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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1021-6361> (2016) 'It seems at the moment my career is dependent on factors outside of my control.' Reflections on graduates' experiences of employment and career enactment in an era of economic uncertainty and austerity. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 45 (2). pp. 188-198.

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‘It seems at the moment my career is dependent on factors outside of my control.’ Reflections on graduates’ experiences of employment and career enactment in an era of economic uncertainty and austerity.

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Abstract

This paper explores contested notions of the purpose of education and careers work. The research for the paper examines public sector employee reactions to notion of a psychological contract breach, when cuts in funding put their jobs and careers at risk. It argues that, in this environment, the search for career fulfilment can be marked by feelings of cruel optimism, wicked problems and broken expectations. The findings are then used to present the case for further research, firstly, to address the notion of possible selves, as individuals explore alternative identity affirming career opportunities; and secondly, the impact of changes in public policy on the processes of psychological contracting between students and staff in further and higher education.

Keywords: Labour markets, cruel optimism, wicked problems, contested transitions, positive selves; psychological contracts.

Introduction

This paper contributes to the contested body of work about the vocational imperative in education, and its implications for careers guidance and counselling in the 21st Century. The notion that education should serve the needs of the business community and the economy is not new. Throughout the 20th Century, the expansion of education and careers work in schools, colleges and universities in the UK, and in other countries, was financed by governments, in the belief that it would deliver a much needed boost to the economy, and deliver social and economic returns for most people, and greater social equality. (Avis & Orr, 2016; Haywood, 2004; Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014; Keep & Mayhew, 2014). Looking back to the period of post-war economic expansion in the 1950s and 1960s, for many, a ‘job for life’ with the prospect of career promotion in one, or a few, organisations was a real possibility. It was also a time when theories about the existence of a psychological contract to explain social exchange relationships in the work place first took hold. Introduced by Argyris (1960), and then taken up afterwards by Levinson et al., (1962) and Schein ([1945], 1980), classical definitions of the psychological contract are that it is implicit, unwritten and often unspoken; involves all members of the organisation; is concerned with perceived mutual expectations and obligations; and that these implicit understandings are about notions of mutual obligations of trust, fairness and social justice. These expectations of one another are said to be powerful determinants of job commitment and satisfaction within the organisation. If, and when, either party reaches a point where they feel the other party is in breach of these expectations, the consequences can be serious for employer-employee relationships, employee health and wellbeing, and the

organisation (Conway & Briner 2005; Conway et al., 2014; Guest et al., 1996; Leach, 2009, 2010; 2012; Piccoli & De Witte, 2015; Rousseau, 1995; Zhao et al., 2007).

Nowadays, politicians and employers are more inclined to question the cost-benefits of the public expenditure on education. In his speech, delivered at Ruskin College Oxford on 18th October 1976, the Labour Prime Minister James (Jim) Callaghan first set out the grounds for 'The Great Debate' about the expected return from the public expenditure on education (Callaghan, 1976). The response since then has been the intensification of the argument for vocational education and training for a highly skilled, employable workforce in public policy in the UK, and across Europe (CEDEFOP, 2005); DBIS, 2016; COM, 2005; OECD, 2014):

If we are to continue to succeed as a knowledge economy, however, we cannot stand still, nor take for granted our universities' enviable global reputation and position at the top of league tables. We must ensure that the system is also fulfilling its potential and delivering good value for students, for employers and for taxpayers who underwrite it. (DBIS, 2016: p. 5).

At the same time, there has been a noticeable change in employer-employee relationship expectations, and vocational and educational paths are no longer linear, predictable or stable. When recessionary pressures first took hold in the early 1990s, there was talk of a new approach in psychological contracting to explain the changing nature of social exchange relationships in the work place, with employers providing employees with work that involves skill development opportunities to maintain their employability in a highly competitive global economy, in return for a loss of job security (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995; Rousseau, 1995). However much they were disguised, these changes were early indications of the now familiar neoliberal market fundamentalism that informs policy for education and careers work in the UK, and in other countries. Within this discourse, education is regarded as a form of knowledge capital (Tomlinson, 2008), and the 'social state' gives way to the 'enabling state' to ensure individuals have the knowledge, skills, powers and freedom to become innovative entrepreneurs in the competitive global market place. (COM, 2005; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Harris, 2007; Keep & Mayhew, 2014; Leitch Review of Skills, 2006; Lyotard, 1984). To accelerate this agenda and 'drive up standards' in teaching to satisfy the needs of the 'knowledge economy', the UK Government's White Paper proposals for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS), are designed to release market forces and increase competition in Higher Education, so that 'employers get the skills they need at the highest level to increase productivity in their businesses' (DBIS, 2016).

In keeping with this ideological and political perspective on the laws of the labour market, and the contributory role and purpose of education, social relationships between teachers, careers workers and students are constructed as calculated instrumental exchanges, designed to ensure graduate employability (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008). Thereafter, the educated person is made morally responsible for maintaining their employability and managing the development of their career throughout their working life (Bloom, 2013, p. 788; Brooks & Everett, 2009, p. 240; Clarke & Partickson, 2008, p. 122; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Shamir, 2008; Williams, Dodd, Steele & Randall, 2015). Portrayed, as '*career actors*' and '*protean careerists*' who value their freedom, are flexible, believe in continuous learning and seek intrinsic rewards through their work, it is claimed they can repackage their knowledge, skills and abilities to remain mobile and marketable in a rapidly changing and highly competitive globalised economy (Arthur, 2008; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996, 2002; 2004, 2008). A person's ability to be an empowered career actor in this environment is said to be dependent on their levels of reflexivity, notions of their self-identity, and their resilience in the face of the challenges that come their way (Brimrose, Barabasch, Brown & Mulvey, 2015, p.257; Tomassini, 2015, p. 265). Anticipating the implications of this for careers work, reflexive narrative construction is predicted to become one of the most important approaches in careers guidance and counselling in the 21st Century (Savickas, 2008; Langelles & Meijers, 2013; McMahan & Watson, 2013). It

involves the counsellor and the client working together to explore and co-construct a narrative to reflect, as accurately as possible, the logic of the client's concrete transitional life experiences, and emerging career identity. Portrayed as a creative, therapeutic and empowering dialogic process, the counsellor seeks to help the writer to explore and ascribe meaning and a sense of logic to their previous transitional experiences, and to craft an imaginary future career identity for themselves (Lengelle & Meijers, 2013; McMahon & Watson, 2013; Bimrose, Barabasch, Brown & Mulvey, 2015).

While acknowledging the value of this narrative approach for some clients, in contrast, some studies identify career transitions as contested, troublesome events, and question assumptions about the power of individual agency and reflexivity to assign meaning and logic to their career experiences in times of high economic and employment uncertainty (Langelle & Meijers, 2013; Moreno da Fonseca, 2015). In particular, it is noticeable how much of the research dwells on the "good news" stories of successful protean careerists (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, p. 1550; Williams, Dodd, Steele & Randall, 2015). According to these stories, flexible employment arrangements enable employees to balance work, leisure and family time better, and to manage their careers more effectively. These arrangements are also said to allow managers to attract and retain skilled employees who would otherwise be unable to accept a full-time job. In contrast, the "bad news" stories point to the harsh realities of the hollowing out of previously secure professional jobs and careers, to be replaced by forms of non-standard employment. This trend is associated with multiple work transitions: the expansion of short-term, fractional contracts, the use of agency-based contract workers, forms of self-employment, voluntary work, low pay, and a loss of employment benefits (Eliasoph, 2013; Green et al., 2016; Haasler & Barabasch, 2015, p. 310; Hutton, 2016; Leach, 2015; Tomassini, 2015). The upshot is that questions remain over the extent to which the knowledge and skills for employability agenda in education can counteract the labour market's role as an 'inequality engine', delivering high numbers of low skill, low pay 'bad jobs' for the many, including graduates, and high skill, high pay jobs for the privileged few (CIPD, 2015; Keep & James, 2012; Keep & Mayhew, 2014, pp. 776-777; Piketty, 2013). In this climate, a person's search for career fulfilment can be marked by feelings of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic, imaginary, identity-informed career ambition and its attendant promises of job satisfaction, rewards and career development, in advance of its likely loss. The cruelty of it is most evident when the maintenance of an attachment to the optimistic, imagined career outcome recognises its 'compromised conditions of possibility', but is nevertheless conceived as the reason, and means, for living in the world. (Berlant, 2011).

Following the financial crash of 2007-8, much attention has been paid to the debate about the need for cuts in public sector funding (for example, Barrell & Davies, 2008; Krugman, 2015). In comparison, little attention has been given to the costly effects of austerity for the career prospects of public sector workers. Recognising this, the purpose of this paper is to consider the reactions of public sector employees to notions of a psychological contract breach, when their jobs and careers are put at risk in this new age of austerity. Specifically, the paper argues that the policy-driven discourse on vocational education ignores the reality of labour market inequalities, and depersonalises the learner's experiences and the learning process, and their career experiences. The findings from the research are then used to further the contested debate about the role and purpose of education and career guidance and counselling in the 21st Century.

The Research

Adopting a phenomenological stance, the study explores the realities of employment and career enactment, as reflected in the voices of the research participants. Using email interviews, the research aims to uncover the meaningful ways in which career events are experienced, made sense of and enacted in everyday life (Berglund, 2007, pp. 75-76). The modest sample for the study comprises 8 mature graduates, whose work involves supporting vulnerable children, young

people and families. As a group they are highly aspirational, and their career narratives reflect the wider, international discourse concerning vocational learning and graduate employability. Graduating in 2013, the participants (7 females and 1 male) were part-time students in their 30s and 40s, who continued with their pre-existing employment while studying for a Foundation Degree followed by a top-up BA Honours degree.

Conducted on two separate occasions, first in 2013, and then in a series of follow-up interviews in 2015, each interview quickly became a shared asynchronous conversation, a collaborative venture during which the researcher and the research participants immersed themselves in the emerging conversation and became co-constructors, as well as interpreters, of knowledge (James & Busher, 2009, p. 25). The texts that were created online helped reflect and shape the researcher and the participant's understandings of the participant's lived employment and career building experiences. Adopting this approach can create problems in terms of eliminating researcher subjective attitudes and judgments, and when judging the authenticity of the participant's online contributions. On the other hand, Hayes (1997) reminds us that it is naïve and impractical to claim our views and attitudes have no impact on the way we interpret and understand the meanings contained in data obtained in real everyday situations. Using the approach known as 'bracketing', we can, however, reflect on, and bring to the surface, our subjective viewpoints so that they can be acknowledged when making sense of the data we collect in qualitative research.

Ethical approval was obtained from the author's faculty ethics committee when planning the investigation. Known by me from the days when I was their university tutor, participants were approached via email, inviting them to take part in the study. The nature and purpose of the study were explained and, in line with common practice, they were assured their privacy and anonymity would be protected.

Based on interviews conducted in 2013, and follow-up interviews conducted in 2015, the aim is to represent and examine the participants' lived experiences when seeking to build their careers within the contemporary context of renewed cuts in public sector funding. I was particularly interested in the unfolding of participants' transitional experiences and their careers. Pseudonyms are used when quoting from the participant's narratives.

Graduation and the cruel optimism of imagined jobs and careers

It is important to note that throughout their degree course, the participants' jobs were under threat because of the cuts in public sector funding, introduced by the coalition government in 2010, and thereafter. Noticeably, soon after graduation in 2013, they expressed positive feelings that the qualification would put them in a better position in the new environment to achieve their ambition for a job and a career that is central to the identities they wish to inhabit. The efficacy of the undergraduate experience and its positive impact on their feelings of self-confidence, self-worth and enhance ability to articulate their employment credentials with employers, colleagues and families is evident in their narratives. However, as explained earlier, maintaining an attachment to a career ambition can be cruelly optimistic (Berlant, 2011), and it is revealing to see how expressions of excitement over the possibilities before them, are also tinged with feelings of worry, when they contemplate, even anticipate, the all too possible loss of the dream career. Their stories illustrate how frequent inter-connected changes in public policy, the labour market and a person's social and environmental circumstances influences career journeys; and how the journey is problematic, full of troublesome uncertainties, sometimes evolves slowly, and can involve false starts.

I think people respect me and value my opinion more now that I have a degree, and it has raised my status and profile. I would attribute that to my studies and the people I encountered along the way. Originally, I wanted to be an Early Years teacher, but, as I continued with the degree, I found myself enjoying all the new knowledge, academic writing and research too much. I wanted to keep stretching myself cognitively. It opened my mind to a different way of thinking that I don't really want to give up. So, I decided to go into teaching young people and adults instead. The degree got me the place on the PGCE as they told me at interview they were offering me a place on academic merit (2013).

Ann

Now that I am a graduate, I feel there are many options open to me. My dream has always been to work in the education department of a museum and co-ordinate school visits and creative interactive exhibits/role play experiences for the visiting children, but this would require further study for a MA in Museum Studies, or a Primary PCGE to make myself an attractive and viable candidate for that kind of position. Currently, my finances will not allow for me to take on further study, so I feel as though I am in limbo. As for volunteering in the sector, it is difficult to get the experience in a department which would benefit me most (2013).

Clare

Graduation boosted my confidence as I am now in a similar position to my colleagues who are mostly graduates. For me, feeling very much overlooked at school, it's like a validation, confirmation of being as good as anyone else. Consequently, I am more willing to get involved and not just give and argue an opinion. The position I hold is one I moved up to from lower level posts, whereas some of my colleagues have come in at this level. I have always been conscious of this difference, and now I feel able to let go of this and think about looking at other opportunities as well. I volunteered to be part of a local pilot that may be rolled out county wide. If, or when, that happens, they often need 'leads' to help with implementation and that's probably what I have in mind when I think about opportunities, and about how to show management I'm interested in new things (2013).

Louise

What gaining the degree has done for me is far greater than enhancing my career. I was written off at school for being lazy and lacking academic ability. This led to me failing all my GCSEs. Thereafter, I successfully embarked on a nursery nursing course, and began a career in child care. I attempted to do my A levels at aged 21. Again I failed these. Later, I started the foundation degree course when I reached the point where my experience could no longer get me to the next step on the career ladder. The university picked up on my difficulties almost instantly and I was diagnosed with dyslexia. All the confidence issue I had disappeared on gaining this qualification. I am currently looking at new jobs, but, because of the cuts in funding for the kind of work I do, I think I need further training to enhance my career possibilities (2013).

Tom

Studying enabled me to understand the behaviours of not only young people, but also my colleagues. I am looking for other jobs that have more responsibility, but my aim is to still have direct contact with young people. I know this limits my options but I would take enjoying my job over earning more. I am more confident in my work, and the course has opened a lot more doors for me. There are jobs that I can apply for now that I couldn't apply for before. My manager has said she can see a difference in my work, not just with young people. I now attend (nearly) all multi agency meetings because I kept going on about the importance of effective multi agency work. I do enjoy this, and it really makes a difference, not just for the organisation, but for the young people as they are receiving a better level of support (2013).

Charlotte

After graduating, I continued in my role as a Youth Support Worker, working with young people who need further support with issues affecting their lives. My degree will (I hope) allow me to apply for managerial jobs within the youth support service, which is great, so it has opened some doors, but I lack managerial experience and in this line of work most employers will only accept social work or counselling degrees. Which is extremely frustrating (2013).

Transitions

Traditional theories about transition in the lives of organisations and people assume there will be periods of equilibrium, when they can come to terms with the change requirement, and learn to move on in their lives. This notion that change events are separated by periods of equilibrium, fuels a widespread belief that change can be planned and managed incrementally (Tushman, Newman & Romanelli, 1986; Gersick, 1991). For example, Bridges (1980, p. 1991) identifies three stages to illustrate how personal transitions can occur. The first stage is about 'ending' and 'letting go' of the old situation and the identity that went with it. A second, in-between, stage is described as a *neutral zone*, which is said to be a period of disorientation, self-doubt and anxiety, as well as a time when there is an increase in personal creativity and growth. Also, it is said to be a time when one becomes aware of new opportunities. The third stage is described as 'beginnings', a period of reorientation to a new situation and a new identity. However, it would be a mistake to assume the transition process is a linear one. In this study, participant narratives illuminate the political and potentially hazardous realities of employment and career enactment in this new age of economic uncertainty. In particular, over the course of the interviews, the troublesome impact of not being able to come to terms with, and adjust to, a never ending stream of unfinished restructures and transitions is all too evident in their narratives. As one participant, explained, 'we all know local authority services will be restructured again. The current restructure is my fourth in eight years.' The picture presented is of careers, whose future is full of contested, unending and interconnected uncertainties.

Tom

I applied for and was offered a job as a youth worker in a management position. However, I told them I would not accept it immediately as I still had other questions for them. I looked at the funding cuts for youth services over the last three years and had some concerns over the position, and how long my contract would be for. To be fair to them, they were honest with me and said they didn't know if their jobs would be there in 12–18 months' time. If I didn't have children and a mortgage, I would have taken the risk and accepted the job. Thankfully, my manager asked if I would consider staying if they could offer me more. We discussed what I would want - more money and responsibility, but more importantly, that I would still have direct work with young people. This was agreed but I am still waiting for the confirmation and a contract to sign. I have more responsibility and a much larger workload, but my wages are still the same (2015).

Louise

I am on a fixed term contract which was due to end in December 2014. Now I am told it will be extended until August 2015. So, I am looking for other jobs. This is hard because all my experience (17 years) has been with supporting disabled children, and jobs in this field are being ended. It probably means I will be starting at the bottom with any new career path. I applied to be a special constable in the police as I believe it will give me some valuable experience, and help me identify other career paths. I will do this alongside whatever paid job I can get. I am also considering a return to being a teaching assistant, with a view to doing a PGCE, but it feels like I've failed as I started my career as a TA. (2015).

Ann

In May 2014 I was told I would be moved from supporting young people to a community support work role. Then, in June 2014, I was moved into another job for which I had no

training, and was given barely a week's induction before being expected to 'get on' with my new role. This brought a great deal of stress which resulted in me being signed off sick by my GP. Then, just before Christmas, more funding cuts were announced and I was made redundant. I am now on the council's 'redeployment' register, and applying for other jobs (2015).

Jane

Teaching at college means I can still do a lot of the academic things I enjoy, and I really like teaching the students. The college is looking to do their degree programmes full-time from next year, and it is possible that there will be some paid work for me. After the Post-16 PGCE, I plan to do a Masters degree, but my ultimate career goal would be to work as a university lecturer. However, I am very frustrated. I thought that gaining a degree would open up a whole new world of work opportunities, but that doesn't seem to have happened. It seems at the moment my career is dependent on factors outside of my control (2015).

Appreciating the participants' troublesome experiences remind us why vocational idealism can become a 'wicked' problem. The 'wicked' cruelty of it is evident when decisions taken in response to one set of needs results in undesired and unhelpful consequences and uncertainties in other areas. (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Waddock, Meszoely, Waddell & Dentoni, 2015). In the following example, Clare is all too aware of the dangers when the job requirement to actively engineer the growth of a volunteer workforce puts her, and her colleagues,' jobs at risk.

Clare

There is a push to establish group work, so that a number of young people can be worked with at one time. Volunteers are used to deliver intervention work previously undertaken by paid members of staff. Case managers are now expected to train and manage volunteers as well as write specific intervention programmes. The constant 'fear' of the axe dropping and repeated consultation periods that appear to roll out annually, have meant that the service has lost valued workers. The financial insecurities within the public sector do generate feelings that trained volunteers are 'apprentices waiting in the wings', particularly within an agency where it is difficult to secure paid employment. It seems as though we are educating the competition (2015).

Clare's comment about the difficulties experienced when looking for secure paid employment highlights contested and troublesome trends in the global labour market; trends associated with the expansion of short-term, fractional contracts, forms of self-employment, voluntary work, low pay, and a loss of entitlements to social security, worker protection, training access and retirement benefits. The wicked reality of this is evident in Catherine's narrative.

Catherine

Soon after graduation, I was made redundant. I lost nine hours of contractual work with a youth club (this club closed) and for a group called Young Inspectors, which was kept running. In order to continue working with the group, I had to sign up with an employment agency that recruits casual workers for the Council. So, I am now paid hourly for this work and don't have the same employment benefits, although I do get paid slightly more. I enjoy the role, although it can be quite stressful, and the young people are quite vulnerable and challenging at times. Also, I gained employment at the university. The work is on a casual basis, so, again, it is not a long-term option, as I need more job security. I don't feel I have control over the direction of my career. Part of this feeling comes from being on a 'zero hours' contract, and knowing that I could suddenly be out of work with little notice and no real rights, and nothing to move on to. It is a struggle to plan things like holidays away, or time off. If I have a night off I don't get paid. I could, of course, always apply for more jobs, or widen my search to include working further afield. I have applied for many jobs since graduation and have felt disappointed many times to not get to the interview stage. In the past, when I wanted to get into a certain field, I started out volunteering and doggedly pursued the subject, reading round it and getting really into it. I don't have the motivation to volunteer anymore. When I think of developing in a particular field, I think of further study which is too

expensive an option at the moment (2015).

Psychological contracts

As mentioned earlier, public policy and much of the careers literature continues to promote the idea of employability as a basis for career and employment success. For many, the reality is different. The expressed uncertainties in the participants' narratives reveals the emotional and psychological impact of cumulative restructures on them, and their self-protective behaviours.

Clare

It feels like everything has ground to a halt in anticipation of yet another restructure. The team is working on, but in limbo. We feel dislocated from the restructure process/decisions. We don't feel there is any real consultation, just lip service. We take on tasks from former, departed colleagues, because we don't have a choice, but also because we hope that by trying to adapt, and being willing to, we will strengthen our case. We continue in the hope that we will survive intact, but in reality we all expect the opposite. We look at the internal vacancy bulletin, not for jobs, but to see what's new and what's changing. You get a taste for where things are going from the posts advertised. We scrutinise job descriptions looking for elements of our role as an indication of what might happen to us. It's grim really (2015).

Emma

Studying for a degree altered the course of my career. When my headteacher saw that I was keen to progress and learn, and was prepared to work hard, I was slotted into a role of home school liaison coordinator. I began the role with three hours a week allocated to it, which gradually increased to twenty in my last year of studying. After finishing my degree, I was given the role full time, and assured that I would receive a new contract, together with an increase in salary. However, the role had not been passed by the council's human resources department. When the job description was completed and sent for evaluation, the HR department disagreed with the grade. The grade they think it is worth is the grade I am currently paid. So, I am a little disillusioned. I thought my career was 'on the up' but at present I haven't moved at all through the pay bands, yet have more responsibility. Although I enjoy the role, I feel a little 'cheated'. I am considering alternative options, and starting to formulate new plans. On a positive note at least my job has not been affected by cut backs (2013).

Charlotte

Although my pay is protected for one year in the latest restructure, my salary will then be reduced by £3500, and my role has been down-graded so that you no longer need a level 4 qualification, it is only level 3. It hasn't made me feel valued! (2015).

The perceived unfairness of Charlotte's situation is not just about the changes in her job specification, and the impending salary reduction; it is also about the deliberate downgrading of the qualification status of her job, as a way of absorbing cuts in public sector funding. Emma's statement '*I feel a little cheated*', and Charlotte's '*it hasn't made me feel valued*' are especially revealing, because one can imagine the strength of their feelings, soon after graduation. Signalling similar concerns, other participants frequently use language which suggests they too believe some basic expectations are being violated, and that the foundations of strong employer-employee relationships, i.e. notions of fairness, trust and social justice, are threatened in these times.

Discussion

In 2010, participants in the study enthusiastically embarked on a three-year degree programme, in the belief that it would increase their chances of career progression and increased earnings in

the occupation of their dreams; that it would allow them access to ‘the good life’ (Berlant, 2011). Interviewed three years later, the positive impact of becoming a graduate on their feelings of self-confidence, self-worth and enhanced agential ability to articulate their employment credentials with employers, colleagues and families is evident. In particular, it is noticeable how the work they do is central to their imagined work identities, and makes them who they are. Since then, the cruel reality of their experiences is etched into accounts of changes in their employment status, brought about by waves of cuts in public sector funding. Most of all, they express feelings that some fundamental, implicit understandings of a psychological contract between them, the state and their employer is being cruelly violated. These implicit understandings are about notions of mutual obligations of trust, fairness and social justice in employment practice.

Appreciating the participants’ experiences raises some troublesome questions for further and higher education, and for careers work. In practice, education and careers work can transform people and organisations for the better; it can also mirror and act to reproduce existing inequalities in the market economy and employment practices. (Bernstein, 1971; Keep & Mayhew, 2014, p. 775). This is why the discourse about poor quality teaching, and students lacking the knowledge and skills to satisfy the economy’s needs, becomes a paradigmatic target around which to re-direct and channel public outrage (Collini, 2016; Palfreyman & Trapper, 2014). Cast in instrumental terms, the notion of a psychological contract, where the roles of student and staff are set up in opposition as customers and vendors respectively, is affirmed. Students are the customers and what they pay for, and expect, is an education and careers guidance that gives them advantage in the highly competitive labour marketplace. On the other hand, in this age of austerity and market fundamentalism, there are no silver bullets available to guarantee success in helping people to build and manage imagined careers. Rather, the great dangers are to over-claim what might be achievable through education and careers guidance, and then to become part of the ‘cooling out of the marks’ process, when the victim of the con is denied the imaginary reward of the career of their dreams (Goffman, 1952). In Goffman’s analogy, the mark is the sucker – the person who is taken in and becomes the victim of a con. The operator of the con, or his agent, stays with the mark in order to help them to ‘define the situation in a way that makes it easy for them to accept the inevitable and quietly go home.’ (Goffman, 1952, p. 451). Using Goffman’s analogy one can see how the uncritical pursuit of the skills and education for employability agenda, and complementary forms of career guidance and counselling, risks encouraging students to build and maintain an attachment to an imagined, problematic career outcome, and then becomes a cooling out mechanism to draw attention away from the in-built inequalities in the labour marketplace, when the imagined object of desire is lost. (Berlant, 2011; Keep & Mayhew, 2014).

Acknowledging this danger, and asserting that the purpose of education and careers work is about more than meeting the needs of modern capitalism, we can also see why a prolonged economic crisis can render traditional notions of career paths and conventional job seeking approaches irrelevant. The analysis shows that the processes of career and employment sense-making are both cognitive and emotional. Often of necessity, careers are built around available short-term paid and unpaid work opportunities and voluntary activities, which, when supported by a strong sense of professional identity, can give rise to adaptability and a sense of well-being. For those with a strong historical sense of self and a professional identity, career sustaining strategies can be pursued, despite the inevitable doubts and challenges. The study also illustrates how changes in a person’s role and employment status can threaten and undermine notions of a professional identity and well-being. New roles can produce fundamental changes in an individual’s self-definitions and confidence. Although potentially destabilising, a change in role change can also be an opportunity to trial new identity affirming skills, behaviours and attitudes. Mindful of this, we can assert that careers work is about enabling people to envisage, plan and manage their career journeys in a complex world of work and employment relationships. We can also assert that it is about enabling people to become rounded citizens ‘who have the capacity for

reasoning, for inter-relating with other persons in the community and for deliberating about the ends worth pursuing' in their lives, as well as in the globalised economy (Pring, 2012, p. 753).

The implications for future research are two-fold. Firstly, it can profitably address the notion of possible selves in times of economic crisis, when individuals explore alternative career opportunities based on changing perceptions of a fit between what they would like to become, and their beliefs about future opportunities (Lengelle & Meijers, 2013; McMahon & Watson, 2013; Tomassini, 2015). Secondly, there needs to be a robust, research-informed debate about the complex, problematic processes of psychological contracting between students and staff in colleges of further education and universities, and to see if, and how, contractual expectations and beliefs are changing in these uncertain times, and the consequences of this.

Disclosure statement

No personal conflict of interest was reported by the author

Note on contributor

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