lot of EYP alumni, who are now in senior positions in different fields. For example, our alumni include a former British ambassador to Kosovo and an aide to the Prime Minister (who runs events in the UK). We have only recently identified our alumni body as a resource to be utilised. In 2018, we piloted our first EYP mentorship programme. This programme brings together EYP members who are beginning their careers – for instance, they may be just finishing their education and looking for their first job – with EYP alumni, who are willing to share their experience with the next generation. Our international office, in partnership with the EYP Alumni Steering Group, matches pairs based on mentees' interests and mentors' experience. Our pilot included 18 mentee-mentor pairs from across 16 European countries. Since then, we ran three rounds of the mentorship programme, matching 145 participants from 36 countries in 16 professional fields. The feedback from participants so far suggests that mentors find the experience personally enriching, and mentees report the programme helpful for incorporating the skills gained from EYP events into their job search and careers. I finished this programme last year, in the 3rd cohort, with a colleague who works in a Greek university and contributes to *The Economist* with their expertise on the green economy. For me, that was really, really, useful. This year we will be running our 4th mentorship programme.

Mentoring is the most obvious youth employment initiative we have but there are other things as well. These could be more granular at regional levels, for instance, running

regional events, which are entirely volunteer-led. Giving young people opportunities to run those events is key for skills development. Also, through outreach and inclusion activities, we aim to provide activities for young people who wouldn't otherwise be aware of or be active in the EYP. Through these activities, we target for instance, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, from ethnic minorities and with migrant backgrounds. So, I grew up in a working-class family and my parents' relationship split-up when I was five years old. I went to a state school for my secondary education; that has now long closed. Despite all this, through EYP, I have been able to work in nine different countries as a volunteer, with pretty much most costs covered, except for the flights.

We invite schools in remote geographic areas to take part in our activities. The young people will be given a topic, current in European affairs, such as questions concerning refugees and migration. Then, as part of a committee of peers from across the region they will work together to come up with potential solutions to the topic. The work is multifaceted; and there are many areas to explore.

Belgin: *How do you define 'good' youth employment? What makes it 'good' work?*

Matthew: Our generation are conscious of the ethical image of the firms we work for. The big thing for young employees is probably going to be about the responsibility they are given, and the respect that they are given early in that job role. For instance, in my current work, I feel that what I do is making an impact, and this is a key element. I don't really want to be doing something that is not meaningful, or at least isn't contributing any value.

There is also the relevant support for things such as development. We must sit accountancy exams, for example, but we are given time off and professional training, to help us succeed in those exams. In comparison, some of the other firms where you must do those exams have nowhere near that level of support in place.

To summarise, good employment has three key things: The ethical image is important. The respect given because of the work you are doing is crucial. Thirdly, I would say the kind of support given to you is very important when starting out in your career. Maybe one more thing that matches quite closely with the respect element is pay. Especially in the UK's political environment, where we pay a different minimum wage to 16- and 18-year-olds, what organizations pay their young people feeds into the respect felt by that person. So fair pay is the fourth key thing. I don't think it's the most prominent thing, but I do think it is something that sets good youth employers aside.

Belgin: *From the EYP perspective, what do you see as the key challenges or issues in youth employment?*

Matthew: The most obvious problem is the impact of the 2008 economic recession. This will only worsen with the Covid-19 situation. If you're an employer and you're looking at someone who is a bit older and has more experience, especially in these uncertain times, I can understand you will be more inclined to go with them rather than a younger, less experienced candidate. So, this is a significant problem facing youth employment.

I am also concerned about the impact of degrees being delivered as virtual learning. This is going to affect the current graduating cohorts. You can still develop a lot of skills at university, such as critical thinking and critical engagement in peer discussion online. Saying that, we run our events digitally now as well, and we can still make good discussion happen. But there are things, just by nature of the logistic element that must physically be in a place in the real world, to have impact. This is particularly true for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students. As a STEM student the proportion of fees you pay go towards being able to work in a laboratory or to work with key materials. You just can't access that online. Also, not being able to go into the library or the student union is just something that naturally will be of detriment to skills development. So, I believe it's the Covid-19 cohort both at school and university who will suffer as a result; and that is unfortunate. However, this is where organizations like our own can step in. We provide the opportunity to further develop communication skills; particularly with people you don't know. These are the sort of skills you develop when you're working in a team that take you completely out of your comfort zone.

In addition, particularly for young people, economic security is important, as life is becoming more and more precarious. I don't really see, especially in the current economic climate, that things will get better soon. In my opinion we need more job security and more workers' rights. So, for instance, in the UK there is talk about removing the Sunday trading laws in post-pandemic working, as part of the economic recovery. I mean people have died for those kinds of laws to be introduced so that there is a least one day without work in a week. This is certainly very relevant for young people now, and I believe young people are more switched on to these issues as they affect them directly.

These are some of the key problems: the precarious nature of coming out of university or just education in general into the real world, where there are not as many good safety nets.

Belgin: *Does the EYP have influence on policy making relevant for youth employment?*

Matthew: The answer to this varies across national borders. We are a politically unbound organization by nature of our Charter, not representing any particular political group or party. In the UK we don't have a political framework that ties us directly to policymakers and politicians; so there is no infrastructure whereby we can influence lobbying groups or select committees. However, this is not the case outside our immediate borders. For example, in Ireland, our sister organization is relatively closely aligned to the Irish Food Board. Certainly, as a result of that they have that direct line of communication on certain things. There are a few other examples like that. For instance, Germany's EYP organization is quite closely associated with the Federal Foreign Office in Germany.

Following our 2021 – 2025 EYP strategy, we are putting more effort into monitoring and evaluating our impact. A new Steering Group is currently being formed to develop a framework for the whole EYP organization to better understand, assess and communicate its impact. So, in the future we hope to have a stronger influence on policy making.

The relationship we have with influencing public policy was best summarised to me by fellow EYP member Kevin Boland; *'EYP probably won't change the world, but it will change the people that do'*. For example, there are many people who have been members of EYP who go on into positions of influence themselves. The immediate one that comes to mind, was one of the chairs at the Davos Economic Forum last year. There is also a Georgian member who was in Nairobi for a UN Women's summit. Similarly, there is a Swiss member who was recognised in Forbes '30 under 30' and was one of the Young Leaders at the UNESCO Youth Summit, among their many other achievements (see Forbes, 2020). So, they are good examples of EYP members who have influence on a wider scale.

Belgin: *What resources are needed to improve youth employment, in general?*

Matthew: From the EYP perspective, the resources needed to improve youth employment are those relevant for making sure that we're providing skills for the young people who take part in our events. We have several training events, every year. For example, we run a Summer Academy for the board members of all 40 EYP member countries. This focuses on key topics for supporting members further, such as committee management and development, fundraising, outreach and inclusion, public relations, and communications. Further, we provide training to organise successful committees, foster project management skills for organising events, and a diversity lab, to enable people to deal with a wide range of diverse views, opinions, and national cultures. To be able to deliver

these events and training sessions, we rely on our alumni network, our partnerships, for instance with the German Federal Foreign Office or the UN Refugee Agency, and donations.

Conclusion

It was a pleasure speaking to Matthew and to hear of the youth-led initiatives supporting development of crucial employability and career management skills among European youth. As a bottom-up, youth-led organisation aiming to develop future leaders, the EYP and all the initiatives they undertake remind us of the importance of the voice of the young people in driving social agendas. Most importantly for our purpose in this *Special Issue*, for contributing to the youth employment agenda, the EYP's specific objectives include developing intercultural dialogue, opportunities for skills development within the safety net of a well-connected international network. We may take these as the primary cues the young people in Europe use, as they make sense of the opportunities in labour markets and how to navigate barriers.

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Participation in career development communities of practice: Perspectives from low socio-economic background students

Michelle Trottier



MICHELLE TROTTIER

Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, UK

M.Trottier.1@research.gla.ac.uk

About the author

Michelle Trottier is a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow. She also holds an Associate Lecturer and Academic Mentor role at the University of Exeter teaching on the Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship MBA programme. Prior to commencing her PhD, she spent three years teaching Careers Management to undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK and in Canada. Her teaching has included developing and facilitating careers management and work placement modules. Through her teaching experience she noted differences in student experiences and the value of peer-to-peer support. Michelle completed her Master's in Education and has roles within UK Higher Education sharing teaching practices across the university with a focus on inclusion and student-centred teaching.

Abstract

Despite experiencing challenges in transitioning into graduate employment (Ashley, Duberley, Sommerlad & Scholarios, 2015; Boston Consulting Group, 2017) low socio-economic background students are less likely to engage with support offered through their higher education careers services (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013). This study investigates the efficacy of using a four-week online community of practice intervention aiming to build careers support engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds through peer learning. Through a series of 24 semi-structured interviews, it was found that students who disengaged from the intervention reported doing so due to feeling apprehensive about their lack of knowledge and experience, other commitments (especially term-time work and academic studies), and anxiety associated with transition from university to work. This research expands the careers counselling literature to not only consider career consulting practices, but also student engagement through leveraging social learning. This work has additional practical applications for careers practitioners highlighting benefits and drawbacks of offering career support through online communities of practice.

Keywords: careers counselling, engagement, socio-economic backgrounds, community of practice, peer learning, careers service interventions

Introduction

A significant challenge for university career services is student engagement (Cranmer, 2007; Cullinane & Montacute, 2018). For instance, almost half of the students in the UK never use careers service support (Purcell et al., 2012) nor have spoken to a careers service advisor by the end of their undergraduate degree (Bradley, Quigley & Bailey, 2019). Similar findings have been reported from the United States and Australia (Bates, Hayes, Walker & Marchesi, 2018; Callanan & Benzing, 2004). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds (i.e., those living in deprived neighbourhoods, who are the first generation to go to university in their immediate family or those who were in a deprived school prior to attending university) are among the least likely to engage with the services offered by the university careers service (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013).

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience higher education differently than those from more advantaged backgrounds (Murphy, 2009). Crucially, they report lower feelings of belonging (i.e., feeling accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, Goodenow, 1993) in higher education (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Keane 2011; Patiniotis & Holdsworth 2005; Lynch & O’Riordan 1998; Mallman, 2017). Students who feel a lack of belonging tend to be less likely to take advantage of the opportunities around them, as they doubt their skills and abilities to perform and therefore achieve lower academically (De Cordova & Herzon, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Similar effects are more prominent when looking at engagement with careers services. Within the careers counselling literature Willis (1977) first observed, through an ethnographical study, that careers service support was perceived to be geared much more to the middle-class students, focusing on securing middle-class, professional or managerial, occupations. In fact, low socio-economic background students ridiculed and undermined the recommendations they received from the careers service (Willis, 1977). In a contemporary higher education context, which includes students from diverse backgrounds, 79 per cent of students report that their primary motivation for attending post-secondary education is to improve their employability prospects (National Union of Students, 2011). If students feel that their motivations, interests and aspirations are not accepted, included or valued, they may be less likely to engage with the careers service.

Another reason why students from low socio-economic backgrounds may not engage with university careers services may be that they are less likely to seek help. For some students, attending higher education is a ‘break away’ from social disadvantage.

They may therefore be more conscious of the labels attached to their backgrounds. For instance, Massey and Fischer (2005) report that even students who do not believe the stereotype about their group to be true, feel threatened to engage in help seeking behaviour to avoid the risk of confirming or being associated with the label.

Finally, conflicting demands from work, commuting and/or caregiving responsibilities (Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006; Murphy, 2009) may prevent students from low socio-economic backgrounds from engaging with the careers service. Callender and Jackson (2005) highlight that low socio-economic background students were amongst the most concerned about consequences of debt. Not only does debt create a deterrent for entering university but also increases their likelihood of working throughout their education. Students working during term time often face challenges in meeting competing demands (Callender & Kemp, 2000). Thus, this group may have less time to engage with the careers service.

The issue of students disengaging from careers support is not a new challenge as there has been evidence of this lack of engagement from over 30 years ago (Willis, 1977). Despite new advancements in our knowledge of how interventions can support student experience, often these fail to consider student engagement with careers service. Particularly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013) career engagement is a major concern. While it may be hard for the careers service to address all challenges associated with access to careers services (e.g., time limitations due to other commitments) students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be more willing to engage with interventions relevant for their belonging and, relatedly, comfort in seeking help. This article next considers the role of peer learning as a tool for encouraging participation from students.

Peer learning to support careers service engagement

The challenge in careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be addressed through peer learning, where individuals receive support and help from peers relevant for their learning. Peer learning is a dimension of pedagogy that has been long established as effective, with peer groups playing a role in shaping and influencing individual's cognitive processes (Dewey, 1923; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger, 2000).

Learning from others is a major component of peer learning. This is aligned with Social Learning Theory (Bandura & McClelland, 1977), according to which social behaviour is

partly learnt through observing and imitating others. Bandura (1965) argues that social processes, such as observing others' behaviour and the rewards associated with these behaviours (i.e., vicarious learning), can be just as important for learning as mastery experiences. For instance, in the context of graduate employability, work-integrated learning, whereby students are socialised into occupations, has been shown to provide opportunities for students to not only master the requirements of jobs but also be part of the professional community and observe professionals perform (Jackson, 2017). There is evidence that supportive peer relations instill a sense of camaraderie, help build social capital and help students 'learn how to learn', which were all relevant for improving students' sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). These interactions with peers were found to facilitate students' self-awareness of their strengths and capabilities and were therefore relevant for students' investment of effort and persistence in academic studies (Soria & Stuffblefield, 2015).

A crucial medium where individuals learn through observing others is communities of practice, which refers to a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In communities of practices individuals build a community through relationships, develop a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing their concerns and thereby learn from each other. The construct 'communities of practice' is used in many ways in the literature, depending on exclusivity of membership rules (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). For exploring university students' engagement with careers service, this research adopts Lave and Wegner's (1991) conceptualisation, where a 'community' is a group of individuals (students) that share a practice (engagement with careers service for improving employability).

Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on situated learning, where learning occurs through observing general behaviours. Drawing on experiences of midwives, tailors, butchers and sober alcoholics Lave and Wenger (1991) show how members build skills overtime by first observing and then doing. Notably within this context learning was defined as situated participation and observation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For university students, this implies that enhancing employability skills via engagement with careers services may be via situated learning where situated participation and observation form a key building block of learning.

The present study

The overall aim of this study is to explore the efficacy of a community of practice intervention to build careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Although previous literature has attempted to understand careers services benefits (Ryan, 1999), there is limited literature that focuses on improving engagement, especially of low socio-economic background students. There is therefore a lack of evidence-based strategy to provide an equal access tailored service that supports disadvantaged student populations (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Bridge Group, 2017; The International Graduate Insight Group Ltd., 2011). We know from previous research that, social and behavioural change (e.g., in relation to eating disorders or anti-social behaviours) is possible through interventions targeted towards university students (Berkowitz, 2003). With the aim of informing ways of improving careers service engagement, this article explores low socio-economic background students' motivation for participation in careers service interventions, using an intervention study. The intervention presented in this study consists of an online peer-led community of practice intervention, where students can support each other's employability through sharing experiences and knowledge.

There are differences across types of higher education institutions in the ways that students participate in developing their employability. Students at the more research-intensive institutions have been found to report higher participation through proactive career behaviours than those in the more teaching-led institutions (Okay-Somerville, Allison, Luchinskaya & Scholarios, 2020). This study takes place in a research-intensive institution that has received numerous awards for excellence of its careers service (e.g., National Undergraduate Employability Awards) yet has a disproportionately small representation of students from low socio-economic background (Scottish Funding Council, 2017). Accounting for the quality of careers service provided (Rowley & Purcell, 2001), the present study focuses on ways of improving careers service engagement for low socio-economic background students.

Employability building interventions generally target students who are already actively engaged in job search or career support (Goodwin, 2019). The intervention involved in the present study encourages participation from a group that has been known to participate less and provides a medium for peer learning. Although this intervention may be able to engage some students, there may be some barriers that others cannot be overcome. This paper aims to explore these barriers to careers service engagement. By doing so, the

study aims to make practical suggestions on how careers services might address some of the concerns that students raise and provide new perspectives of the benefits and drawbacks of a peer learning approach to career support.

Methodology

The present study was part of a larger (unpublished) research project. Students in their third and fourth year of their undergraduate studies at a research-intensive Scottish University were recruited through emails sent by the researcher and their subject course coordinators. These emails invited students to participate in an employability study providing careers service support. This first required students to complete an online questionnaire to identify their socio-economic background. Specifically, students were identified as being from a low socio-economic background if either their family home postal code was in a deprived area, if neither parent attended higher education, or if they attended a school that was identified as being deprived prior to entering university. Students who met at least one of these characteristics were considered to be from a low socio-economic background. To provide students with more opportunities to participate, the intervention ran at three different times over the course of the 2019 academic year; in early autumn (October), late autumn (November) and early spring (January). This resulted in a total of 222 participants in the online community of practice intervention, of which 115 were identified as from low socio-economic backgrounds. After students were enrolled in the community of practice, they were then told that their participation throughout the study was entirely voluntary and they could participate as much or as little as they liked, or even not at all.

The intervention

The community of practice intervention was set-up on the university's central virtual learning environment and was monitored by the researcher. Within the online community of practice, students were assigned into forums based on their subject discipline. Groups ranged from five to 13 members in size based on how many students volunteered from each subject, and students were suggested to discuss set topics each week. The first week students shared career goals and what type of roles they were targeting. The second week students provided each other suggestions on their curriculum vitae (CVs) and covering letters. The third week many students shared interview questions that they had been asked during interviews, while their peers suggested possible answers. The final week was open to all discussion topics and students discussed

anything from postgraduate degree applications to where to go on campus to get a free LinkedIn photo taken. All discussion occurred on the forum and were private for only students enrolled to see.

Post-intervention interviews

After the four-week online community of practice intervention, the researcher invited all 115 low socio-economic status students who took part in the intervention for an interview. Participants were offered an incentive of £15 Amazon gift card in exchange for their time in the study. This resulted in 25 participants; however, one interview was cut short thus has been excluded from the data.

The interviews were conducted mainly in person at the students' higher education institution. There were a small number of students who requested video conferencing interviews. This was accommodated at the student's request. As this research was part of larger project, there were specific interview questions that are considered as part of this data. Students were asked two primary questions: how they participated in the community of practice; and what affected their choice to do so. The interview followed the probing questions guidelines suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann, (2009) only probing into topics already mentioned by the participant. This included questions such as "why was that?" and "what do you mean by that?". Overall, these questions were intended to uncover both levels of participation, and then further understand what motivated this. Interview audio was recorded and then transcribed by the researcher for analysis.

Analyses

Analyses were conducted in two stages. Firstly, the page view data from the community of practice virtual learning environment was used. This involved monitoring how many times each participant logged on to the virtual learning environment and viewed content on the online community of practice (see Table 1). This was used to gain a general understanding of what participation might look like, as such observation may be linked to situated learning by observing others (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Secondly, the analysis of the interviews was conducted through a general thematic coding procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After becoming familiar with the data through the transcription process, the data was then reviewed and coded based on categories developing within the data. This coding was refined throughout the review process based on new categories of information emerging (for instance, some codes needed to become more specific). Once the data was coded in full, it was reread and reconsidered based

on all codes generated. These codes were then sorted into more prominent themes that represented the larger topics with the data. As certain themes of the data were related to each other (as per results below), the more prominent themes acted as an umbrella category for themes within them. Although not all segments of data were considered in this analysis, all of the data that was connected to the research aims were.

Findings

The analyses resulted in two complementing forms of data to understand student participation. One was the overall virtual learning environment page view data providing details of student participation and the other was interview themes to provide a more detailed account of each student’s experiences. As observed in Table 1, of the 24 participants 18 identified as female and six as male, 16 were in their fourth year of their undergraduate and eight were in their third year, and 12 subject disciplines across the university were represented.

Table 1
Participant description and page views

Participant	Gender	Subject of study	Year of studies	Perceived engagement	Number of page views
19	Male	Science and Engineering	4	Active	226
20	Male	Computing Science	4	Active	179
11	Female	Business	4	Active	116
24	Female	Science and Engineering	4	Active	95
12	Female	School of Law	4	Active	88
13	Female	Critical Studies	4	Active	74
2	Female	Life Science	3	Active	69
1	Female	Chemistry	3	Less active	66
23	Male	Math and Statistics	4	Less active	61
15	Female	School of Law	4	Less active	59
3	Male	Social and Political Science	4	Less active	55
14	Female	Critical Studies and Humanities	4	Less active	53
6	Female	Science and Engineering	4	Active	52
5	Female	Social and Political Science	3	Less active	43
8	Female	Business	3	Less active	28
4	Male	Humanities	4	Less active	27
17	Female	Humanities	4	Active	20
21	Female	Life Science	4	Active	19
16	Male	Chemistry	3	Active	9
18	Female	Social and Political Science	4	Less active	4
22	Female	Social and Political Science	4	Less active	2
10	Female	Science and Engineering	3	Less active	1
7	Female	Culture and creative arts	3	Less active	0
9	Female	School of Law	3	Active	0

Page view data

On average, participants visited the virtual learning environment 56.08 times (SD = 56.11) over the four weeks of the intervention. Frequency of site visits ranged from zero (two participants) to more than 90 views (four participants). Participants' self-report engagement data did not necessarily match page view data. As observed in Table 1, although those who had the highest page views also reported high engagement, so did some participants with the lowest page views. There was one participant who reported high engagement although they never visited the virtual learning environment. It should be noted that there is a possibility that participants could have activated a function on the virtual learning environment to be emailed copies of the posts, thus, participated vicariously through reading automatically generated emails without ever clicking through to the page. Although this descriptive information is useful, the data needs to be carefully interpreted.

Post-intervention interview data

Among the students who described themselves as more active members, two key themes emerged that explained their motivation for engaging with the intervention: improving their own employability and sharing their employability-related knowledge and experience with others. Students who reported being disengaged from the intervention reported doing so due to feeling apprehensive about their lack of knowledge and experience, other commitments (especially term-time work and academic studies), and anxiety associated with transition from university to work. These themes are explained further below.

Improving employability

The initial drive to start participating in the community of practice seems to be to access the resources that were being shared on the forums. Participants recognised the usefulness of the practice of learning about career management for improving employability. Students also realised however that the usefulness of the community of practice was not just about links and signposting but was also related to the advice and sharing that they could leverage from peers:

"[I] was going through different forums to see what other people were saying in the other ones, and I also took their advice on, you know, what they answered and I kind of, you know, said okay that's actually quite good you know. If I get asked this in an interview, that's something that I could potentially twist around to fit into my answer." (Participant 16)

For most participants, engagement with the forums and learning about ways of improving employability was done vicariously. Students logged onto the intervention in order to gain insights from what others were doing to improve employability. There seems to be a real value for the students:

"I was interested in enrolling mainly to see like other people's experiences as well. So, like, even though I didn't participate much myself, like, 'I looked through other people's CVs and stuff, but I thought that was really helpful." (Participant 20)

They also found it useful to have more exclusive groups broken down by their subject of discipline and perceived the knowledge exchange in that context to be more useful. Interestingly knowledge shared across forums were similar in terms of content (e.g., focusing on CV building and interviews):

"It helped me to get like feedback that was more tailored to a path that I wanted to go down. Compared to, you know, you obviously get a lot of just generic job interview advice or whatever or CV advice, but I think that getting the specific advice that is specific to your goals and that you're interested in was like helpful." (Participant 21)

Sharing employability-related knowledge and experience

A second key reason why participants engaged with the intervention was being able to relate to others and being able to give back in a useful way. Community building by sharing knowledge and experience was important for engaging with careers service intervention:

"I was interested in maybe giving other people advice, that someone who is maybe in the same boat as me... I think just giving advice to people who don't know where to find it... just telling them you just go do this." (Participant 9)

As students learned more about each other and as more students made informal introductions the helping behaviour within the community of practice grew:

"As soon as I read the first person... I just felt like, my experience would be worth sharing as well. Even though it was, like I didn't really think much of it before, like sharing my experience, you know, who cares. But I thought it was really helpful, just in case somebody feels the same." (Participant 13)

Notably this attitude about being able to help others was much related to perceiving one's self to have the resources needed to do so:

"Like you have the skill set now, so now you should share what you know to other people. So, um, I was really happy to help others in the [virtual learning environment] as well. Even doing my internship, I can now show, tell them that, oh, there's this opportunity that you can go for... I feel

like I'm actually useful in a sense and yeah, this more than happy to... I really like the idea... where I get some feedback and then I can give some feedback to other people and yeah, just sharing experience because where else would you have seen these people or spoken to these people in and sense. And yet it's a really good environment to, you don't feel forced to say anything that you just, you feel that you're quite happy to be open in a sense, and maybe people don't judge you as much because it's online, you can't really see them." (Participant 14)

Barriers to engagement

Half of the participants (N=12) reported being not very active in their engagement with the online intervention. Feeling apprehensive in how others would view them, time conflict with other commitments and mental health challenges were the major barriers in engagement. These students were comparing themselves to others and seemed to disengage if they felt that their experiences were less worthwhile than the others':

"I did feel quite intimidated, if I am being honest. I feel like everybody else has, you know, much more experience and are much more professional and know how to talk the talk and walk the walk." (Participant 11)

For some students, feelings of apprehension and intimidation seemed to be enhanced especially when they felt that it was impossible for them to catch up due to conflicting demands on their time as a student and a worker:

"I feel like, there are people that have tons of experience related to their degree... I don't have what I would term as academic experience. Because again, I've had to work, like I just have not had time to do these things and I couldn't afford to have the luxury of volunteering for things... I didn't have the time for that. Because you need money to live, and I need money to attend here... So, I felt just quite self-conscious, in that sense." (Participant 4)

Engagement with the careers service intervention was at the bottom of priorities for those who felt pressures from work and/or university. Although students reported that they would have preferred to engage more with the intervention, in order to improve employability, prioritisation became an issue for students who were less active:

"I'd been meaning to participate more, and then I would just get wrapped up in like uni stress. And then look and be like, oh we are in week three now. And, I think yeah, I was like quite aware that it would be quite a good opportunity to get external feedback and just kind of see what other people were up to, and what experiences they've had, and how that kind of led them to where they are." (Participant 7)

Related to the many pressures students felt, issues around mental health and well-being also came into the interviews as a reason for lack of active engagement with the intervention (this would have been unknown to the researcher if it hadn't been mentioned in the interview);

"I've been sad and anxious before, but I was never like that. I was never so stressed, I'd never been so... I guess I never really sought out help either, and this time I decided to go to my tutor... I didn't participate a lot, but I always went to the forums, what people were saying and stuff like that. And I think I introduced myself at the very start, and this term and last term I wasn't feeling too well, so I didn't really participate as much as I wanted." (Participant 16)

Importantly, some of this stress and the well-being challenges were associated with the graduate recruitment process. In some students the pressures of having to find a graduate job are so intense that this may discourage proactive behaviours:

'I just get so stressed about getting behind in things, I didn't really engage in other stuff about interview questions or anything. Just the thought of it makes me sweaty. Um, so. That's why I didn't really participate in the bit, in the later stages of it.' (Participant 23)

Overall, most of the students in this study had some level of engagement with the careers support when it was provided in a community of practice format. However, there was a split experience of whether students felt they actively engaged in the community of practice. For those who actively participated, the motivation was to improve own and others' employability. Yet, half of the participants reported barriers to engagement concerning apprehension of sharing and various pressures to their time as students and workers.

Discussion

The present study explored the motivations for engagement with career service and the barriers in the way of doing so among students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Following an online peer-led community of practice-based intervention on enhancing employability skills, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants from low socio-economic backgrounds. The findings show that students engage with the peer-led intervention in order to enhance both their own employability and that of others' in the community. However, for half of the participants there were personal and work or study-related barriers in the way of active engagement. Most of those who did not actively engage still logged into the intervention to observe and to learn from others' experience. This section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for improving careers service engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Theoretical implications

The findings make three theoretical contributions to understanding careers service engagement of low socio-economic background students. Firstly, findings show that improving employability is a major motivator for engagement with careers service interventions. This resonates with students' motivations for joining postsecondary education (National Union of Students Scotland, 2010). Broadening this understanding, the findings from this study also show that students are motivated by helping others enhance their employability. Previous research on graduate employability indicates that students are very much aware of the need to enhance career management skills (Bridgstock, 2009). This study suggests a role for student's helping behaviour for enhancing employability of similar others, who are potentially in the competition for the limited number of graduate jobs.

A second contribution from these findings concerns the efficacy of online, peer-led communities of practice interventions for improving employability. Although peer-led interventions are common (e.g., on nutrition awareness, Story, Lytle, Birnbaum & Perry, 2002) careers practitioners often do not make use of these for improving graduate employability. Findings from this study show that this is relatively effective for two reasons. Firstly, half of the participants in this study actively engaged and felt the benefit for improving their own employability while sharing information for improving others' employability, too. Secondly, students who reported a lack of active engagement benefited from reading others' posts and were able to learn from the community's shared knowledge and experiences. This shows the value of peer learning for improving student engagement with careers service interventions. Consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1965), the findings show that students gain both mastery experiences (e.g., by practicing CV building) and vicarious learning by observing similar others' posts. From a communities of practice perspective, this can be explained by the concept of situated learning (Wenger, 1998), where the repertoire of knowledge and experiences in the community of practice were accessible to all participants, and they were able to benefit regardless of active participation.

Expanding our knowledge on barriers to careers service engagement is the study's third theoretical contribution. Confirming previous research on conflicting demands on university leavers, this study shows how academic and financial pressures interfere with engagement with careers service (Okay-Somerville et al., 2020). Beyond this, among students who felt intimidated and apprehensive about sharing experience, we observe

an identity threat (see Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). This confirms that some students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be self-conscious of sharing and asking for help, as this may further reinforce stereotypes associated with their background (Massey & Fischer, 2005). Yet, we observe the dangers of this perceived identity threat, alongside pressures related juggling term-time work, academic work and university-to-work transitions, in mental health issues becoming significant barriers for engagement with careers service interventions. Health and well-being issues have been referred to as the invisible problem in higher education settings (Martin, 2010). A variety of demands (e.g., financial difficulties, self-image and identity) that impact student mental well-being have been identified (National Union of Students Scotland, 2010; Universities UK, 2015). The present study extends these findings to show how these pressures also constitute barriers for engagement with careers service interventions for improving employability.

Communities of practice can be run almost entirely without understanding the emotions of others. This became evident during interviews as students shared stories of illnesses that they experienced over the course of the peer-led intervention caused by mental health challenges. This created barriers for them in feeling that they could not access the intervention. Although it would be interesting to compare that to the barriers of accessing in-person career support, the greater concern is that members cannot observe feelings and emotions online. Although it can be argued that in face-to-face delivery these are equally hidden, it raises an alarm with whether the facilitator could have intervened and signposted to support if more was known. Herrington, Reeves and Oliver's (2014) work on authentic identities highlight the importance of building trust and authentic people in communities of practice. This study found that even when individuals make introductions and welcome others, trust is difficult to form unless emotions come out in text. One student's response that she was nervous to participate as "*other members might laugh*" highlights how important this is. The paper next discusses practical implications of these findings.

Application for careers practitioners

In the context of low socio-economic background students building career knowledge, these results provide preliminary evidence that online community of practice-based interventions does provide opportunity for vicarious learning. This may explain why most students viewed multiple pages, and many students were motivated to participate to help others. Implementing the community of practice was relatively light touch for the researcher due to the peer-led nature of the intervention. This study reached 222

students in total, which was manageable for one researcher to oversee. Multiple students asked to be enrolled in repeat rounds of the intervention, suggesting that a longer period of offer support would have been beneficial, with more open access for students to continue their membership. Notably, the behaviour of peers helping peers could have been due to no formal career 'expert' leading the community of practice.

Careers practitioners should also consider ways that they can create a more cohesive community. In retrospect, this could have been done by separating those students who were looking for their first internship from those that already have had internships. It would be interesting to explore whether early supportive feedback to students on their qualification, highlighting their strengths, could have helped mitigate this.

There were also concerns raised about privacy and trust. Allowing opportunity for students to see the emotion and personality of other students is part of creating authentic identity. For some students a written introduction is not enough. It would be useful to test whether a synchronous welcome meeting would have helped.

This research also highlights the interplay that mental health challenges have on career service participation. Searching for graduate jobs and receiving multiple rejections is stress inducing even to the individuals who are at an optimum mental health. Mental health and well-being resources, specifically targeting stress and anxiety should be incorporated into careers service offerings. In hindsight, perhaps a link to the well-being resources that focus on stress and rejection should have been shared by the community of practice facilitator at the onset of the programme. Notably, this was only caught as a problem during the face-to-face interview where the researcher was then able to signpost to well-being resources.

Limitations

Although this study has been able to provide new insight into the motivations underpinning student participation, a pragmatic approach was taken throughout the study aimed to uncover the fullest information possible. There are some limitations that came along with that. Firstly, the participants involved in this study were students who self-selected to take part. There may have been additional motivations for students to participate as they were told ahead that they would receive a £15 gift voucher to acknowledge the time spent. Compensation was provided mainly due to the long duration of the study and concerns that students may withdraw. The £15 gift voucher was provided to students at the end of the study regardless of levels of participation.

The participation data used in this study should also be discussed. The community of practice virtual learning environment's 'page view' data only provides a rough indicator of participation. It is recognised that this data cannot be weighted as a strong indicator of participation, as the individual who spends 15 minutes on a forum page is weighted the same as the individual spending 15 seconds within the data set. This data should be taken only as an additional piece of information that provides more context to the qualitative data. Finally, it should be noted that questions about the community of practice intervention were not the primary focus of the interviews with the 24 students; instead, they represent one section of data that was collected from participants. In a separate section of the interview, students shared stories of their life experiences and developing their employability aimed at addressing a different research question. Although this should be acknowledged as a limitation, it is also a strength in the quality of data produced, due to the closeness that was developed between the researcher and the student during the interview process. Comments about sharing deep secrets and oversharing were commonly made by students. The researcher believes that this allowed for students to share honest challenges regarding mental health and social anxiety that may have otherwise not been available in this type of research.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the evidence-base that incorporating peer learning into careers service interventions improves active and passive engagement by building a cohesive community. Theoretically, this highlights the relevance of peer learning and social learning theory (Bandura, 1965) for engaging a group of university leavers who historically lack engagement with the careers service. Nevertheless, there are still major obstacles that need more consideration, such as individuals' awareness of stereotypes associated with their background and associated feelings of intimidation, the conflicting demands on students' time (e.g., between academic study, term-time work and preparing for life after graduation) and ensuring presence of well-being resources with a recognition of how difficult it is to detect a need for it through online text. Although this research cannot point to a solution to these obstacles, it suggests that practitioners should consider them throughout the planning and implementation of community of practice careers support.

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Career guidance on online platforms in the Covid-19 context

Interview with Hannah Courtney Bennett, Chartered Psychologist and Career Coach

hannah.courtneybennett@btinternet.com



About the interviewee

A Chartered Psychologist since 1998, Hannah's work focuses on career development and talent management through assessments and one-to-one coaching. As an Occupational Psychologist she has provided assessment and selection services to organizations, including job analyses and identification of competency frameworks, job design and interviewing. This side of her work puts her in a position of strength when it comes to coaching and identifying talent, strengths and interests with anyone facing significant career decisions, be they career changers, returners, graduates, undergraduates or young people. Hannah has been working as a consultant for the past 20 years and prior to this worked for the National Health Service and then the Sussex Police where she obtained her Chartered status.

Introduction

A key theme during the Small Group Meeting was the importance of career guidance, for helping young people identify their interests and strengths, and the opportunities in the labour market, including those that may not necessarily be readily visible. In this practitioner interview, I spoke to Hannah Courtney Bennett about her experience of in-person and online career guidance delivery. Due to Covid-19 restrictions the interview was conducted online and lasted about an hour. Below is a summary of the interview.

The interview

Belgin: *Tell me about your career guidance practice with young people?*

Hannah: As part of the career guidance practitioner qualification, I had to do certain amount of work experience working with young people in schools. Much to my surprise, I really enjoyed working with young people. It is good fun and I feel like I am making a difference. Now I work with people of all ages with career decision-making, but I carry on doing four or five days a month in schools, working with young people. I support several schools mainly working with 14- to 18-year-olds, as they plan their transition to further study, education, training or work.

There is a statutory government requirement in the UK for young people to receive career guidance. This is something that was introduced in 2014 following significant work by Sir John Holman and the Gatsby Foundation. This resulted in a framework called the *Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance* (Holman, 2014). The framework aims to ensure

that young people are provided with high-quality career guidance to make informed decisions about their future (for example, if they are 'career-ready'). The last benchmark states that every young person should receive expert guidance from somebody suitably qualified. In my head it ought to be benchmark number one! In practice, this implies that every young person who is in school must be seen by an impartial career guidance practitioner; and this is how I continue to work with young people.

I visit each school once a week or once a fortnight. They're not big schools so I can see the majority of the 14- to 16-year-olds in one day. In my practice, I follow the Single Interaction Model (Reid & Fielding, 2007), which recognises that you are only likely to get one meeting with your client. I see each student one-to-one for one session, that is about 40 minutes long. We talk about their career pathways and options. I help them explore their interests and strengths with questions such as: '*Do you know what's your plan?*', '*What are your predicted grades?*', '*Have you had any thoughts about what you want to do after school?*', '*Do you know you can do an apprenticeship?*' or '*Have you thought about the International Baccalaureate?*'. Then we'll put together a plan and consider whether their plan is feasible or not. For instance, if ultimately the student wants to be a physiotherapist, I would point out that they should be studying biology. These are little but crucial mistakes students often make when they select the subjects they are going to study. So, we question the feasibility of their choices (e.g., '*If you don't like chemistry, do you really want to do medicine?*')

It's about challenging the young people to identify what they enjoy but also become aware of the requirements of job roles as well. Related to that we also talk about how to get work experience and the importance of work experience in general. I highlight some of the other opportunities (like Young Enterprise, if they are interested in business and financial education). Students find it difficult to explain their work experience. I ask them about the things they do; such as volunteering or working in charity shops. I try to help them see that all these activities count as work experience and teach them how to speak about them. I show them how search engines work, and how to use different databases. If they've got no idea about what they want to do as a career, I share with them a couple of good tools for self-assessment that will give them ideas, such as for gaining awareness on ability, personality and interests, and for relevant career suggestions (for further information look at my website).

However, each school provides a different career guidance service. Before, careers people like me were funded by the local government. Now money goes to schools directly to

decide the type of career guidance they wish to provide. So, to some extent, schools can choose to do this in completely different ways. In some schools a member of staff will be the careers advisor (as an additional role); whereas other schools will reach out to qualified people like me.

Belgin: *Can you tell me about your experience of providing online career guidance?*

Hannah: Since 2013 I have been working with cohorts of university students in Europe. I work with a company in the sustainable energy industry that sponsors master's students. Each of those students have a career coach for their two years of study; and I deliver that coaching online. Additionally, young people or parents of young people contact me for online guidance from across the UK. This is either by recommendation or because they have been to my website.

Just before the first lockdown in the UK, in early March 2020, I was already speaking with schools and encouraging them to offer career guidance online. This enabled us to run with online provision quickly. In secondary schools, finding the space to provide career guidance was always a huge problem. For the schools I work with online delivery meant that they didn't need to put a careers advisor in a tiny space (like a broom cupboard), and we could carry on meeting. Providing guidance online kind of made me more accessible.

I would like to think that Covid-19 has raised the profile of career guidance. When schools are up against financial pressures, career guidance and careers education go to the bottom of the list of priorities. All the 'nice to haves' get pushed to the back of the queue. I felt strongly this shouldn't be allowed to happen to young people. I felt this time last year (March 2020) was so crucial for 14- to 16-year-olds. Students were confused; it wasn't clear whether they would be sitting examinations. They didn't know what was going to happen to their results and so they didn't know how they could make decisions, for instance, should they be looking for university applications or apprenticeships? They weren't getting any support.

Belgin: *How is providing online career guidance different from face-to-face delivery?*

Hannah: I don't find the online delivery much different to face-to-face. However, for some students, it is difficult to engage online because they don't have the full set of non-verbal cues they can use to understand the conversation. But, for other students, online delivery is better because they're much more comfortable with not interacting in person. So, there are plusses and minuses. But it only works if you've got the right

equipment and that it is functioning well!

In terms of the content of guidance; the nature of the work conversations has changed. We are now spending a lot more time talking about work experience. We do a screen share and search for options together. In current times, this usually means virtual work experience. Young people worry that there are no 'real' work opportunities. So, you need to show them where the opportunities are and what they look like. The importance of work experience has probably grown ever more important for young people in the pandemic. In the first lockdown in England (March 2020) students were sent home from school and there was little ongoing contact. There was little structure in the way home-schooling was done; and people were not prepared to educate at home. Nobody knew what to do and we didn't realise how long this period of home-schooling was going to last.

However, there have been some clear benefits from this situation. Particularly during the pandemic when people are working from home, you get more engagement from the young peoples' parents. This may be because parents are more concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on jobs and are therefore willing to find out what opportunities are available and what their children might be missing out on. Parental involvement is also necessary for safeguarding/child protection reasons as well (to protect young people's health, well-being and rights) during the online session. We have seen safeguarding procedures evolve all the time; at the moment (April 2021) a parent should be around with the young person at home. They don't have to be actually sitting with the student, but there needs to be always at least one parent at home. But, this is the recommended good practice, and not a legal requirement.

Belgin: *Tell me about the online career guidance training you developed? What does it involve?*

Hannah: Given the inconsistencies around career guidance delivery, and the importance of continuing career guidance despite lockdown restrictions, I prepared safeguarding guidance for remote interactions with young people and delivered this training in the area near my home. To prepare the material I looked at national guidelines first (see DfE, 2020). Then spoke to the schools and local authorities in the area. I made a strong case to continue career guidance, and the stakeholders came back and said - let's do it. These are the kind of schools that prioritise career guidance. They are the forward-thinking schools, continuing career guidance remotely from the start of the first lockdown. Now, many more schools are doing this, a year later.

A key issue was that a lot of the careers advisors did not have the confidence to do their work online; even though they had the expertise. Hence, I worked locally to put together this training package about delivering online career guidance (Courtney Bennett, 2020); and it does cover safeguarding, as it is a big part of the process. For demonstration, I brought in one of my children and we ran a mock online guidance session. This way careers advisors could see how the process works to increase their confidence that they could do this themselves.

The first topic covered in the training was how as a practitioner you prepare for an online guidance meeting. A key issue was setting up the image for video conferencing because everything a student sees on the screen, including your appearance and your background, will influence them – consciously or unconsciously. Especially in early days of the lockdown, we were still trying to figure out how to appear on video connections. In terms of setting up the image, the training discussed lighting in our rooms (e.g., soft/natural light on your face), our background (e.g., white walls, decluttered, and so on) and being at eye level with the camera (e.g., avoid holding the device or having it on your lap).

The second topic in my training was how to prepare for delivery. The logistics of the guidance meeting needs to be clearly communicated within the school; making it clear who is going to initiate contact with the student. You need to sit down with the safeguarding person within the school and agree with them what is to be done. There could be different interpretations of guidelines across schools, so different schools have different requirements of me (e.g., some schools recommend not having sessions from the student's bedroom).

Once an appointment is arranged, expectations also need to be communicated to the student (and parents). These include appropriate dress, appropriate venue, and who will be present with the student. It is also important to note that if the student doesn't have access to a video platform or doesn't want to use it, the consultation can be done on the phone. How the practitioner prepares for the call is also important. For instance, allowing yourself more time to prepare is considered good practice.

The third topic is on running the meeting. Establishing effective rapport online is a key issue here. Normally in face-to-face delivery I wouldn't mention confidentiality right at the outset, but in remote guidance I do, especially if there is an observer present (e.g., from school), so everyone understands the boundaries. I also take notes to summarise the meeting in a document. So, I need to tell the student that my gaze will move off the screen from time to time. I don't record meetings; but I'm wondering whether that's

going to change soon. During the third lockdown in England (January – April 2021) there was talk about recording lessons. More schools have chosen to opt into the recording of guidance sessions than have opted out. But young people can better express themselves in a safe environment, without recording. If the school wants to record the session, I don't have a problem with that, but I don't want to be responsible for looking after the data.

The final topic was on safeguarding. Safeguarding rules can vary from school to school. For example, with face-to-face delivery, in one school you can sit down and have a one-to-one with a student but in another school, you must never position yourself in between the door and the student. In other schools you're not allowed to be in a room with the door closed if there's no window. Now we have similar inconsistency of safeguarding principles with online career guidance to the extent that some schools do not want to engage in the process at all.

Online delivery does not negate the current safeguarding principles. So that means careers advisors need to be checked for criminal record, they need to have undertaken safeguarding training and to adhere to statutory safeguarding guidance. All advisors need to be familiar with the Designated Safeguarding Lead in the school and how to contact them. Online meetings should be held during normal school times and students need to be aware that a record will be kept and made available to the school as well.

Recommended online safeguarding practice (see DfE, 2020) is that advisors should try to avoid one-to-one situations, make sure there is a parent around. For instance, handling difficult cases is even more problematic online. I feel that is why it's important to have somebody else in the house while you are delivering guidance; as when you end the call, if they are upset, they are supported. This differs from my training when we were advised not to have parents present. This was to help you to speak to your student and for them not be influenced by anybody else. But, as a careers advisor one of your skills is to encourage young people to speak despite the presence of their parents. You can always listen to the parents and then ask the student if that's what they want to do.

Conclusion

We thank Hannah for sharing her experiences and tips on remote career guidance. The Covid-19 pandemic not only limited the number of labour market opportunities for young people, but also opportunities for receiving career-related support. Research shows that goal-directed focused, as opposed to haphazard or exploratory, career behaviour, such

as that encouraged by the single interaction model of career guidance, is particularly more relevant for those transitioning into uncertain, ambiguous labour markets (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2021). We can therefore argue that not having access to career guidance potentially multiplies young people's disadvantage in the Covid-19 context. It is therefore crucial that careers practitioners are confident in online delivery of career guidance, including adjusting safeguarding of young people during these virtual sessions.

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A suitable marriage: Careers and identities at work

Sakshi Bansal



SAKSHI BANSAL

Founder, Project LEAP, UK

tanya.bansal2@gmail.com

About the author

Sakshi has an MSc in Work and Organisational Psychology from University of Nottingham, UK. At the age of 19 years Sakshi became the founder of Project LEAP, a social service project where her volunteers provide free education to over 1600 under-privileged families in India. Sakshi works as a full-time Psychometric Consultant in London (UK) and provides pro-bono skill-based training to youth volunteers. A young entrepreneur herself, she supports various young start-ups by providing strategy and brand advise. Since being awarded the UNESCO Kindness Leader (in 2018) she has spoken on various platforms on ideas of change, kindness, leadership, and volunteering.

Abstract

This paper aims to facilitate a shift in thought for professionals of all ages who have experienced, or are experiencing, a dilemma surrounding their career choice. The paper explores why multiple career roles can lead to ineffectiveness, burnout, and division in self-perception. I will illustrate a few important questions that can lead to a meaningful congruence between different career roles and ideas of self, a state that promotes clarity, collaboration, and well-being. This exploration will assist professionals to engage proactively in career crafting and seeking ways to merge their various careers into one meaningful whole.

Keywords: Career crafting, congruence, collaboration, self-perception, well-being

Introduction

A career journey is often marked by different milestones. Each milestone presents a unique opportunity to pause and reflect on the learning we have accumulated over the years and to chalk out our future direction. Since I started my career journey at the age of 17 years, I have had some time to reflect. My journey has always been unusual. I started by selling cakes on Facebook to establish a social service project to educate under-privileged families in India (project LEAP). While I was doing this, I studied psychology, interned as a social-media trainee, and joined a start-up to sell Artificial Intelligence based products.

The motivation behind each one of these activities has also been unique. I engaged in different careers for the pleasure, or to pay the bills or for the legacy. Since each of these motivations were powerful for me, I never let go of any of the career paths and instead, just kept adding to them. Today, I work as a Psychometric Consultant in London with the various other parts of me working as trainer, volunteer, facilitator, and advisor in the roles I love. The following paragraphs will explore why these additions to my career led to a division in my perception of self. I will end by illustrating some questions that I am constantly asking myself to carve a career for me which is wholesome, fulfilling, and practical.

The journey

In total honesty I will admit that the early years of my career were daunting. My career journey looked like a big puzzle to me with different pieces that I was trying to put together. While some pieces I could see fitting into the big picture, like my goals, expectations, and skills; most of the pieces were vague, hidden, and hard to find a fit for. These included parts like career growth, personal limitations, and parallel interests. Over the years, it has taken a lot of resources, patience, and mistakes to figure out the puzzle, piece by piece.

Since all of this began in school, a trip down the memory lane can provide useful context. I was very young when I realised the things I never wanted to do. A lot of them included any kind of sports, mathematics, and science. Since I was 'left' with the only option of psychology, I chose to embrace it and continued studying it in college at University of Delhi, India. While in college I came across various social-service groups. I distinctively remember telling my friend I was not a charitable kind of person and was unlikely to enjoy volunteering my time in these groups. But, as tradition has it, I joined the group because my friend joined it. I quickly realised that these groups had a lot to do with leadership, management and problem-solving; some of the areas that really interest me.

After two years of voluntary working with Rotary International I realised there were some gaps that were preventing my fellow volunteers from maximising their impact. These gaps existed because although the organization had ample guidelines on what causes to care about and what issues we need to solve, there was a lack of awareness in the volunteers on what exactly they need to do. Most of the volunteers went into the field with passion in their hearts, surrounded by hundreds of students who were eager to learn from them but they themselves were clueless on where and how to begin. This either led

to a lot of volunteers using trial-and-error methods that impacted the quality of their teaching, or, led to a lot of volunteers exiting the group leaving the children lacking consistency of approach.

This is when I started Project LEAP (Literacy, Empowerment, Ability and Participation). The word LEAP encompassed all the things I cared about, and the project aimed to provide guidance for the volunteers when they went into the community to teach under-privileged children. My mission was simple. I developed a project that provides ample resources to volunteers to help them become aware of their own stereotypes, their body language, develop teaching skills, learn about project management, and develop kindness. This in-turn would help them not only to teach under-privileged children but entire families within an area. Within a month, I had 300 volunteers joining my mission. The volunteers were divided in various small groups based on their geographic location and proximity. Once the volunteers had identified an area in their vicinity where they would teach, I would work closely with the volunteer group to develop guidelines for their work, what they would do and how they would conduct themselves. We worked with all the innovative ideas that the volunteers suggested (like using cinema for teaching important values) and incorporated them into the project. Project LEAP ended up providing education to over 1600 families in the year of 2017.

At the same time, I was attending lectures on social psychology in college; and I fell in love with the subject. Once again, by the order of elimination (I did not like counselling and clinical psychology), I was left with 'Organizational Psychology' and I chose to embrace it with both hands and moved to the UK to do further study in an area that I had not yet fully understood.

Choices

At each of the stages I have described, there were choices to be made. A choice on how to spend my time and what to spend it on. With the multiple interests and inability to say 'no', I was landed with a lot of work ranging from studying psychology, managing over 300 volunteers, volunteering for families, working with a start-up, interning in a social media role; and trying to have a social life. Each avenue created multiple and markedly distinct opportunities making it harder to choose between starting a psychology career in the UK and doing social work with Project LEAP. Again, I chose to do both these things!

Puzzle of multiple identities

Reflecting on this time my work and career seemed like a puzzle because I was unsure of how the big picture would look. There was no image on the box I could refer to; and no example of people doing this before me. When I turned to the obvious next step of networking to learn from people who had done something similar, I realised that there was a clear lack of Indian-origin women who had ‘made it’ in the relatively-niche (if not non-existent) field of social work or work and organizational psychology in my network. In these circumstances, networking with people who did not face the same issues, dilemmas, and choices as I was doing would not take me any further than where I already was. Hence, I began my college years with a markedly different sense of direction than most of my peers, who went onto more well-known forms of psychology while I wanted to do something different. I did not fully understand what this ‘something different’ was and in those years and I never for once considered that practicing psychology and social work in a single job would ever be possible, let alone something I would be doing in the coming years.

For the initial part of my education and career, I led a dual life. To avoid losing either of my interests, my 17-year-old-self decided to train as an occupational psychologist in the UK (this is similar to the work and organizational psychology role in Europe); while in parallel working on my social-service project LEAP. This did not change after university. Following a similar pattern to the start of my career at the age of 23 years, my days looked like a 9-5 full-time role as a psychometric consultant with the nights and weekend reserved for Project LEAP. This is exactly how my LinkedIn profile described me; and reflected my biggest issue. This mere division in my thoughts between the two career paths split me into two halves. I stopped seeing myself as one human being with a clear set of skills and congruent personality who is trying to build her legacy but instead, I saw myself as Consultant Sakshi on weekdays and Social Entrepreneur Sakshi on the weekends.

Traditionally, sociologists focused on the draining aspects of human energy when multiple roles create an overload of demands and often led to scarcity or lack of energy in a person. Shah, Mullainathan and Shafir (2012) also mention that all human beings have a limited ‘mental bandwidth’, or brainpower, which restricts how much they can focus on at any one time. They further explain that when multiple constraints are presented to an individual, they can impact the individual’s ability to make decisions, influence their general well-being (often increasing anxiety) and lead to role conflict (Barnet &

Baruch, 1985). These theories therefore focus on the difficulty of managing multiple roles and in some cases conclude that since different obligations are overdemanding, some compromises must be made (Goode, 1960). A slightly different perspective comes from Marks (1977) who explains the 'expansion' theory of energy where he states that individuals have an unlimited fund of energy which can be produced more and more through social interactions. He also explains that the varying level of commitment of an individual to multiple roles will be responsible for whether they feel strained, or not, by the number of roles they manage. This line of thinking suggests that perhaps multiple roles can create an expansion of energy. Although there are individuals who feel fatigue, drained, or strained by these multiple roles, there is a certain energy that these roles create for us to further ourselves, especially during social interactions (Durkheim, 1974).

Coming back to my two roles, my consulting role was largely based on the content of the master's degree I had completed at the University of Nottingham. This course allowed me to see the diverse nature of the study of psychology of work. When I was in India, I looked at the field with a narrow lens thinking all roads lead to Human Resources (HR) roles. However, it was during my master's programme that I realised how we could brand, market and apply ourselves to the world of business. According to Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern (2006, p. 3) Social Entrepreneurship is an "*Innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the non-profit, business or government sectors*". This is exactly what I was doing or helping others to do given my experience of establishing Project LEAP and in interactions with several charities, not-for-profit organizations, and volunteers from around the world.

The costs

In reality, both my selves were just trying to stay afloat. This is simply because all my energy, time and goals are divided into two. Maintaining this level of activity since I was 17 years of age takes excellent, but extreme time management, priority setting and boundary creation.

One of the first things I did was to learn about my own style. I understood that I came from a strategy building mindset rather than an attention-to-detail style; and thus, I quickly learned how to delegate. I delegated all tasks, wherever possible so I could spend as much time as needed to create vision, direction, and hope. Delegation meant trust and inspiration - a type of leadership that I had to observe and learn as it did not come naturally. This meant I spent hours listening to Indra Nooyi's interviews (Stanford

Graduate School of Businesses, 2016), more hours reflecting on how people feel around me and a lot of time trying to understand what motivates people (something I had learned in my psychology classes).

To do all this, I had to learn how to find pockets of time. Thus, whenever I was doing a repetitive task (cooking rice, doing the laundry, walking); I was multi-tasking by listening, reading, or reflecting. Since it took some practice and a lot of burned rice on the way, I call it the 'Burn the Rice' technique. Interestingly, I also realised I had to keep reminding myself of why I do what I do and when the motivation was not natural, I found talking to other people helped. Networking with strangers and discussing my work always gave me fresh perspectives, new direction, unexplored avenues and perhaps some validation that my work is meaningful. Finally, it took a lot of rest-days where I would just go solo-travelling in the mountains without one single minute spent on work. In hindsight, time alone was one of the best ways to keep me energised, motivated and happy.

However, after years of doing this, the result is exhaustion, serious feelings of imposter syndrome and losing track of what impact I was creating, if any. Imposter syndrome is characterised by chronic feelings of self-doubt and fear of being discovered as an intellectual fraud when despite evidence of abilities, those suffering from imposter syndrome are unable to internalise a sense of accomplishment, competence, or skill (Maqsood et al., 2018). On lighter days, these feelings led to confusion, tiredness and missed meals and on tougher days, it looked like burnout, exertion, and lack of clarity of my career heading. The very practice of creating two partitions of my interests and careers meant at any given point, I was only generating half of the impact that I could in both the fields of work. Moreover, it barely left me any time to create, innovate and collaborate freely as my mind was singularly focused on getting tasks done. When I had just enough of this madness and decided to talk about it to a colleague, something no less than magic happened.

The wedding

Amongst this madness and search for a fuller identity at work, a breakthrough occurred during a phone call with Professor Stuart Carr (from Massey University, New Zealand) and Ingrid Covington (Occupational Psychologist at Creating Psychological Capital), two people who I have never met but simply connected with me via LinkedIn. Although the call was about my plans to move to New Zealand, we stumbled upon the topic of merging

careers and roles. This is when I experienced a eureka moment. The solution was simple yet extraordinary; exploring the field of *Humanitarian Psychology* would hold my two passions of psychology and social work together!

According to Carr, McAuliffe and MacLachlan (2014) humanitarian psychology focuses on using work and organizational psychology to pay close attention to humanitarian concerns, such as promoting safe work conditions and decent wages across all sectors. This is reflected in Stuart Carr's work on sustainable livelihood, decent work, and poverty (Carr, 2013). While traditionally psychology has focused more on personalities in poverty, Carr's work focuses on the contexts for poverty reduction (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). His book titled *Anti-Poverty Psychology* (2013) highlights and builds on the roles of businesses, aid agencies, government civil services, community groups and educational institutions on reducing poverty.

For me, the field of humanitarian psychology would allow me to marry both my work identities fully and beautifully; providing indications of how my career and life could look like in the future. Finally, I had found an arena where I could apply fully myself without creating partitions or barriers to contain the various areas of my work. I had failed to discover this sooner simply because my mind could not fathom how these two professions could work together. I had never tried to google psychology + social work (social psychology) before! This newfound knowledge that there is a place where I can put both my careers in one place felt like I had finally put all the pieces of the puzzle together, like I was whole again. It felt like a huge wave of relief and warmth had taken over me but at the same time I was excited at the possibility to exploring a new field, a new life, and a new career for myself. There was finally a field that provided knowledge, allowed ample space, and gave me the much-needed validation of putting these two fields together. The mere existence of the field challenged the notion that work and personal selves are separate which a lot of organizations continue to believe is true. It also challenged a notion I had held as a child that careers and interests are meant to be different since interests like dance, social work or art cannot lead to successful careers.

The marriage

The task of marrying work and social psychology together in my mind allowed me to see the bigger picture of my life and career. Slowly, I was making connections between both of my perceived separate careers that were otherwise unexplored. These connections

allowed me to enjoy the benefits that two mature people enjoy when they marry and form an alliance together.

There are two major benefits of this practice. First was the ability to innovate in both the fields by bringing in a perspective which uses the dual expertise and creates holistic solutions. I furthered Project LEAP by not only providing a 'first-if-its-kind' training to 300 volunteers but by developing a model for this training which we now deliver to youth volunteers involved in supporting various Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Africa, and the UK. This required me to bring in my expertise as a psychologist and my experience from working with Rotary International. The second benefit of finding a common field was to be able to create a unique identity for myself which helped me to start building my legacy. It was important to me to understand my legacy. What I want to be known for, what people should remember me for, what my colleagues should contact me about. While this seemed muddled and unclear before, my legacy was taking shape slowly and I realised I wanted to be known for innovating and changing the world using psychology as the key tool. An identity that is whole instead of many pieces, that is easier to market and work with, and one that understands the far-reaching impact it can have on not just volunteers in India but for volunteers around the world. This brought immense satisfaction and clarity to my career. It was easier to put together a puzzle when I could imagine what the result could look like.

Subtle differences and challenges

For those who might find this idea similar to the concept of work-life balance (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018), or the ability to manage time to hustle two careers, there is a nuance that needs to be understood. History provides an apt metaphor here. When powerful rulers wanted to conquer another empire, they would often develop strategies to divide the empire by breaking it up in smaller pieces. This strategy has led to countless invasions and the breaking up of huge empires. Learning from our ancestors, the idea here is to marry our careers into one single, powerful whole. This allows us to apply our entire selves towards creating an impactful career. Once we achieve a full sense of self in our work, it becomes difficult for outside forces to disempower us. Indeed, it is proven that to break apart a whole body (stones, humans, and dynasties) is much harder than those which has holes in it (cracks, incongruencies and traitors). Just like this, a marriage of my two careers allows me to create a stronger and empowered career which will have ample clarity, direction, sense of self, and will be much harder to crumble in face of change, uncertainty, and doubt.

For those who might still argue about the worth of secondary jobs and multiple revenue streams, there is no way I am trying to say that these are not important. In fact, I did it for years. This concept is what comes after years of side-hustles. It is the idea of marrying our different jobs, dimensions, skills, and parts together in a union. This concept will allow us to craft our careers into a thriving, strong and fuller self; after the years of side-hustling that will burn and wear us out. While some people are good at ending one part of their chapters and moving on to the other, this idea will save us from shutting down a part of us that we like. It will allow us to transfer our skills to increase our impact, to see ourselves as one human being with a wide skill set, rather than just looking at different jobs in our life that are separate from each other.

Like all good things in life, this marriage did not come easy. The professional maturity of combining my greatest assets required a lot of careful strategising and bold changes. This required mindful observation of my daily tasks in both fields and understanding how they could be aligned together. An instance comes to mind where I sat down with ten different objects in my room, each of which reflected a different project that I was involved in. I then grouped them together based on their focal point: psychology versus social work. I then started shuffling the objects in these two groups thinking which key people from each project I could introduce to each other and how that would benefit the goal of both projects. This simple exercise revealed to me that a lot of my colleagues in field of psychology could help me understand the motivation that propels volunteers; which would then help me find out how to help them better. It required finding out where the opportunities to network and grow lie and where the gaps are. Finally, I had to go an extra step and say 'no' to anything that did not contribute to building my legacy. While my career remains a work in progress, I have been told that this maturity is an experience that people find much later in their lives. The very fact that I felt the compelling need to find it so early in my career highlights how fast paced, competitive and overwhelming careers have become and how devoted my generation is to be the best version of themselves (Chiu, 2021).

An exercise to investigate identities

With the clear benefits of a holistic career in mind, I bring forth the concept of marrying multiple passions, interests, and careers together. So, as individuals, we might want to rethink our identities at work. This exercise can begin by asking ourselves some questions:

- Are there pieces of our puzzle that we have lost, hidden away, or forgotten?
- Do we feel whole, or do we feel divided?
- What makes us feel divided?
- What practices are we adopting in our careers that continuously divide our time, attention, energy and thinking?
- How can we bring our full selves to work?
- What are the benefits we see from it?
- How can we systemically collaborate with people who will benefit from the marriage of our different career paths?
- What will make us whole again?

Concluding remarks: Moving forward, together

Over the past months, I have shared the idea of marrying our careers globally and have collated revolutionising anecdotes where this concept could work. Currently, I am working on an equation. A simple equation that allows us the flexibility and the direction to find our two moving parts, how they add to one another and what the result can look like. Once I have that equation ready, I will share it as far and widely as possible. Who knows, this simple equation might allow individuals, teams, organizations, and governments to finally apply their fuller self and create their legacies.

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