

Employability Pathways and Perceptions of ‘Work’ amongst Single Homeless and Vulnerably Housed People

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This article reports on a longitudinal study that explores the changing motivations to enter paid work of a sample of thirty homeless and vulnerably housed people. A pathways approach is proposed to offer insights into the complex relationships between promoting employability and the pursuit of other resettlement outcomes, such as the achievement of sustainable accommodation and recovery from long-term ill-health issues. The four pathways constructed following in-depth interviews suggest that individuals were at various stages of moving towards employment. Movement within and between pathways was affected by personal and structural issues, including access to resources, housing situations and support needs.

The policy context

Homelessness has been conceptualised as an extreme form of social exclusion (Pleace, 1998). The emphasis on paid employment as a means of social inclusion was a critical tenet of the previous New Labour Government (Dwyer, 2000). For example, in New Labour’s (DCLG, 2008) rough sleeping strategy, ‘work’ featured as an important means of reaching the target of ending rough sleeping by 2012. Tackling worklessness amongst homeless groups is set to be a continued focus under the Coalition Government as, at the time of writing, the newly formed Homelessness Working Group looks to ‘top-up’ funding for the job outcomes of homeless clients within the DWP Work Programme. Employment is therefore seen as a crucial means for homeless people to escape or avoid a return to homelessness. In a wider context, it asserts the current and former Governments’ emphasis on the relationships between (un)employment and social housing provision and proposals for linking tenancies with the condition of seeking work (cf. Fletcher *et al.*, 2008).

A salient policy development of recent years linking resettlement and employment for homeless people is the ‘Places of Change’ initiative. The Hostels Improvement Programme has sought to transform the culture of hostels through promotion of employment, training and education within hostel spaces. The objective of this programme is to halt the ‘cycle of exclusion’ from hostels to create ‘places of change’ which facilitate a move from hostels into independent accommodation and sustainable employment, and thus avoid the silting up of hostels. Under New Labour, ‘joined-up’ approaches to service delivery were promoted, and within homelessness services this was evident in the extension of in-house employability programmes, social enterprises and increased work opportunities for homeless people within voluntary organisations. Meanwhile, concerned private sector contractors focused on employment support for homeless people. Business Action

on Homelessness (BAOH), for example, was established as a partnership organisation between business, homeless sectors and government to help homeless people overcome barriers to employment and break the cycle of having 'no job, no home, no job' (BAOH, 2009).

Voluntary work, education and training have also been viewed as important in helping people resettle and sustain their tenancies (Jones and Higate, 2000). Thames Reach (2008), a homelessness charity in London, also argues that there are strong links between building confidence through skills development, finding work and successful resettlement. It claims that by helping homeless people to find employment and expand their skills they are less likely to abandon their properties, be evicted or return to sleeping rough on the streets. Despite apparent links between resettlement and employment, St Mungo's (2010) report that mainstream welfare-to-work services offer inadequate employment support to homeless people. It suggests that first stage support should be offered to jobseekers with multiple complex needs, including more joined-up health services and support with basic skills and confidence building prior to a second 'job-readiness' stage.

Evidence suggests that the majority of homeless people want to work but that homeless people face a number of barriers to employability and those with multiple barriers are least likely to gain entry to the labour market (Singh, 2005). Personal barriers include poor job skills (Luby and Welch, 2006), mental ill-health (SEU, 2004), substance use (Cebulla *et al.*, 2004) and a history of offending (SEU, 2002). Structural barriers arise from employer discrimination, the benefits trap, poor employment advice, inflexible training and employment services and the debilitating effects of homelessness itself (CESI, 2005; Singh, 2005).

Homelessness services have continued over the last twenty years to focus on a 'resettlement' agenda, which advocates a holistic approach to homeless people's needs for supportive relationships, 'meaningful' activities and appropriate housing and support (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000). Over the last decade, tenancy sustainment support has also increasingly become a feature of resettlement services as a means of supporting homeless and vulnerably housed people in their homes and communities (Jones and Pleace, 2010). Structural and personal barriers also present obstacles to resettlement for homeless people. Research has explored some of these barriers, experiences and outcomes of resettlement for specific homeless groups, such as older homeless people (Crane and Warnes, 2007), young homeless people (Hennessey *et al.*, 2005), single homeless people (Harding and Willett, 2008), homeless mothers (Tischler, 2008) and formerly homeless substance users (Bowpitt and Harding, 2009). However, little has been done to explore where pursuing employability fits into the priorities of homeless and vulnerably housed people themselves.

Methodology

Thirty single homeless and vulnerably housed people in a range of resettlement stages were recruited through key workers at hostels (emergency shelters and 'second stage' hostels) and 'tenancy sustainment' teams (TST). Informed consent was gained prior to in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which lasted up to an hour and a half each time. Participants received a £10 voucher for each interview and contact details were obtained to take part in a second interview approximately six months later. Whilst some attrition was expected, second interviews were completed with twenty-two of the original participants and explored what had changed in their lives in the period between interviews, including

their perceptions and experiences of housing, employability, supportive relationships, priorities and aspirations.

Short questionnaires were completed with participants before interviews. Based on questionnaire self reports, two people were in paid employment and the other twenty-eight people were in receipt of welfare benefits including Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support and Incapacity Benefit. No-one in the sample claimed Employment and Support Allowance, which had been introduced at the time of first interviews. More than a third of people interviewed had no qualifications and just over a quarter had difficulties with reading and/or writing. More than half of all respondents had mental health difficulties and/or physical health problems. Moreover, half the respondents had convictions, a third had spent time in custody and more than half had a history of substance misuse.

Pathways to resettlement: work and homeless people's priorities

A 'pathways' approach has been adopted as it enables a dynamic analysis of the changes in homeless and vulnerably housed people's routes and decision making in employability over time. Increasingly research has explored the 'trajectories', 'careers' or 'pathways' of homeless people to map the transitions of homelessness to resettlement (e.g. McNaughton, 2008; Ravenhill, 2008; Quilgars *et al.*, 2008). Greater attention has focused on the changing dynamics of homelessness and therefore conceptualisations of pathways reflect this idea of movement. Advocates of such approaches argue that 'pathways' enhance our understandings of 'the complexity of homelessness in a more meaningful and useful way ... that embraces the dynamics of movement into and out of different situations over a person's lifetime' (Downey, 2008: 4). The pathways approach presented here draws on what Cloke *et al.* (2008: 247) describe as the 'journeys and pauses' of homeless people. The *pauses* of homeless people are also important when understanding routes into and through homelessness, and therefore to this exploration of 'employability', acknowledging that these 'paths' are not always fluid or progressive, but impeded by a number of complex barriers.

The study conceptualises four pathways which emerged following longitudinal interviews exploring attitudes and motivations towards employment: 'work-focused', 'deferred focus', 'uncertain focus' and 'resettlement-focused' pathways. Complex support needs and access to a number of resources, including safe housing and support, also influenced allocation to one of the 'pathways'. Personal and structural issues affected the pathway to which people were assigned, including the absence or presence of stable housing, feeling at 'home', supportive relationships, aspirations, perceptions of opportunities to develop employability, and personal difficulties, including coping with traumatic experiences and health-related problems. Pathways were not linearly connected and individuals did not necessarily move from one pathway to another. Some individuals moved into other pathways at the time of second interviews and there were indications this may change in the future. Within pathways, there were often complex movements related to changes in individuals' emotional and cognitive states.

Whilst there were some common characteristics of individuals, distinct differences between people in different pathways also emerged. In all pathways, people experienced common support needs and barriers, including mental and physical health problems, ex-offending and substance misuse, but those furthest from the paid labour market had current, multiple complex needs. Traversing all pathways, people had experienced a

range of homeless situations, including rough sleeping, sofa surfing and living in hostels. However, those who had spent long periods of time in and out of homelessness were furthest away from considering paid work. The majority of people interviewed had limited experiences of paid work and/or had been unemployed for several years. However, many people engaged in 'meaningful' activities, defined by Homeless Link (2009) as 'giving homeless people something positive to do with the aim of building their self-esteem, developing their skills and building social networks away from the streets'. Whilst there were similarities across pathways, what distinguished pathways were people's attitudes, motivations, priorities and long-term aspirations, as well as support, complex needs and housing situations. Each pathway is briefly described before common characteristics of people within the pathway are outlined and some discussion of the changes that occurred between interviews for particular individuals.

'Work-focused' pathway

The six people (five women and one man) included in this group were engaged in paid or in voluntary work with a view to entering paid work in the near future. Paid work was a more *immediate* focus for the people engaged in voluntary work in this group, who were perceived as closest to the paid labour market of all those interviewed. People in this pathway were more 'job ready' in terms of their attitudes, motivations and access to resources. Paid work was generally viewed as offering structure, progression, financial independence and a sense of purpose. In addition to their motivations and attitudes towards work, their position within this pathway was influenced by a sense that they had overcome past difficulties (such as alcohol or drug use) and were coping sufficiently in their daily lives. Their housing situations were secure in terms of tenure type, but, more importantly, those in this pathway felt safe, settled and at 'home'.

Whilst several people in the pathways had had difficulties in relationships with family in the past, there had been re-building of these relationships, which were now deemed 'supportive' and facilitated preparations for entering paid work for some. Overall, people in this group had fewer continuing 'complex needs'. Furthermore, only one person had experienced street homelessness in the past and the women in the group had only been homeless for short periods of time, either sofa surfing, staying in hostels or quickly resolving their homeless situations.

Some people talked about the perceived health benefits of work. For Pamela, who had moved from a hostel into her own tenancy, the routine and responsibility of paid work meant she was able to tackle her alcohol problems. The benefits of paid work to self-esteem were also expressed by Lorna, a volunteer in a homeless day centre that she had approached when she had become homeless, where she had also secured paid work at the time of the second interview:

I definitely want to go into some kind of work because I feel better. That's why I like doing that voluntary work as well. Coz you feel useful, you know. (Lorna, 47 years old, own tenancy supported by TST)

Five people participated in second interviews six months later. All had continued in their employment or volunteering or found new employment. Movements within

the pathway included participation in in-work training, progression in employment and development of 'transferable' skills. For those in the pathway, stable housing situations, resolution or stability of complex needs and development of support networks made a difference in coping with problems and progressing in their employability.

'Deferred focus' pathway

The six individuals in this pathway placed greater emphasis on education. Paid employment was viewed as a *longer-term* goal. For those in this pathway, attending college and working towards qualifications provided a sense of achievement and improved self-esteem and confidence. Their motivation to pursue education rather than employment was largely influenced by encouragement to attend 'in-house college' within the hostels, as well as maintaining positive relationships with key workers. With few or no qualifications, and experiences of exclusion from mainstream education, the people in this pathway felt that they had been given a 'second chance' to obtain their qualifications in a supportive environment.

Similarly to those in the 'work-focused' pathway, people in this group had fewer complex needs, such as diagnosed mental health issues or 'problematic' drug and alcohol use. Generally, the youngest of the entire sample occupied this pathway and the majority had become homeless after parents were no longer willing to accommodate them. They had stayed in various homeless situations, including refuges, emergency shelters, sofa surfing and rough sleeping. Whilst all people in this pathway were in temporary hostel accommodation, many described feeling at 'home' and for some young people it was the first time they had felt safe. Feeling safe and supported enabled them to pursue their educational qualifications but also deal with difficulties in their lives. Those in this pathway felt hopeful to resolve housing issues and gain paid work in the future. Many people in the pathway felt that gaining qualifications whilst in a hostel would set them up for acquiring a 'better job' in the future when they had moved to their own accommodation:

it's a lot easier to get into education and everything while you're here so you can get better jobs and everything . . . Getting help here and then moving onto your own place – it's better doing it like that. (Becky, 19 years old, hostel resident)

The majority of people in this pathway were also interviewed again. Compared with those in the 'work-focused' pathway, people in this group generally appeared to have made significant changes in their lives during the time between interviews, whereas those in the 'work-focused' group had remained fairly stable with few changes to their circumstances. Most had continued with their education and were attending courses, considering new courses and training, coping with routines, sitting exams and completing coursework. Major changes for those in this pathway included new relationships, pregnancy and further vocational training. Apart from one young woman, the majority in the 'deferred focus' pathway had moved to either permanent accommodation or in one case second stage supported accommodation. One person had started paid work in the time between interviews, but felt work was unsustainable due to high hostel rents, an environment not conducive to paid work and a perceived stigma attached to living in a hostel. These barriers were reiterated by others who suggested that noisy or chaotic hostel

environments restricted working whilst living in a hostel, but that pursuing educational qualifications was more appropriate.

Like those in the 'work-focused' pathway, people in the 'deferred focus' pathway indicated that they were coping in their lives. However, those in the 'deferred focus' pathway were also preparing to move out of hostel accommodation into their own tenancies. Respondents considered the pursuit of paid work whilst residing in hostel accommodation to be more demanding than balancing in-house college with moving to independent accommodation. This suggests that people's motivations to pursue work were bound up with housing and other issues.

'Uncertain focus' pathway

The ten people in this pathway were contemplating work in the future, but many were unsure what they would like to do or how they might pursue work. Others were less interested in exploring work options, focusing instead on short courses and other meaningful activities for reasons other than gaining paid work in the future. People in this group were ambivalent towards the kinds of work they would be able to do largely because of the personal and structural obstacles they faced as well as past negative experiences of work for some:

I do want to get into work but I want to do something what I want to do. I don't just want to jump into a job for the sake of getting a job, coz I know I'll become unhappy again. (Eric, thirty-eight years old, hostel resident moved to TST supported tenancy)

Low self-esteem affected those in this pathway and difficulties in relationships and attaining secure and safe housing were also common features, indicating complex relationships between people's motivations and aspirations to pursue employability and support needs. Many people in this pathway were focused on acquiring stable accommodation. Whilst those in this group had a mix of 'secure' and 'insecure' housing situations, what was evident was their feelings towards their housing situations, in that many felt unsafe or unstable.

There was no discernible pattern in experience of unemployment; people had been unemployed for between a year and twelve years. Three of the four men in this group had spent some time sleeping rough, and one of the women had also done so. More than half the members of this group had been homeless more than once. Their reasons for homelessness were diverse, including eviction, relationship breakdown, leaving the armed forces, loss of employment and fleeing domestic violence. Many of the people had complex needs in various combinations, including past heroin addiction, prison discharge, mental health issues and physical health problems.

Nine people in this group were interviewed again six months later. Of those re-interviewed no-one had made significant moves to pursuing employability. The exception was a young woman who had started a vocational course between interviews, but didn't expect she would be able to complete it. However, during the period between interviews, people had been making decisions about a range of issues, including addressing complex needs and consideration of the kinds of work that may be pursued in the future. Eric, for example, a former rough sleeper who had moved from a hostel, was initially unsure of

engaging in work in the future or the kind of work he was interested in. Past negative experiences of work impacted his motivations to gain work, including pressures from family who viewed work as a solution for overcoming his heroin problem. In the past, he had been unable to sustain work when he had 'relapsed' and this had perpetuated a negative self-image. At the time of the second interview, he was gradually settling into a new tenancy and discussed starting an apprenticeship offered through the homelessness organisation that supported him, which would lead to paid work in the future.

Although there were some indications that people in this pathway had started to re-consider paid work, the majority were still ambivalent and this was affected by past negative experiences of work, fears of the impact of paid work on benefits or worsening health, and enduring complex needs. Whilst there was little movement in this pathway in terms of changing perceptions of work, there were some smaller changes relating to developing supportive relationships and feeling settled in accommodation.

'Resettlement-focused' pathway

The eight individuals (six men and two women) in this pathway were not focused on pursuing work or employability. Their attention was instead occupied by more pressing issues relating to recovery or housing situations. Individuals in this pathway experienced multiple and severe complex needs, such as physical and mental health problems and substance misuse. Individuals in other pathways were also addressing complex needs, but those in the 'resettlement-focused' pathway had little or no interest in developing employability, either through training and education or in paid employment. Paid employment was either undesirable or unlikely for individuals in this pathway as their progress was restricted by the multiple barriers they faced. Paid work was not a long-term consideration or goal, as the majority in this pathway were often dealing with immediate crises. Therefore, individuals in the 'resettlement-focused' pathway were the greatest distance from the paid labour market, as work was not a priority and there was no expectation of work in the near future. Housing situations, which were not perceived as stable or which impacted health negatively, also affected individuals in this pathway, with some feeling 'trapped'.

Five of the men had been entrenched rough sleepers, spending long periods in and out of homelessness. Other common issues included time spent in prison, long-term unemployment, few support networks and social isolation. There was limited or no engagement in 'meaningful activities' offered through the homeless organisation. Like those in the 'uncertain focus' pathway, there was also a deep concern amongst two of the recent rough sleepers with long-term heroin problems and that being pushed into work at the wrong time might jeopardise their recovery and land them back at 'square one'.

Whilst the majority of people across pathways argued that housing was needed before employability could be developed, the day-to-day survival was often an additional priority for the recent rough sleepers in the 'resettlement-focused' pathway:

I don't think that without a sort of stable base to live at I don't think employment even comes into the picture . . . Coz really you're getting where you are from one day to the next. (William, thirty-one, emergency hostel resident)

People in this pathway felt they had too much on their minds or to cope with to consider any form of employability, and generally anticipated that their support needs would remain relatively unchanged in the future. Whilst a few people were more hopeful in re-building personal relationships, finding permanent accommodation or dealing with drug problems, paid work remained unlikely in the near future or in the long term.

Second interviews were carried out with just three of the people originally interviewed in this pathway. An interpretation of this attrition may be further evidence that people within this pathway faced multiple and severe complex needs. Limited information from key workers suggested that for those who were untraced, their lives had remained in crisis. Whilst there were movements for people in this pathway related to addressing or coming to terms with the problems they faced, no-one had moved closer to considering or pursuing paid work. The housing situations and/or mental health of those interviewed a second time remained difficult or had worsened and their attentions to employability had remained unchanged. Their priorities continued to centre on recovery, re-building supportive relationships and resolving immediate crises, and work was viewed as far removed from their current circumstances.

Conclusions

Attaining secure and safe housing that was suitable for their needs was prioritised above work by the majority of those interviewed. However, some felt that recovery from mental ill health or maintaining 'wellness' was their main focus. Dealing with debts, seeking support for substance misuse, caring for family members or gaining access to children were also considered immediate priorities above work for many people interviewed. Building supportive personal relationships was also seen as important for resettlement. This study supports the view that housing and employment pathways are complexly linked (cf. Clapham, 2005) and highlights that a number of pathways, such as those relating to developing positive relationships, self-image and recovery, also play a role in motivations towards employability.

Temporary and enduring structural and personal barriers to education, training, volunteering and employment were faced by many people interviewed. However, those furthest from engaging in employability and entering the paid labour market (in the 'uncertain focus' and 'resettlement-focused' pathways) had the most and more severe complex needs and greatest barriers to employment. Motivations and aspirations to develop employability were affected by their access to a range of resources as well as the extent to which they were coping with and addressing emotional or health-related difficulties, including past experiences of trauma, mental health problems or substance misuse.

Some movement between pathways occurred between first and second interviews; one person in the 'deferred focus' group became more 'work focused' and had decided to pursue paid work, but work had not been sustained due to an unsettled housing situation and their focus returned to pursuing educational qualifications. Another person originally in the 'deferred focus' pathway moved to the 'uncertain focus' pathway as she was focused on other priorities, such as her pregnancy and acquiring suitable housing, rather than education or preparing for future paid work. However, there were greater movements within pathways, which were often subtle and related to choices and decision making around complex needs. For example, those in the 'uncertain focus' pathway had clearer

ideas of the kinds of work they wished to pursue or the routes they might take in the future. Whilst there were subtle changes in people's attitudes and motivations at the time of second interviews, it is suggested that the time between interviews was not long enough to capture greater movement between and within pathways. The tracing of movement of people's journeys was further impeded by the difficulties in arranging second interviews and this was especially difficult with those in crisis.

The four pathways reflect the complexity of the relationship between homelessness, resettlement and employability and include those furthest and closest to the paid labour market, those pursuing training or education and those with more ambivalent attitudes towards work. Thus, the pathways in which people were grouped indicate different orientations towards the paid labour market in terms of participation, preparation, ambivalence and rejection. Gender, age, housing situation, length of time unemployed and range and severity of complex issues, such as substance misuse and mental health issues, appeared to influence positioning in pathways. In addition, there were factors which are more difficult to measure, which influenced positioning within employability pathways, including views of work, past experiences and future expectations of work. What determined the pathway into which individuals were placed were their priorities, motivations, feelings of settlement and progress in addressing or dealing with complex needs.

As Jones and Pleace (2005) point out, homeless people may be at very different stages in seeking work. Some may feel ready for support into the paid labour market, others may not need this support, and others may feel it is simply not a viable option. Therefore, employability support for those able to work should be informed by an understanding of the differing complex needs of individuals on different pathways, indicating that employment support and recovery need to be more closely connected. A further potential policy implication of the study is that programmes which seek to change the culture of hostels to encourage participation in paid work have some way to go. Many respondents felt hostels posed barriers and disincentives to paid work due to high rents, chaotic environments and the stigma associated with hostels. Perhaps controversially, this may suggest that quicker progression for resettlement and 'move on' accommodation is needed for homeless people deemed 'work-ready'.

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