Identity work and the 'unemployed' worker: Age, disability and the lived experience of the older unemployed

Abstract

This article seeks to explore how older individuals negotiate and manage their self-identity in relation to work whilst situated outwith paid employment. After reviewing the current positions of the older unemployed in the UK, noting the substantial overlap between age and disability, we turn our attention to conceptualising the lived experiences of individuals through exploring 'identity work' as a means of understanding a non-working work identity. Based upon focus group interviews, our empirical analysis focuses on key dimensions of participants' identity practice and how they sought to manage the following social processes: imposed identities, crafting working identities; and contesting unfavourable working identities. The conclusion contextualises the findings against a backdrop of increasing individualistic discourses underpinning approaches to employability, closing with the policy implications arising from this study, and making suggestions for future research agendas.

Keywords: Age, Disability, Identity Work, Older Worker, Unemployment

Introduction

Across industrialised nations, concern over declining and ageing populations has led to heightened focus on 'older workers' (commonly, although somewhat problematically, defined as those over 50). Increasing the employment rates of the over-50s carries important economic potential, by increasing taxable capacity and reducing dependability of older people on the state (Zaidi and Fuchs, 2006: 13). There is also a moral argument which rests on the belief that many of those who leave employment early, i.e. before state pension/retirement ages, do so involuntarily (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000) and because of age discrimination (Barnes et al., 2002). Although there is some evidence that in the UK and elsewhere average retirement ages are rising (Zaidi and Fuchs, 2006), there remains 'substantial scope' for increasing the employment of older workers (OECD, 2006: 9).

Policy debates have centred around two related concepts: extending working lives, through keeping people in employment up until or beyond state retirement/pension ages, and reversing the 'one-way street' (OECD, 2006: 10) of early exit, that is, getting unemployed or economically inactive older people back into work. Although fully recognizing the significance of retaining existing older employees, our focus in this article is on the older out-of-work, an arguably neglected cohort in the field of research (Maltby, 2007). Berthoud (2003) has suggested that many unemployed older workers suffer from 'multiple disadvantage' in the form of age and disability. Statistical data show increased prevalence of long-term health conditions from age 50 onwards (e.g. Sargeant, 2005; Loretto and Taylor, 2007). However we are lacking insight into the ways in which these disadvantages may be experienced, and specifically on how age and disability may interact to create, sustain or increase

barriers to employability. Of course, employability is a complex term; we use it here in its broadest sense to mean the various circumstances that may affect the potential to enter, re-enter or to maintain employment (see McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005 for a full discussion).

In addition, there has been surprisingly little discussion within sociological studies of work over older unemployed people's lived experiences. There remains a lack of focus on the relationships between paid and unpaid work and the self-management of older workers' multifaceted identities as workers, non-workers, disabled individuals or older claimants. Exploring the nature and complexity of these various identities and positions may provide an insight into the success or failure of current initiatives to promote employability.

The aim of the article is to explore the social processes and discourses that older unemployed persons engage with to construct or maintain a working identity. To do this, we begin by introducing the UK government's approaches to promoting employability among the over-50s, critiquing the lack of attention that has been paid to the identity of those within these schemes. We then examine how the identity construction of the older unemployed may be explored conceptually, drawing on the notion of 'identity work'. We investigate this further through a qualitative study of individuals over 50 who are currently on government benefit schemes, exploring how the tensions between maintaining a working identity against competing discourses were negotiated. Finally, we discuss how the findings of our study may be used to critique the inherent identity assumptions made within policy approaches towards the older unemployed.

Policy initiatives

The older unemployed in the UK feature prominently in what is often termed the 'hidden' unemployed, i.e. not recorded in the official unemployment figures. Half of all people aged between 50 and state pension ages (currently 60 for women and 65 for men) who are not working are in receipt of Incapacity Benefit (IB) (Beatty and Fothergill, 2007: 65), the principal benefit for those who stop working due to ill-health or disability (see DWP, 2004: 55-58.). Of the 2.4 million claimants of IB, almost half (47.8%) are aged 50 and over (DWP statistics; authors' analysis). Considerably fewer (some 140,000) over-50s are in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). JSA claimants, included in the official unemployment figures, must be 'available for, and actively seeking, work' (Jobcentre Plus, 2007), and are required to attend regular meetings at a Jobcentre and demonstrate work-seeking activity. In contrast, IB recipients tend to be unemployed for longer, do not have to visit Jobcentres, and are consequently considered to be more detached from the labour market (Beatty and Fothergill, 1999).

The government has publicly stated its commitment to reduce the number of IB claimants by one million and to increase the number of older people in work (DWP, 2007). A raft of measures has been introduced to encourage uptake of work among older and disabled workers. Modifications to the benefits systems have attempted to subsidise people into, or back into, work while also reducing incentives in the benefits regimes to leave the labour market. 'Innovative employment programmes' (DWP, 2007: 7) include the 'New Deal' initiatives (separate initiatives for older workers and for disabled workers). These have specifically targeted the longer-term unemployed, and offer financial support, personal advice and in-work training grants.

Most recently, attention has been focused on the Pathways to Work programme which supplements the back-to-work support of the New Deal programmes with further financial and personal support, and involves a range of partner organisations, notably the National Health Service. Alongside such schemes, recent legislation against age and disability discrimination (OPSI 2005; 2006) has contributed to the rhetoric that employment opportunities are now available for anyone who wishes to work

Of course, such approaches are not value-free but both create and reproduce a number of constructions about the norms of work and those individuals engaging with (or excluded from) the labour market. Conceptually, the UK government's approach has been characterised by a 'work first' tactic, moving people out of unemployment and inactivity and into jobs as quickly as possible. However, the Pathways to Work programme has elements of an alternative model, that of 'human capital development' (HCD), which is more holistic in its focus, aiming to equip people with appropriate skills and attributes to find and retain jobs. (see Lindsay et al., 2007: 542 for a full comparison of these approaches). Theoretically at least, an HCD orientation will benefit people with multiple disadvantages (Lindsay et. al., 2007: 557). However, as seen in studies of political texts from a gendered perspective (e.g. Garnsey and Rees, 1996), many of the current policies make assumptions about 'disadvantaged' individuals, homogenising both their experiences and their social or economic position. For example, legislation prohibiting discrimination on account of age maintains a default retirement age, supporting rhetoric that there is a 'right time' for people to retire. This impacts on schemes targeting the working population, such as New Deal 50+, which is only made available to those 'of working age', i.e. 16-65.

Similarly, while it is tacitly acknowledged that the impact of certain Pathways to Work schemes may lead many older people on benefit 'to an acceptance of early retirement' (2002: 14), there has been little development in showing how or why such processes occur in practice. As a result, we are left with an over-simplistic notion of an 'unemployed' identity which only relates to people's 'condition' pertaining to their non-working status or to their 'potential' to return to the labour market. To further understand this diverse group of people, we turn to a micro-perspective of identity to explore what processes of identity formation may be at play when negotiating their sense of self in relation to paid employment.

Identity work and the non-working worker

Work constitutes a key part of how we construct, define, transform and make sense of our own and others' identities and has attracted widespread attention from a range of theoretical perspectives across the social sciences (Bain, 2005). In striving towards a unified sense of self, corporate culture, shared values and human resource strategies endeavour to mould a shared identity that the employees either voluntarily or are required to attach themselves to, assuming, sometimes incorrectly, that this will facilitate organisational success (Parker, 2000). A number of studies have already sought to explore the ways identity is managed by the individual within workplace settings (e.g. Hatch and Shultz, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Allen Collinson, 2006). However, there has been less focus on how an individual seeks to construct or maintain 'professional' identities even when they are not engaged in paid employment. Explorations of unemployment often rest upon psychological tenets, assuming the non-working identity as unfavourable (Gallie and Marsh, 1998) and inadequate in fulfilling an individual's sense of self (Kelvin, 1981), with the label of

'unemployed' seen as a negative and unhealthy concept in itself (Cassidy, 2001). However, critical perspectives show how traditional dichotomies assumed within this literature between work and non-work are problematic when it comes to conceptualising activities as either paid work or non-paid activities. For example, domestic labour or volunteering can be understood as constituting a 'working identity' (Taylor, 2004). Similarly, studies of retirement and identity (e.g. Dorfman and Kolarik, 2005) have shown that retirees may retain a strong sense of who they are in relation to their former occupation or profession. We extend this argument by suggesting that those within these spheres are actively engaged in professional identity work. It may follow that there are similar processes of creating working identities amongst those who are regarded as 'temporarily' out of work, and questions arise over how these are reproduced, contested and challenged socially in day-to-day interaction.

In attempting to capture the complex processes of making sense of a multidimensional and continually forming self, the term 'identity work' has been increasingly employed within studies of work. Understanding identity as an inherently social process, individuals are engaged in negotiating who they are and their position within the social arenas they occupy (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). Individuals are not conceptualised as passively accepting the positions imposed upon them but instead seen as maintaining some control over their on-going sense of self. Key to achieving this is the sense of a 'reflexive project' where identity is 'routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of individuals' (Giddens, 1991: 52). Not only is this a mental endeavour but it is intrinsically embodied in the sense that we are immersed within the social through our physical presence and the choices,

regimes and contexts we inhabit. This process may not lead to a full sense of emancipatory action or the denial of perceived structures and constraints; rather, it focuses upon the tensions and sense-making techniques used to facilitate an on-going construction of self within arenas of power.

The theoretical tenet that belies 'identity work' would certainly allow for a non-working working identity to be possible, but lacks a sound account of the temporal dimensions of identity work. Its uptake within many post-structural accounts of work-based identities has resulted in a tendency to overplay the fragmented, fluid nature of identity work as a means of subjectivity, often complimented by a Foucauldian or performative-based account of the discursive self (e.g. Creed and Scully, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005). We would argue that this particular angle within the current organizational literature provides less consideration of accounts of self-identity across time. Returning to Giddens (1991) as a key contributor to the theoretical development of identity work, we see that his concept of identity in high modernity underlines the importance of time and the autobiographical self in relation to identity work, and argues that identity resources may not necessarily be bounded by temporality or the current spaces individuals occupy. In one sense the past is employed as a means of sense-making that allows us to have a continued sense of self where 'the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future' (Giddens, 1991: 75). Yet it also creates a continual sense of self, since an individual can 'hang onto' an identity or the symbolic resources attached to that identity even when it ceases to be actualised in their current daily practice.

There are already tentative inferences that work may be a symbolic resource that is drawn upon as an identity resource by those currently outwith the labour force for example, by Willot and Griffin (2004) who show the ways in which unemployed men draw on forms of work as a means of symbolic capital to define a masculine self. Yet there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the ways in which older unemployed individuals actively negotiate, maintain or reject a working identity through their identity work. Therefore, we sought to explore how older workers outwith paid employment seek to negotiate or maintain a 'working' identity despite being in formalised government schemes for the unemployed.

Data collection and analysis

Datas was collected through focus groups, as part of a larger project commissioned by Scottish Enterprise (Scotland's principal economic development agency), investigating the employability of older workers (Loretto and White, 2004). Scotland has attracted particular interest because its population is thought to be ageing more rapidly than elsewhere in the UK (Danson, 2007). Focus groups were preferred to individual interviews as the social arena of the group provides a relatively naturalistic setting in which to study attitudes, but also allows us to explore how individuals' accounts are 'articulated, censured, opposed and challenged through social interaction' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 5).

Eight groups (4 of JSA recipients and 4 of IB recipients) were held across four regions of Scotland in Spring 2003. The participants were recruited through various avenues, including advertisements in local newspapers, public libraries, and community centres, but not through Jobcentres, as constraints of confidentiality

prohibited staff from divulging clients' contact details. As a caveat, we note that the self-selection and call for participants has skewed the sample in the sense that all participants were interested in discussing 'employability'. We acknowledge that not all those within the same governmental schemes may share the sentiments or employ similar identity strategies discussed herein.

The sixty-six participants comprised 54 men (19 IB and 35 JSA), and 12 women (8 IB and 4 JSA). Just over half of the participants (n = 35) were aged between 50 and 54; twenty-four were between 55 and 59; the remaining seven came into the 60-64 year-old cohort. The occupations, skills and qualifications background was very diverse. There were professionals; health care workers; crafts/trade people; semi-skilled/unskilled production workers; former teachers, directors and senior managers. 1 in 6 had been out of work for less than a year; a further 16 had not had a job for between one and two years, while 14 (nearly a quarter) had been out of work for three years or more. The IB participants tended to be longer out of work than their JSA counterparts. Health problems, however, were by no means restricted to IB claimants: a notable proportion of the JSA groups also revealed a health problem. Previous research (e.g. Bacon, 2002) has also shown that (older) people do not always move from JSA to IB if they develop health problems which prevent them working or looking for work.

Focus groups were facilitated and audio-taped then transcribed ad verbatim. Transcripts were initially anonymised then analysed independently by each of the authors through a range of coding and memoing techniques in order to identify what symbolic resources, subject positions and experiences were being drawn upon within

respondents' processes of identity work. After discussing the findings from this preliminary stage of analysis, the second stage involved the use of comparative textual analysis techniques within each participant's personal narratives to explore the contradictions, tensions and conflation of ideas that were reifying or contesting their espoused identity, and how these became interwoven or juxtaposed with the narratives of other members of the group. This procedure led to the emergence of the processes that were key to the identity work of these 'non workers'. In summary, respondents tended to reject 'non-working' identities: significantly none considered themselves to be retired. All expressed an interest in working again; the majority (n=45) wished to return to paid work. Their accounts revealed constant tension between working and non-working identities, feeling that non-working identities had been imposed upon them often through being labelled as 'older' or 'disabled'. However, our analysis also showed that they sought to actively craft working identities and to reject unfavourable working identities. We now explore each of these themes in turn.

Imposed identities

The power of various external 'gatekeepers' to impose disabled and older worker identities was clear throughout the focus groups. Common sentiments included 'I've been told at the Jobcentre and by a job broker that I'm too old at 56' (Female, JSA); and 'I had a hip replacement three years ago but I've been told by doctors I can't go back to work' (Male, IB). Significantly, this imposed construction of disabled and older identities by others was not seen as compatible with a working identity. For example, one male IB claimant was told that he was too ill and to 'not bother with employment and get on with my life' by hospital staff, suggesting that there was an

inability to integrate any form of employment with being ill, or even consider why work might be important to him in 'getting on with his life'.

The transition from paid employment was also instrumental in shaping current identities. The most common exit route among JSA claimants was redundancy. Many had experienced successive redundancies, and most believed that they had been selected because of their age, reinforcing the notion that as older workers, they were less desirable to both past and future employers. Although nearly two-thirds of the IB claimants ascribed their job loss to illness, closer scrutiny of their accounts revealed a range of factors. Only eight people became too ill to work and gave up of their own accord or on medical advice. The same number had retired through ill-health retirement schemes, largely on an involuntary basis; others gave up work after a work-related accident and for several, the onset of ill health came only after redundancy.

Participants highlighted the difficulty of escaping imposed non-worker identities when their financial survival relied upon their compliance and submission to the parameters set by the benefits structure. The disembodied power of 'the system', comprising 'faceless people' (Male, JSA) was highlighted to explain the lack of fluidity between not working and working. Benefits were cut as soon as employment was gained even if it was temporary or part time, often leaving them 'out of pocket' (Male, IB) if they did return to work:

'Being in receipt of benefits just prior to December – housing benefit,

Jobseeker's Allowance and council tax benefits…(upon getting a temporary

job) Bingo, the 2nd December, the information goes from the Jobcentre to the housing benefit people– everything stops – the trigger point of withdrawing benefit is so fast that it can really interrupt the equilibrium of your finances' (Male, JSA).

IB participants also discussed the role of the benefits trap in forcing them into a non-working position through the inflexibility of the system failing to recognise the fluidity of their conditions or allowing them to 'dip their toe' (Male, IB) to explore what they were able to do. This highlighted the unidirectional assumptions viewed as inherent within the IB system, where disability was seen as permanent, or at best reassessed only once every three years. Front line stakeholders (JCP staff) were only seen as playing a limited role in the implementation of the system, with limited power or autonomy to help the recipients. Instead, the locus of power was attributed to disembodied bureaucratic processes over which neither recipients nor JCP staff were positioned as having any form of control, making it difficult to articulate how the system could facilitate the transition from a non-working to working sense of self.

However, many IB recipients sought to challenge the embedded concept of illness as unidirectional and deteriorating by creating space between imposed, medically-determined identities and their 'selves', or by stressing the intermittent nature of their ill-health.

'I am not terminal – I have had MS for 21 years and I do all my own housekeeping, washing and ironing' (Female, IB).

'(discussing her epilepsy) some days you're fine and you could work all day and another day when you get up in the morning you just know you're not going to be able to do anything that day' (Female, IB).

In highlighting their ability to move in and out of a disabled status, their identity work frames disability as more of a personal 'identity episode' that may either be one-off, in the case of an accident, or reoccurring over a period of time. Whilst this episode is not within the participant's control as such, in discussing their identity in relation to it, their impairment can be compartmentalised rather than a permanent feature that constitutes who they are. For example, participants would describe themselves as 'disabled to a certain degree' (Male, IB) or distanced disability from being in receipt of IB: 'What I'm saying is I'm disabled and some of these people are on Incapacity but I don't have a disability as such' (Male, IB). In separating the category from who they 'are', the participants were able to highlight the fallacy of State categorisations, whilst at the same time allowing them to promote a sense of self that exists outwith the rigid parameters of disabled/non-disabled dichotomies.

Whilst many argued against the notion of 'capable' as separate from their disabled status or age, it appeared that the notion of being 'incapable' was still being conflated with their 'older' or 'disabled' identities in the minds of employers. Respondents felt that barriers to finding jobs were constructed through these labels, rather than by any assessment of whether their age or disability would impede their ability to carry out the job successfully: 'I enclosed a CV and a letter telling what my disability was and saying that I could wheel a wheelchair (what the job entailed)…I didn't get a reply' (Male, IB). Both IB and JSA participants felt the only way to avoid capability

conflation was to simply lie on application forms regarding their health and disability, often claiming 'It's embarrassing but you've got to do it' (Male, IB). However, this was not seen as a completely successful strategy as participants understood that they would be likely to lose their jobs should the misinformation be uncovered.

A further challenge in attempting to secure employment and reinforce a working identity was to explicitly distance themselves from the stereotype of a non-worker image. In response to such sentiments, part of respondents' identity practice involved creating the stereotype of a 'dole seeker' (someone who is not interested in finding a job) as an image that they could easily reject:

> 'I'm not a snob, but I listen to the ones that go there quite regularly, and they've no intention of working. I don't want to be tarred with the same brush…I stood in a queue one day and I heard this guy saying: It's terrible having to get out of bed at this time of day and come and sign on' (Female, JSA).

By being ashamed and 'embarrassed to go to the Jobcentre' (Male, JSA), and having a conscience about 'taking' or 'robbing' from the State, participants were able to juxtapose their own actions with others who, on paper, appear to be in the same position and engaging in the same practices and activities. However, in upholding this 'doleseeker' character, one may argue that they were simply reinforcing a subject position that they had earlier sought to reject when it was imposed upon them.

Crafting working identities

The clear rejection of non-working identities discussed in the previous section was only part of the process in fostering a cohesive sense of self during the focus groups. A number of strategies enabled individuals to engage with a working identity that not only appeared to be of key importance in legitimising their position as someone who wanted to work, but were integral in how they defined themselves as citizens and integrated (and valuable) members of society.

Key to this was employing the motif of 'being active'. Following the functionalist tenets of Activity Theory (Havighurst, 1961) which argues successful ageing requires inclusion in a number of areas of life, participants sought to construct the idea of a worker as someone who offered something to society, albeit not within the confines of traditional notions of labour. Narratives emphasised getting up early in the mornings and having a structure to the day (Male, IB), keeping in touch with the world through reading (Male, JSA) undertaking new qualifications, working on new hobbies or projects of benefit to others (Female, IB), and being involved with the church (Male, JSA). In many ways, the activities themselves were used not only to highlight their attempts to look for work, but to show they were the 'type' of person who was potentially employable. Yet it also served to position doing something as integral to well-being and 'feeling needed' (Male, JSA), one participant going as far as to state voluntary training was 'keeping me alive' (Male, JSA). In this sense participants felt the responsibility for maintaining a working persona fell to them through self-monitoring: 'when you're unemployed, you have to keep yourself concentrating, you've got to keep yourself regulated, it's far too easy just to sit back' (Male, JSA).

Others sought to mould a working identity by seeking to renegotiate the parameters of what was meant by work. Often this was required when they had to renegotiate a fragile working identity that had previously been strongly correlated with physical ability, as highlighted by an ex shipbuilder who stated 'I would like to do something but I can't promise day by day to be on the job because I'm not fit enough – I'm not well enough. I'm good one day and bad another' (Male, IB). It appeared that the fluidity of their health status could also be the source of frustration in preventing the ability to participate in the workforce and often it was this unpredictability that caused the tension, rather than the illness itself. Therefore, by renegotiating what a 'job' was, participants were able to maintain a sense of working identity without harming past identities: 'I find it difficult in answering what constitutes a job, whether you take it in terms of training for work or full-time work or whatever – I don't really consider myself unemployed. I'm unwaged' (Male, JSA). Others had attained strong standing within unpaid positions, such as one Male JSA, who had been shortlisted for Volunteer of the Year for his work at Amnesty.

This complements recent policy emphasis on 'active ageing', where 'older people's contributions to families and communities are valued and recognised by society as a whole' (DWP, 2005: 31). However, in practice it was impossible to separate this sentiment entirely from a monetary system of capitalism: travelling to volunteer can 'cost a fortune' (Male, IB) and experiences or skills gained were not seen as being recognised or transferable to the workplace by employers. Moreover, participants repeatedly expressed their frustrations and lack of acknowledgment by others about the value of activities that made a contribution to society, mainly because such activities were assumed to be second best: 'I did come across this wall – you're too

old, be a nice lady and put your jacket on and do some voluntary work' (Female, IB). Similarly, the participants themselves often saw voluntary work as a last resort and one that was often incompatible with a coherent concept of their own working identity and the status attached to that notion of self: 'I've done voluntary work, but I find that after a few months I was just pessimistic and I said – that's not me – I mean I was a shop steward and everything' (Male, JSA).

Negotiating a working identity thus remained precarious and required conscious effort to maintain. Many stories and narratives revealed a fear from both IB and JSA applicants of 'slipping away' and becoming a 'non worker'.

'When you walk into say a hotel and someone says to you, what are you working at and you say, I work in a hospital, I teach, I'm a secretary, I work as an engineer. You get a buzz from the fact that you can actually turn round and say, I'm being something' (Male, IB).

The social dimension was seen as vital in attributing value to work and thus a working identity. The termination of a job had induced a number of changes in participant's personal life and outlook that were often discussed in terms of disruption. The loss of work-based friends, deteriorating health of family or themselves, or the constant rejection from prospective employers led to a personal crisis of confidence where the self that had once been stable and assumed became interrupted and questioned by the individual. Whilst feelings of guilt were often used as a signal that they were still willing to work, many of those on JSA and IB were resigned to the fact that they may never participate in paid employment again, even if

their health would permit it. One male summed up the sentiment of a number of participants throughout:

> 'Self esteem is so important…when I finished work it was a major change in life and I was depressed and received counselling and so forth, for 18 months or more – it was such a massive blow to your pride, to everything, so it was a major shock to the system – physically and mentally. I've come out the other end of that now and I'm quite comfortable and I can function in my little box but I'm really frightened of it happening again' (Male, IB).

This participant's metaphor of a little box is particularly insightful in highlighting how an individual's attempts and strategies to stabilise a self-identity can often result in self-exclusion from participating in the workplace, even though elsewhere in their narratives they have stated they wish to be employed. For example, the participant above discusses how he would enjoy going back to work and maintains his potential to work as a teacher, yet the traumatic experience of a temporary loss of self has understandably made him hesitant to enter into an environment where this crisis may be likely to reoccur. In striving to maintain some form of stability and sense of self, it appears that participating in the labour market may become an increasingly unlikely prospect.

Contesting unfavourable working identities

A further key challenge facing participants was to negotiate the parameters between what they understood to be their working identity and the pressure of being

shoehorned into a form of employment that was very different to their expectations and self-perception of who they were as 'workers'. Other research (e.g. Riach, 2007) has explored how the characteristics of certain jobs are seen as 'fitting' with the stereotypical construction of older workers or those with a disability. The narratives from participants in this study suggested that this was also a factor that limited what jobs they were expected to take. Being labelled as 'disabled' or 'older' often led to an assumption that they would be willing to do particular jobs: 'They seem to have a blinkered view that disabled people are just wanting to operate computers for the rest of their days' (Male, IB).

The process of justification used to 'match' participants with possible jobs relied on implicit value assumptions being rationalised in relation to their health or older worker identity ipso facto. A number of participants recounted stories of being offered low skilled, badly paid jobs, such as cleaning or security work, based upon their status as disabled or older, rather than upon their experience and skills set. This led to a relationship being formed between the value of work (in terms of the type of work) and how valuable a contribution someone could possibly make:

'I went to a disability advisor (in the Jobcentre) and they said that now you've got a slight disability as well there's no way you will expect to earn what you used to earn, you're going to have to downgrade. She actually suggested training to go and work as a care assistant...I was so insulted' (Female, IB).

'I've been told I'll never get a job in an office because of my age but I don't want to be just computing; I want to do physical work as well' (Male, JSA).

At the crux of this was a tension between their past working histories and the current positions they were being asked to occupy. Taking these jobs would require individuals who had once been located within skilled or professional occupations moving into a secondary labour market. It is thus unsurprising that there was strong resistance to accepting these positions, shown both in their actions within each narrative, and their discussion of themselves during the focus groups. This may be in relation to their skills set (such as technical, manual or professional/managerial) or the more general working environment or culture they locate themselves. Ironically, this also prevented them from being able to become a waged employee.

'You're under pressure all the time from the Jobcentre certainly to look for work whether it's selling double glazing or cleaning toilets – they want you to do anything – stuff that! Whatever skills you've gleamed over the past 40 years or contributions you've made, forget about that' (Male, JSA).

In this sense, many participants appeared to have been asked the impossible. As discussed previously, Giddens (1991) stressed the continuity of self that is formed autobiographically. Thus one's working identity is not a mere artefact of finite experiences and skills gained, but is ultimately embodied and understood by past practice and the expectation of what path they should take in relation to where they

have been. If their working identity was both historically situated and created generatively, it is unsurprising that a job-seeking strategy that denies an individual's past and potentially harms their own self-image often fails to engage jobseekers.

Discussion and conclusions

Our article set out to explore the processes that participants engaged with in order to negotiate and construct a working identity despite not being in paid employment. In particular, we sought to contribute to an identified lacuna in research into older workers currently located outwith paid employment (Maltby, 2007). We would argue that understanding the processes of constructing and negotiating non-worker working identities helps to illuminate the subtle complexities of the barriers to successful implementation of government policies designed to increase employment among the older out-of-work.

Theoretically, our study calls into question how we conceptualise the unwaged individual. Past studies have taken those not engaged in paid labour as a separate entity, often drawing Goffman's notion of 'spoiled identities' when discussing the unwaged individual. For example Letkemann (2002: 512) refers to unemployment as an initial stigma that leads to a number of 'derived' stigma. Yet employing this framework can imply that a homogenised, abject non-working identity is the initial benchmark from which individuals draw their sense of identity. From our participants' narratives it appeared that they strongly contested being stigmatised in their day-to-day practice by creatively and actively utilising alternative resources to sustain or uphold a working persona, whether it be through drawing on past working identities, distancing themselves from stereotypes of non workers, or negotiating the

parameters of what constitutes 'work'. Consequently, it appears that the identities of the non-waged cannot be understood in isolation from either an individual's personal biography, or without an exploration of their relationship with the labour market choices and constraints they face.

Policy reforms, which came into effect at the end of October 2008, replaced IB with the Employment Support Allowance. They will further develop the Pathways to Work programmes and introduce a Work Capability Assessment for new claimants, the idea being to focus on what work individuals can do rather than on their limitations (DWP, 2007). While the findings of this article support these holistic and longer-term foci, a closer examination of techniques employed may give cause for concern. An integral (albeit voluntary) part of the Pathways to Work programme involves individuals participating in a Condition Management Programme which includes Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to 'help clients to learn to cope with conditions in such a way that they may return to some form of employment' (Lindsay et. al., 2007: 547). With the emphasis still firmly on the individual, the underlying viewpoint reflects the much-contested medicalised view of the disabled worker where the body is situated at the locus of the 'problem', requiring cure or care. Disability is therefore a 'condition' (Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000) attributed to the individual, who is responsible for modifying themselves to cope, but not necessarily able to manage, the handicap themselves. By contrast, the social model which emerged during the 1990s sought to shift responsibility for adaptation from the individual to society by separating functional impairment from the loss of opportunities that emerged from barriers created by society (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991) and has resulted in larger calls for social inclusion that filter into arguments promoting disabled worker (Barnes and

Mercer, 2005). It would appear that there is very little evidence of this social model in relation to disability *or* age in the employment arena. The policy rhetoric may be 'a balance of rights and responsibilities' (DWP 2007: 9), but the emphasis seems to remain with the individual. As prophesised within Gidden's framework, this responsibility for the self by the self becomes an increasingly legitimised practice in society, often to the detriment of individuals who may be disadvantaged. This of course relates to Roberts' (2006) concern over the individualism which is inherent within new capitalist discourses where older workers are introduced into a system that simultaneously distances age or cumulative knowledge and where we become responsible for our own multiple-career paths and individual competency, trends that increase the legitimisation of our own sense of self-responsibility.

There is also some recognition of a strategic role for employers, through Local Employment Partnerships, where a range of employers will offer some 250,000 jobs to those 'who are at a disadvantage in the labour market' (DWP, 2007: 9). Nonetheless, it is significant that a majority of employers currently signed up to this are retailers, leading to our observation that many of the jobs on offer may be those rejected by our respondents as inferior to their working identities. Contrary to the literature that concentrates on those on benefits as 'victims' or 'disadvantaged', the participants here were hesitant to forfeit the capacity to forge a working identity based on 'professional' forms of work, and much of the identity work revolving around this made it difficult to ameliorate the tensions between taking a job seen as holding a lesser status or submitting to the impinged identities endemic within the job-seeking programmes. There was also evidence that our participants found their particular experiences of interacting with Jobcentres unsatisfactory and incompatible

with their own notion of themselves as job seekers. If the very schemes that aim to facilitate this transition serve to reinforce or impinge an unfavourable identity upon the individual, there is little incentive for individuals to engage with either the system or the processes intended to help them.

Contemporary policy initiatives do not explicitly acknowledge multiple discrimination as a barrier to the labour market. Yet it was clear from our respondents' narratives that they believed that they had suffered discrimination on account of age *and* disability. Whilst the effects of this conflation of 'double disadvantage' are unsurprising from an identity perspective, where a range of different identities interrelate with and collapse into each other at different points in time and space, the current system makes it difficult to challenge multiple discrimination legally. Currently the UK's separate legislation governing age and disability discrimination fits the notion of 'additive' discrimination, whereby an individual 'may be able to justify individual claims under different statutes and they are essentially additive in nature' (Sargeant, 2005: 30). However, based on our insight into the identities of older, disabled individuals, we would argue that much of their disadvantage would be better represented by the notion of 'intersectional' discrimination - where the components cannot easily be broken down into their constituent parts, and the effect is cumulative rather than additive. Whilst the new UK Commission for Equality and Human Rights is expected to be in a better position to tackle discrimination on multiple grounds, and the government is committed to introducing a single equality bill, this is only in its early stages of inception.

Our article attempts to understand the identity work undertaken by those seeking to challenge and craft a particular form of working identity, but it also leaves us with further questions about the non-working worker. The respondents' accounts offered some insight into the ways in which 'unfavourable' non-working identities are imposed via constructions of people as 'older' and 'disabled'. Further research, incorporating the perspectives of employers, Jobcentre staff and policy advisors and medical personnel, would be helpful in further understanding the ways of preventing these impinged identities. This approach could usefully draw upon the social model of disability in challenging the onus on the individual to overcome their 'disadvantaged' identities. We would also advocate further research to better understand how claimants embark on their journey towards paid work, and the concomitant effects on the management and construction of their identity. Research which seeks to illuminate alternative paths used to find work later in life, and what support or resources may be given in order to facilitate these processes may help to begin to assess the measures required to allow individuals fulfil a working identity in practice without compromising their own sense of self.

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Kathleen Riach

Kathleen Riach is Lecturer in Management at Essex Business School (University of Essex). Having recently completed an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship, her research focuses on ageing identities within an organizational context, with particular emphasis on embodied and sensual processes of meaning making and identity construction   Recent and upcoming work has been published in *Social Policy and Society*, *British Journal of Management*, *Human Relations* and *Sociology*.

Wendy Loretto

Wendy Loretto is Senior Lecturer in Organisation Studies at the University of Edinburgh Business School. She has undertaken a variety of research projects in the area of age, employment, age discrimination and retirement. She has published widely in policy outlets and in peer-reviewed journals including *Industrial Relations Journal*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Personnel Review*, and *Social Policy and Society*. Along with Sarah Vickerstaff and Phil White she recently edited a book: *The Future for Older Workers*, published by The Policy Press in 2007.