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In search of a job – but which one? How unemployed people revise their occupational expectations

Abstract

Conducting a job search implies the identification of a target – an intended job. However, this assumption has been little studied, and just two main conclusions have been drawn, namely: jobseekers have an incentive to adjust their targets to the jobs available, and returning to work tends to lead to occupational downgrading. This paper explores how job search experiences shape and alter targets. Biographical interviews were conducted with 57 unemployed people registered with the French public employment service. Ultimately, all of them revise their occupational expectations as, faced with the uncertainties inherent to the job search and experiencing difficulties in reaching their priority targets, they try to adapt and define more realistic goals. Four contrasting processes of expectation revision are used to track these tensions between desirability and realism. In conclusion, we stress the following facts: that unemployed people are flexible and develop rationales in order to adapt to the labour market; that their experience of failure, alongside advice and beliefs arising in the course of the job search feed directly into these revisions, and that these revisions both vary in magnitude and reflect inequalities in the defining process of target jobs.

Keywords

Job search, unemployed, target job, occupational expectations, realism

1. Introduction

Job search is a compulsory duty with which unemployed people must either comply, or risk being sanctioned. Activation policies have reinforced this obligation (Eichhorst *et al.*, 2008). At the same time, employment job statuses have diversified, while conditions of employment have been weakened; the end result is growing job insecurity and precariousness, primarily affecting jobseekers (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017). In this context, joblessness raises questions about the sought-after or hoped-for job: What exactly am I looking for? What should I aim for? What can I expect? These questions have been identified in the course of several analyses of job search experiences showing how unemployed people try to map out their path back to work (Gabriel *et al.*, 2013; Sharone, 2013; Demazière, 2021), and are the starting point of the present study.

The abundant scientific literature on job search tends to focus on the analysis of job search procedures or the measurement of its intensity, neglecting not only these issues but also the goals identified, their calibration and their revision (Benhabib and Bull, 1983; Van Hoye, 2018). Even though attention paid to the jobs found shows a tendency towards the deterioration of occupational situations (Bethmann, 2013; Brand, 2015), the sought-after job remains a fairly abstract entity. Other research shows that activation schemes promote the conversion of unemployed people to a 'self-help paradigm' (Sharone, 2007) and a 'governance of the self' (Boland, 2016). These incentives are meant to lead unemployed people to adjust their occupational expectations according to the likelihood of achieving them. Yet this subject remains relatively unexplored in terms of the experiences of unemployed people themselves. Many questions remain: how are expectations relaxed, maintained, expanded, redirected, or abandoned? In short, how is the targeted job reshaped?

To follow this path, it is essential that we position the lived experience of unemployed people at the heart of our analysis. This is why we rely on the in-depth biographical interview with jobseekers. The 'lived experience' concept (McIntosh and Wright, 2019) allows us to focus on the views of unemployed people, on how they see (envision and conceive) the job they aspire to, how they experiment with these projections, and how they put them to the job search test. Analyses of the experience of unemployment have highlighted the extent to which joblessness can worsen social integration, family relationships, living conditions, health, etc. But when these negative consequences are highlighted (Cole, 2017), job search tends to disappear from these comprehensive approaches (Demazière & Delpierre, 2022). This is why we focus here on the lived experiences of job search.

We define ‘lived experience’ as a set of concrete events, interactions with others and productions of meaning. The job search is filled with such events (applications, interviews, lack of response, etc.), exchanges (with career advisers, recruiters, relatives, etc.) and interpretations (estimates of own chances, assessments of obstacles encountered en route to a job, identification of goals, etc.) that contribute to the adjustment of occupational expectations, aspirations and targets. Our hypothesis is that these revisions result from difficulties in achieving the most highly-valued targets and goals, and lead to the definition of perspectives pointing towards more realistic goals, i.e. that are supposedly less difficult to achieve. Occupational expectations thus shift between two poles: desirability (the best possible jobs) and realism (less satisfying, more accessible jobs).

Our argument is structured as follows. We begin by situating our approach in relation to the social science literature on job search and the occupational positions targeted by jobseekers. We then present our fieldwork and justify the method we have chosen. Next, we discuss our results, showing that the revision of occupational expectations is indeed a salient feature of job search experiences, but that it takes place along four contrasting pathways. To conclude, we argue that these differences reflect inequalities in terms of both the return to work and mastery of the job search, and suggest lessons for job search analysis as well as for supporting unemployed people towards employment.

2. The target job: a black box

Job search has, since the 1950s, been conceptualised as a set of behaviours aimed at acquiring information about available jobs. Codified nomenclatures listing the steps taken were developed; these made it possible to evaluate and measure job search in terms of intensity and

frequency of effort (Bachmann and Baumgarten, 2013), quality and diversity of the means mobilised (Reid, 1972), persistence and variations over time (Barber *et al.*, 1994) and other aspects of individual behaviour (Van Hoyer, 2018). Throughout all of this work, the characteristics of jobseekers' target jobs remain out of scope, as do their occupational preferences and estimations of the likelihood of reaching their targets.

The occupational expectations of unemployed people are studied indirectly, through the qualities of the jobs they obtain (that is, those they end up accepting). Comparisons carried out in several OECD countries between jobs held pre-unemployment and jobs found post-unemployment show that unemployment drives a downward trend in occupational situations. This concerns both contractual employment conditions and occupational prestige/status (Bethmann, 2013; Dieckhoff, 2011; Lippmann and Rosenthal, 2008) as well as pay (Arulampalam, 2001; Brand, 2015). The phenomenon of downgrading on leaving unemployment has been extensively documented. Comparison of the job search outcomes of employed and unemployed workers also shows that the latter more often obtain (or accept) lower pay, less stable jobs, and less satisfactory working hours (Longhi, 2015). This suggests that because unemployed people are under greater pressure to get a job, they find a wider range of job offers acceptable. Other research shows that both activation schemes and welfare conditionality increase this pressure, pushing unemployed people to accept transitions to atypical job types such as temporary contracts, temporary assignments, part-time work or self-employment (Dengler, 2019; Jordan, 2018) – or indeed any job at all (Boland, 2016). However, all these results do is document the effects of the pressure exerted on unemployed people by unemployment or Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs); they tell us nothing about the processes through which their expectations are revised downwards.

The fact that duration of unemployment accentuates these revisions has been shown by a range of very different studies. In terms of the economic theory of job search (Devine and Kieffer, 1993), the cost of unemployment to jobseekers increases over time, encouraging them to reduce their ‘reservation wage’ and thus to reduce their job expectations. Meanwhile, comprehensive analyses of the experience of people unemployed long-term show that deterioration of the job search, coupled with rising discouragement (Cottle, 2001) leads to a weakening of belief in the possibility of obtaining a job (Lindsay, 2010), open changes to future prospects (Demazière, 2014), and reduces the willingness to make compromises regarding employment conditions, particularly among older jobseekers (Nivorozhkin & Nivorozhkin 2021). Compared with discouragement, the revision of career expectations, however, remains on the margins of the academic research, though it does highlight the role played by uncertainties (Castel, 2016) in assessing both the chances of accessing employment and the time needed to exit unemployment. This same research also suggests that these uncertainties relate to the very definition of the intended job: What prospects are open or closed to me? What are the best possible options and what chance do I have of achieving them? Should I adjust my expectations?

The job search therefore raises questions both about the jobs targeted, and about the gap between those jobs and the ones on offer. As a result, the search is marked by revisions and compromises, and few surveys offer any information on this. One study of unemployed people with specialised skills and qualifications examined two options open to them: a quick exit from unemployment via a downgraded job, or a longer wait (while remaining unemployed) for a suitable job (Buchs *et al.*, 2017). It shows that trade-offs are influenced by the number and quality of available jobs, and that early-career unemployed people are more likely to opt for a quick exit from unemployment. Another analysis, this time focused on unemployed managers

and professionals in their fifties, stresses that most of these people have had to revise their expectations downwards, opting either for de-skilled jobs or for occasional/voluntary activities (Gabriel *et al.*, 2013). This study also shows that unemployed people's expectations are often composite – articulating, for example, the internalisation of an inevitable occupational insecurity with the maintenance of an aspiration to restore their career, or have their value recognised. Occupational expectations are thus embedded in the tensions between different options that are unequally valued or desirable, and these revisions are not without ambivalence. Another study of unemployed people having previously worked in 'traditional' sectors examines the extent to which they would (or would not) be willing to work in the service sector, which is known to offer unattractive jobs of the kind sometimes referred to as 'McJobs' (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). It concludes that unemployed people are more resistant to low-paid jobs in which working conditions are difficult, and that this resistance is stronger for certain jobs (for example, call centres are less popular than retail).

There is, however, a lack of knowledge about the revision processes themselves. Unemployment certainly is often experienced as an ordeal that generates strong uncertainties for unemployed people as to their value, future and employability (Gazier, 2017). Similarly, because it confronts them with recurrent failure, the search for employment exposes people to self-doubt and low self-esteem (Demazière & Zune, 2023). If we are to identify the events and episodes that cause occupational expectations to evolve, the better to guide and steer them in a particular direction, then we need to open up the black box of the job search experience. In this regard, one study focused on benefits recipients argues that the range of events capable of influencing their pathways and perceptions of the future is very broad (Danneris, 2018); this same study also highlights the importance of what makes sense to individuals. It is therefore important to favour a theoretical stance that makes the most of the interpretations and meanings

of unemployed people themselves, since these both underpin job search behaviour and configure the jobs targeted (McDonald, 2010).

In our view, the job search is an experience in the course of which unemployed people calibrate their occupational targets, rather than a mere set of steps to be taken. Since experiences are rooted in the activities of unemployed people and the situations they encounter, they are also interpretations and ‘practices of knowing’ (Campbell, 2003). Indeed, during the job search, unemployed people identify job offers full of various requirements, receive advice aimed at convincing them to adjust their expectations, and test their aspirations through applications. They receive multiple items of information to which they attribute meaning, and these are the ingredients of cycles of hope and disillusionment, encouragement and setbacks, certainty and doubt. Admittedly, the accumulation of difficulties can lead to increasing discouragement as the duration of unemployment lengthens. But in the course of the job search, these nuggets of information also feed into a process in which the intended jobs are categorised: occupational targets are then assigned conditions of possibility, levels of plausibility and degrees of desirability. The target job is thus caught up in a stream of definitions of what might be within reach, satisfying, desirable, ideal, intolerable, unacceptable, unattainable, etc., and out of this stream, revisions of expectations emerge.

Our aim is therefore to examine how unemployed people make sense of these occupational prospects (Ezzy, 2001; Lane, 2011) on the basis of their own job search experiences – and beyond that, how they are led to adjust these prospects, and in which directions these trade-offs go. We see the job search experience as being marked by a flow of situations and interactions, some of which are particularly significant – so much so, that jobseekers mention them during the biographical interviews we conduct with them. The importance they attach to these events

results from the fact that they produce a ‘convincingness’ (Goffman, 1974) as to their occupational future, configuring expectations that are experienced as meaningful and relevant to themselves. Our contribution is twofold: we identify the practices and events that have consequences for the definition and revision of occupational expectations (in other words, the ingredients of the revised expectations) and we identify the pathways organising these revisions, showing that they do not follow any single, uniform logic.

3. Materials and research approach

We conducted in-depth biographical interviews with 57 unemployed people registered with the French public employment agency (*Pôle Emploi*). The fieldwork was carried out in 2017, in a deindustrialised region of northern France: overunemployment dates back to the 1980s and remains high (according to the ILO, the rate at the time of the study was 12.6% compared to 10.4% in France), and poverty is more widespread (measured at 60% of the median standard of living, it affects 18.5% of the population, compared to 14.1% nationally). The economic fabric is however boosted by a large number of small and medium-sized companies and the growth of such job-creating sectors as transport, logistics, culture and mass retailing. This area is also well connected to the regional metropolis, and is at the crossroads of major road, rail and river routes.

This area also presents contrasting characteristics in terms of our fieldwork. On the one hand, unemployed people are in a fairly difficult situation due to high levels of unemployment. On the other, they are able to benefit from a diversification of the economic fabric and good connections with neighbouring territories. This combination creates a context that seems favourable in terms of both analysing the dynamics of occupational expectations and potential

combinations of ‘desirability’ and ‘realism’ perspectives. Indeed, an overly-depressed labour market would accentuate the effects of discouragement and renunciation of the most valued targets, while, an overly-favourable context would reduce the constraints that may lead to compromise.

A random selection was made from a list of unemployed people registered with *Pôle Emploi*. We contacted 127 people by post to inform them of our survey, tell them that we would be calling them and that they could inform us if they wished to refuse to participate (and that no pressure would be applied). Appointments were made with 65 people, and 57 interviews were ultimately conducted. In each face-to-face contact, the purpose of the research was explained in such a way as to obtain free and informed consent. And in accordance with French practice, we did not hand out vouchers to thank the participants. None of the people interviewed indicated that they felt threatened or compromised by the interview process. Factors such as the length of the interview (often close to two hours), and the gratitude expressed by some interviewees at the end of the interaction indicate that a climate of trust had been created. To protect interviewee confidentiality, all first names mentioned in this text have been changed. The sample includes 28 women and 29 men. It is diverse in terms of age, duration of unemployment, education levels, family situation, previous employment and unemployment benefit (Table 1).

Table 1 here

In France, institutions devoted to unemployment have a support side and a compensation side. Anyone who wants to find a job is entitled to register with the public employment agency (*Pôle Emploi*). These jobseekers receive support from caseworkers who help them on their way to employment. These frontline advisers also have a job-search monitoring function, but they

consider this activity to be secondary to their professional identity. They pay attention to the job-search behaviour of the unemployed in order to improve it rather than to hand out sanctions. Evaluating the 'goodwill' of the unemployed is central to their work (Demazière, 2024). So much so that a few years ago, after the period of our study, *Pôle Emploi* created a new category of advisers, exclusively responsible for job-search monitoring, which risks increasing sanctions. On the compensation, the system is insurance-based: entitlements derive from contributions during periods worked. As a result, the duration and amount of unemployment benefits are highly variable. For example, almost 55% of jobseekers registered with *Pôle Emploi* at the time of our fieldwork were not receiving benefit. In addition, there is also a minimum income (Active solidarity income) which is allocated on the basis of household income and independently of registration with *Pôle Emploi*.

The interview protocol was designed with a view to building trusting relationships, because these are essential to talking about a socially-devalued experience (Ezzy, 2001). In presenting our approach we emphasised that we wanted to 'understand how unemployed people like you see their future', 'to discuss with you how you are coping with this situation', 'to listen to your story' and 'to learn from your experiences'. The protocol was centred on the job (targeted or idealised) and on the job search, both the activities undertaken, the obstacles encountered and the interpretations produced. It placed the unemployed in a de facto position of being active and reflective about the labour market. The interview guide was designed to encourage a conversational style, to elicit and support a reflective posture, and to help interviewees tell their stories as personal histories (Forster, 2012). To this end, on the whole it contained a few overarching themes, rather than lots of specific questions, covering career path, job search activities and their evolution over time, significant experiences during unemployment, hopes and disappointments, and visions of the future. Our numerous follow-up questions on these

topics were aimed at producing detailed accounts of the activities, behaviours and practices developed during the unemployment period, so as to trigger reflective processes generating meaning and interpretations. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the interviewees (most often in their homes).

Our analysis here focuses on job search experiences in a bid to understand how unemployed people interpret their position in the labour market, how they conceive of target jobs, and how they regulate their own expectations. The methodology we adopted attends to the evaluative dimensions of the narrative (Riessman, 1993) and examines the relationship between the narrative plot and self-evaluation, since our aim was to understand what ‘good work’ (Ezzy, 1997) is, to unemployed people. The analysis immediately highlights a plurality of perspectives: the job targeted or aimed for is plural, and its characteristics change throughout the narrative. Identifying the aspirations that really count for each interviewee thus became a major challenge for the analysis. To meet this challenge, we focused on what we call decisive expectations, i.e. those that are broken down into concrete activities designed to achieve or test them and that trigger a re-evaluation (disqualification, questioning, rejection in the background, etc.) of other, previously-favoured, pathways.

Our analysis shows that the dynamics of occupational expectations do not follow any simple pattern, in which each new perspective displaces and replaces the previous one. More often than not, the priorities set are conditional (or affected by uncertainty) while the importance attached to certain secondary paths is strong. In other words, the occupational expectations of unemployed people are often plural while the hierarchies organising this plurality tend to be indecisive or unstable. The analysis of this fluidity, which varies from one person to another, led us to identify four contrasting pathways, placing them along a spectrum between ‘desirable’

and 'valued' aims and 'realistic' and 'reasonable' aims in order to describe the dynamics of occupational expectations.

4. Revisions that generate persistent tensions

The unemployed people we interviewed are from diverse professional backgrounds: some have worked continuously for decades, some have changed jobs several times (either because they wanted to, or because they had no choice) and others have worked very little. Their unemployment situation is varied: some are experiencing it for the first time, while others have visited repeatedly, some have been unemployed for less than 10 months, others for about two years. Their living conditions are heterogeneous: some receive unemployment benefit while others do not, some live with a partner while others do not, some have dependent children while others do not. However, However, despite this diversity, the analysis showed that the narratives have important features in common: they express reflexive reasoning that legitimises the behaviours they have adopted and their inflections; they mention other people, whose views have either supported or weakened their own views and beliefs, and they outline their uncertain expectations of the future, leading to the expression of a variety of perspectives. We therefore sought to identify contrasting accounts. Our analysis of the corpus allowed us to identify four processes in the revision of occupational expectations, which we have called: moderation, disorientation, downgrading, and resistance. In describing these, we have favoured an individual focus, which is better suited to a processual approach intended to track the inflections, ambivalences and tensions observed. The four stories selected were chosen for two main reasons: they express very contrasting arguments, which are widely present in the corpus and in this sense illustrate typical processes, and they are dense enough to allow us to reconstruct the dynamics of occupational expectations and link them to job search experiences.

Moderating expectations without sacrificing them

Some unemployed people moderate their expectations right from the start of their job search. They anticipate difficulties in accessing employment that are perceived as insurmountable or difficult to overcome because they derive from stigmatisation or discrimination. This moderation is supported by advice from others, but it is also limited because not all preferences are sacrificed on the altar of realism.

Solange's story illustrates this process of moderation. She had successfully navigated an upward career path, spending 27 years at a family business where she had been promoted to Chief Accountant. 17 months prior to our interview, she had lost her job in a mass redundancy scheme, at the age of 55. Her material situation remained comfortable, with her husband employed as an executive in the banking sector, a home they owned, and an entitlement to unemployment benefit of 1,900 euros per month for a period of three years. She described the loss of her job as a 'shock', and herself as 'by nature, determined'.

She had received support from a company specialised in occupational retraining since the start of her period of unemployment, and had attended their course on job search and career planning, where she learned about the need to adapt to the labour market. The trainers stressed the difficulties older people encounter in finding employment, and advised her, in the event of prolonged unemployment, to consider other roles. Friends and family were telling her the same thing. These early experiences had left her feeling unsettled, and she became convinced that she needed to adapt to what she called 'discrimination' (against unemployed senior managers, now deemed both too expensive and insufficiently productive). To get around this untenable

situation, she set herself a priority target: to find work in her field, but in a downgraded post, as an accounting assistant. In her mind, this downgrading would be compensated for by an additional criterion she had set: the job would be at a small company, with the sort of pleasant, family-like working atmosphere she was used to. This adaptation prioritised working conditions while sacrificing the level of responsibility, and was tacitly approved by the professional advisers.

Solange: Then I thought: this can't be true, are we all condemned to death or what? It's scary, hearing all this stuff. You have to accept it, you can't just turn your back, you can't. And from then on I lowered my sights and aimed for a lower position, without responsibility. And for less money. (...) But don't forget, I do insist on a good working environment, a small, family-run, friendly company... and at *Pôle Emploi*, the staff were relieved that I was focusing on the atmosphere rather than on the pay, or on being the boss.

Having tempered her occupational expectations, Solange sent out dozens of applications. She got four interviews, but no job offers. According to her, her acceptance of a significant downgrade caused a certain amount of embarrassment among recruiters, when the issue of a significantly lower salary was mentioned. Although her dynamic approach was appreciated, her own takeaway was that tempering her expectations had not opened the door to employment.

This impasse ushered in a new chapter of her job search story, as well as further adjustments. After a year of unemployment, a *Pôle Emploi* adviser suggested that she broaden her target by contacting companies of all sizes. For Solange, this would mean abandoning the sole quality criterion she had set, namely the work atmosphere, i.e. 'what counts most' and was 'non-

negotiable'. She did not follow this recommendation. Next, she turned to a voluntary sector organisation supporting unemployed people, where she was given another piece of advice: to establish direct, less formal relationships with the small companies she had targeted, as a way of overcoming the embarrassment she had identified. To this end, she reactivated her professional network, and was also put in touch with a few contacts of volunteers at the organisation. Believing that effort always 'pays off', and given that she had, from the outset, been able to set a goal combining what she values in a job with realistic expectations, she was clearly fairly confident of getting back to work.

Solange: I'm fighting, I will fight. But not to just find myself up against brick walls – that's not what it's about. And the coaches at 'Booster' (fictional organisation name) were really good for me. They helped me see more clearly.

Interviewer: To see more clearly, yes?

Solange: In terms of my goals – which are what matter most to me. I was unsure of what to do next, and it made me a bit anxious. And as we talked together, I said what I was really thinking – that the work atmosphere was all that was left for me. They're very caring, and we looked at how we could make my connections more personal, go through networks, to make them more attractive.

As Solange's case shows, adjustments to occupational expectations can occur right from the moment of job loss, and can be of great magnitude. This early adjustment happens in response to anticipation of major difficulties in accessing employment, and to difficulties considered insurmountable by significant others – and when professionals and family and friends agree with each other, these beliefs seem to solidify. Unemployed people who accept this moderation are seeking to protect themselves from the risk of discrimination, because of their age or ethnic

origin for example. Having often had a continuous professional career, they experience unemployment as a leap into the unknown, fraught with danger. With few levers to improve their employability, they moderate their expectations. However, they do not intend to sacrifice these completely, and they maintain specific requirements, all the more so when they find the support of advisers or trainers. The scope of this revision is becoming a key issue over time. And it depends on the strength and convergence of the advice given - and even the pressure exerted - by institutional contacts, as well as on the material living conditions. If Solange was still resisting after more than a year of unemployment, others living in less favourable material conditions, are more likely to succumb – even without necessarily being convinced of the effectiveness of taking such an option.

Suffering disorientation and abandoning expectations

Other unemployed people are forced to give up the career prospects they had successively envisaged. They become increasingly disorientated as their occupational expectations disintegrate and fade. With no point of reference to guide their job search, they find themselves drifting aimlessly. And they're left with the prospect of taking any job.

This process of disorientation is clearly visible in Latifa's story. She was 43 years old, had left Algeria as a teenager and had limited work experience. She is dysgraphic in French, which means that writing it is difficult for her. Married to a car worker, she had raised her five children without working outside the home. More recently, she had worked for short periods, as a cleaner. Dissatisfied with this, she had registered as unemployed 15 months earlier, in a bid to get a better job. She wasn't receiving any unemployment benefit because she worked for too

short a time. At the time of the interview she was working 6 hours a week for a private household.

For her, looking for a job meant breaking with a past in which she has been undervalued: she was unable to 'earn enough to live on'. Her plan was to become a care assistant, like some of her acquaintances, also women from the Maghreb. She painted a rosy picture of this job, which would combine the advantages of a full-time job with a stable contract, and work that was both 'more human' and less tiring. Then a *Pôle Emploi* adviser informed her that she would have to undergo training before she could do this job. She did not see herself 'going back to school', and abandoned all efforts to apply, or find funding. And she decried the 'idiotic regulations' that were holding her back, thus demonstrating her powerlessness.

It's sad to see this. I'm stuck. He said to me, yes, you need training, it's compulsory. I had pictured myself doing the job. It really brought me down to earth. What could I hope for? I can't move forward, and all that stuff, well I don't get it. I know how to look after people, talk to them a bit, clean them up and so on. I say to myself, a hospital can take me on and I'll show them how I work. But no, that's too much to ask.

Forced to revise her occupational expectations, she came up with alternative paths that are more accessible, because they do not demand training. She mentioned a range of potential jobs, the list getting longer as she went along: market vendor, childminder, waitress, packer, school service woman. And as she talked to people around her (cousins, neighbours, friends, relations), who she considered her peers, more ideas sprouted. She began to project herself into their situations, seeing their jobs as potential leads. Her occupational expectations were being shaped and reshaped in a continuous movement. And no professional played any role in opening these

new windows, probably because she received little support as a result of not being in receipt of benefits.

Positioned on the low-skilled fringes of the workforce, the jobs she was targeting are the subject of disparate jobseeking activities. These differences reflect Latifa's unequal levels of attachment to her targets – some of which were very quickly abandoned. Every single time, the search resulted in refusals – or, more often, no-response at all. This accumulation of failures meant that her goals became vague, and her occupational expectations blurred. At the end of the interview, Latifa insisted on her unlimited availability and flexibility: She said she was 'willing to do anything', without expressing any specific goal, other than to work. Having abandoned her original target and then the litany of alternatives, all that seemed left was uncertainty and bewilderment. Far from allowing for her to develop relationships, the search for a job has led her to a dead end. This led to growing disorientation as time went by and the duration of unemployment increased.

Interviewer: How do you see your situation on the labour market now? What are your prospects, do you think?

Latifa: The future (she sighs). The future, I don't know. Look, I'm ready to work. I'll do anything. That's the worst part. I'm not picky, I'm not going to have a tantrum. Then... I'm lost. Because what's left, once you've tried everything? I try. Knock on all the doors. It's the unemployment game. It's hard sometimes, every avenue is closed. Sometimes I don't know what to do anymore.

The interview with Latifa shows how the revision of occupational expectations can take the form of a growing sense of disorientation. Initially dictated by the shutting down of a highly-

valued option, the revision takes the form of a nomadic movement, guided only by chance encounters and the projections they give rise to. The resulting flexibility is an expression of an insecure quest for employment, rather than an alignment with institutional injunctions or professional advice. This disorientation particularly concerns unemployed people who combine unfavourable characteristics to find a job. Firstly, they have not worked much (or not recently), so are marginalised in the labour market and have little socialisation in its functioning. Then they have few connections with professionals, or are poorly supported – especially if they are not in receipt of benefits – so that they have to rely on their close circle of friends and family who provide irrelevant advice. The availability and flexibility of expectations are claimed to be answers to the difficulties of access to employment, but faced with an accumulation of failures they lead to aimless wandering on the labour market. In a few cases, this spiral seems to have been broken, when professionals have managed to familiarise these disorientated unemployed people with job search knowhow.

Resigning to downgrading and diversifying targets

Other unemployed people experience repeated failures in their attempts to get a job, even though they prefer targets close to their previous experience. Then, they resign themselves to adapting their expectations by diversifying their targets. These revisions reflect a process of downgrading that is self-perpetuating and tends to become stronger over time, making initial occupational aspirations increasingly fragile.

André gives an exemplary account of this process of downgrading. He spent 28 years working in various industrial jobs. At the age of 47, he was living in social housing with his wife (who was working part-time for a local authority) and youngest son, who had a temporary job in the

handling sector. It had been 14 months since André lost his job at an SME in the food sector, as part of a downsizing exercise. He was getting unemployment benefit of 1,100 euros, and this represented a good half of the household income. He has been unemployed twice in his life – most recently four years ago.

André had already experienced ‘the fear of remaining unemployed’. And like he did last time, he intended to take advantage of the public employment service: in the absence of a job offer, he expected advice. His employment adviser offered him two training courses – one on job search methods and the other on job search and prospecting the labour market. His job search was that of a star pupil, following instructions to the letter, almost blindly. For example, rather than focusing on the agri-food sector, he explored every industrial sector in which there were jobs for unskilled workers. With the help of a trainer, he redesigned his CV, organising it around his skills, rather than around the jobs he had held. He was incapable of defending this approach to his CV (indicating either an applied or a submissive relationship to the recommendations he had been given) and this led him to offer it up to the interviewer for an opinion.

Interviewer: Okay, I get it. I can see your CV and everything. What about you? What do you think of it?

André: I’m not saying I got everything right. My CV has completely changed with this skills thing, as I’ve shown. They say this is the modern way. But what’s the outcome? It seems like it doesn’t... in the end, the result isn’t that great. So it’s a shame, to do all that – and then this is what you end up with.

He thought he had wasted his time, and was disappointed not to have achieved anything, even though he’d ‘done everything right’. André felt his setbacks could be explained by the strong

deterioration of the local industrial fabric, and considered two options. The first of these was to search beyond local boundaries (though because of his wife's job, he would be unable to move house). The second, following a neighbour's advice, was to apply for jobs as a labourer in the surrounding municipalities. He put the failure of this approach down to the 'string-puller' not being influential enough.

Eight months into his period of unemployment, André had a lengthy meeting with his *Pôle Emploi* adviser, who observed that finding a job was turning out to be more difficult than anticipated, despite the effort put in, which was acknowledged by the adviser. Diagnosing an impasse, the adviser steered André in a new direction by observing that the blue-collar job offers coming in were overwhelmingly for short-term contracts. The adviser concluded that André should align himself with these offers, and recorded this on André's file. André considered this 'prescription' illegitimate, and reasserted his commitment to secure employment. However, he did not object. Not only did he not object – he also altered his job search to line up with this, always doing as he was told ('obeying', as he put it). This netted him a 4-week contract in a paper mill, where he was not kept on. For André, this new experience was a negative one, reinforcing his belief that 'precarious' jobs are better suited to young people (such as his son, who is a temp) than for people like him.

André: I have to obey, I can't rebel. I'm chomping at the bit. I don't know, all these insecure jobs, it's not right. All I'm asking for is a normal job. Anyone would think it was a dream. Seriously, what's going on here?

Interviewer: For you, these casual jobs are not something you want?

André: I grit my teeth, I have to. I can't afford to turn my nose up – I have to earn money, I have no choice. But if I have to start from scratch with each contract, well no, I say no to that. At my age it's degrading – that stuff's for the youngsters.

André's case illustrates a deterioration of occupational expectations in the course of repeated revisions. Advice and injunctions issued by professionals have pushed him to broaden his targets to blue-collar jobs across all industrial sectors, to modify his jobseeking methods, and then to move into temporary jobs, which further aggravated his situation. Little by little, he became resigned both to the constraints of the local labour market and to the advisers and other professionals responsible for mediating it. Downgrading is not limited to the unskilled unemployed, as it can affect job stability, pay levels, working conditions and so on. This noteworthy alignment on the properties of job offers is the most frequent case in our corpus. It affects unemployed people from a range of professional backgrounds, often combining solid experience with periods of unemployment. They therefore have a certain familiarity with the labour market, and above all with its difficulties. And they try to adapt to these difficulties by diversifying their targets. They also rely on the support of institutions, so the advice given by professionals encourages or accelerates downgrading. This revision builds as the duration of unemployment lengthens, tracing a path that is largely irreversible. But the dynamics of downgrading also give rise to ambivalence, combining, in varying proportions depending on the material constraints of the unemployed, resignation and the hope of better opportunities.

Holding a resistance with forming back-up plans

Finally, other unemployed people maintain their occupational expectations despite the difficulties in fulfilling them. This resistance is based on two pillars: the belief that these

difficulties are surmountable and a very strong emphasis on occupational targets. This resistance is tempered by the mention of contingency plans that could be put in place in the event of a bottleneck.

Olivier's story is a good illustration of this process of resistance. Aged 32 when we interviewed him, Olivier had studied marketing at a reputable higher education establishment. He had followed this up with two middle management jobs in the retail sector. He resigned from the first (to 'enrich' his experiences) after four years, and left the second at the end of a 2-year contract. His partner is an architect who works in an urban planning agency. After ten months of unemployment, he was receiving benefit of 1,800 euros, and this represented 40% of the household income.

Olivier saw this journey through a period of unemployment as an opportunity to improve his professional situation, and presented the non-extension of his contract as a quasi-choice ('It didn't bother me – far from it'). He had a very clear idea of what he wanted to do. His goal was both close to the lost job, and consistent with his training: 'a good job in marketing or advertising'. But he also wanted a part-time job, or one with a lot of freedom, so that he could cultivate his passion for wine, visit winegrowers and organise tastings, etc. It was impossible to separate his occupational expectations from a still-nascent plan to invest in a new activity, alongside his job. Olivier's words were not short on ambivalence. On the one hand, he firmly defended his choices, confident in his chances of making a success of them. On the other, he formulated doubts that he attributed to friends and family, adopting an ironic tone that allowed him to distance himself from these potential reservations.

Olivier: I have references, so in terms of that, it's bulletproof. I mean, my problem isn't about proving myself competent. My task is to convince an employer to recruit me on my own terms. Because flexible hours and part-time offers don't really exist. This is what I'm up against.

Interviewer: I understand. And how do you see it working out, this challenge?

Olivier: I'm not saying it will be easy. But it's my project, and I'm not about to let it go. I'm in my thirties, I graduated from HEC [a renowned business school], I've already proved myself. No, no. It's true that my girlfriend sometimes says I want to have my cake and eat it (laughs).

In the following discussion of his interactions with potential employers, Olivier makes more tangible mention of the risk of having out-of-step expectations, of failing to get anyone to agree to his personal requirements, and thus of finding himself at a dead end. He doesn't say much about these interviews, but seems to see them as tests of his own perspective. The result is the introduction of a fresh tension that runs through his story. On the one hand, he defends the robustness of his choices, and rejects any compromise. On the other, he does set out other perspectives that modulate or soften his main objective. In the course of the interview he sets out three options, as follows: 1. Take on assignments in advertising (either as a salaried employee or as a subcontractor), though experience tells him that this requires an intense and continuous commitment, if he is to avoid becoming marginalised. 2. Take on a less qualified position in his field, one that is more compatible with part-time work – but he fears letting his skills go to waste, and losing professional credibility. 3. Look for a 'pure food job' that would allow him to prioritise his investment in wine – though he fears this would be a point of no return; it would mean that he would have 'burnt all his bridges'. These options are themselves subject to tension: even though they appear more attainable because they are based on a

renunciation of certain requirements, they also have the disadvantage of weakening the priority objective to the point of making it impossible to achieve. In this sense, his concessions do not provide any genuine alternatives to the preferred target. They have the status of secondary alternatives – transitional solutions if unemployment drags on, ‘loopholes’ considered only as a failsafe. Even as he lists them, Olivier downplays these options and distances himself from them, repeatedly demonstrating his attachment to his primary target.

Olivier: Seriously, assuming that my unemployment goes on for a while, this does give me some leads. Well, I say leads, but still – it’s not the future for me. But it’s still good to know that there are some – let’s call them, escape routes. It’s more a matter of, in an emergency, say, well there’s a solution that, while it might not move me forward, could protect me from going under.

Interviewer: Yes, so have you done any research into these ideas, or not?

Olivier: Research? No. (slightly offended) No? Why not? There’s no point, is there. I’m not on my last legs. If I need to, I’ll look, and I’m sure it won’t be difficult. But I’m not going to rush into it. Why would I? It isn’t part of my plans at the moment. It’s not on my mental map.

Here, the revision of occupational expectations is organised around resistances whose strength is put to the test of the labour market. Based on his previous experience and career path, and taking into account his own strong personal requirements, Olivier has identified a precise target. Yet he also mentions subsidiary options that he could take up temporarily if necessary, but which he does not value. Beyond this case, the process of resistance expresses a specific positioning on the labour market since it is viewed as a set of opportunities to test occupational expectations and try to impose one's choices, and not as a sum of constraints weighing on the

hierarchy of preferences. This logic of resistance is most strongly expressed by those unemployed people most confident of their employability (whether because of the qualifications they hold or because of previous deliberate/successful mobility experiences), and by those who develop their own personal networks on the fringes of institutions they are devalue or neglectful of. These are the people best equipped to resist both the material pressures of unemployment (which implies that they are not exposed to excessive material insecurity) and the pressures applied by others involved in the job search – be they recruiters, career advisers or family and friends. The mention of back-up plans as secondary options shows, however, that resistance is more and more uncertain over time.

5. Conclusion

Our objective was to enrich studies of job search by analysing it from the point of view of unemployed people. To this end, we made three departures from the literature on job search, namely: to prioritise analysis of the job sought over that of the search methods used; to grow our understanding of this target job from the point of view of unemployed people rather than on the basis of standardised descriptors; and to position the job within the time frame of the job search process, rather than capturing it instantaneously.

Five main results emerge from our analysis. First, unemployed people's job expectations are not fixed; rather, the targets initially defined evolve in the course of the job search. Second, these revisions are supported by the occurrence of multiple events and activities during the search – especially in terms of relationships with multiple others in which information, views and beliefs about both personal situations and job offers are exchanged. Third, reinforced by both experience of job search uncertainties and difficulties in accessing employment, these

revisions are invariably downward, tracking a pathway of occupational downgrading. Fourth, this trend is broken down into highly-differentiated processes, called: moderation, disorientation, downgrading and resistance. Fifth, these revision processes are subject to tensions and ambivalence between an initially-valued target (which moves away to varying distances or at varying speeds) and downgraded substitutes that are perceived as more or less inevitable. The results are set out in the table below. The comparison highlights the differences between the revision processes and shows how they are combined with different relational (which relationships and with which other people) and biographical (which previous pathways and how these are perceived) elements.

Insert table 2 here

This processual approach to the target job enriches our knowledge of job search (Klehe and Van Hooft, 2018) in several ways. Job search is not only a set of behaviours (searching) but also a configuration of the targeted objective (employment). Upstream of access to employment, it is a process of legitimising employment norms and accepting offers as they stand. As a result of the steps they take, the events they experience, their interaction with others, including both those they meet in institutional spaces and family and friends, the job search experience represents a secondary socialisation of jobseekers. These others are generally seen as relational resources that can be mobilised to access information or employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1974; Lin, 1999). However, our analysis shows that these networks are also channels for the circulation of preferences and beliefs about what is achievable or reasonable, and thus contribute to the revision of occupational expectations. This is an area that demands further exploration, as we still know little about the role played by social relations in job search experiences (McDonald, 2010). Our results show a wide variety of relational configurations. Institutional others have varying weight, play contrasting roles and are invested with different

expectations. And there is just as much heterogeneity among the other actors, whether they are close acquaintances, more extensive personal networks or specialist contacts. Relational configurations are important in the job search experience. Analysis of their effects on the revision of occupational expectations would therefore merit specific investigation.

Revisions of occupational expectations are also dependent on the social characteristics of unemployed people. Some studies explain unemployed people's unequal propensity to broaden their occupational targets in this way (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). Our results also associate the processes identified with the profiles of unemployed people, and thus with social inequalities. They invite us to consider the weight of unemployed people's employability – defined as a hybrid property combining the characteristics of previous career paths (which mark out the perimeter of possible jobs) with the interpretations and beliefs of unemployed people relative to their positions with regard to employment. The biographical components of the revision processes are contrasting, as if each type of revision reflected - in interaction with the role of significant others - different positioning on the labour market, i.e. both assignments to positions and evaluations of these positions. However, our sample size is too small to draw any solid conclusions on this point, especially as these variables are far from simple. But there is no doubt that the revisions pathway depends both on unemployed people's actual situations – and characteristics such as the material and financial situation can influence these revisions, speeding up or slowing down them – and on how these situations are perceived – both by themselves and by significant others involved in their job search.

Lastly, our investigation invites us to reflect on the role played by activation policies and their agents in the revision processes examined. We know that sanctions or benefit reductions lower the quality of post-unemployment jobs in terms of wages, occupational level and job duration

(Arni et al., 2013; van den Berg and Vikström, 2014). Our results show that this downward revision is triggered during the job search, and outside any sanction or even control procedure. The revision of professional expectations is a major component of the job search, and the reduction in the aspirations of the unemployed is discussed, negotiated and even imposed through the many events and meetings that punctuate the job search. Indeed, we have stressed the fact that unemployed people's narratives call upon multiple frontline professionals (private consultants, public employment service advisers, trainers, volunteers, etc.). These narratives show that these professionals play an active (and sometimes prominent) role in revision processes, through diagnoses, advice and recommendations. These professionals are co-producers of the reference points and guidelines that unemployed people need, if they are to orient themselves on the labour market. If this role is to be fulfilled in a climate of negotiation or persuasion, rather than coercion (Penz *et al.*, 2017; Senghaas *et al.*, 2019), then the centrality of the interpretative dimension of interactions with professionals must be acknowledged. And an insistence that job search (far from being a simple matter of procedures and techniques) involves beliefs, values and symbols, can contribute to this.

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Table 1: Sample characteristics

| | | |
|---|--|----|
| Sex | Men | 28 |
| | Women | 29 |
| Age | Under 30 | 11 |
| | Between 30 and 39 | 19 |
| | Between 40 and 49 | 18 |
| | 50 and over | 9 |
| Duration of unemployment | Between 8 and 11 months | 15 |
| | Between 12 and 18 months | 23 |
| | Between 19 and 24 months | 14 |
| | Over 24 months | 5 |
| Level of training | No qualifications | 14 |
| | Vocational secondary school qualification | 11 |
| | Baccalaureate (8 of which were 'vocational') | 15 |
| | Qualification representing 2 years of higher education | 8 |
| | Qualification representing at least 3 years of higher education | 9 |
| Family situation | Alone | 20 |
| | Alone with dependent children | 10 |
| | With a partner without children | 9 |
| | With a partner and dependent children | 18 |
| Employment prior to unemployment | Identified themselves as managers (in banking and insurance, chemicals, retail trade, logistics) | 6 |
| | In intermediate occupations (technician, salesman, site manager, accountant, social worker), | 9 |
| | Employees (in business services such as cleaning, security, transport, or in personal services such as home help, or in retail trade) | 21 |
| | Industrial workers (in more or less qualified positions in the plastics, automobile, logistics, food-processing and mechanical industries) | 20 |
| | Shopkeeper who went bankrupt | 1 |
| Unemployment benefit | Unemployment insurance benefit (550 to 2200 euros) | 32 |
| | 'Active solidarity income' (530 to 910 euros) | 14 |
| | No benefit | 11 |

Table 2: Occupational expectations revision processes

| | | | | |
|--|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Persistent tensions in the revision processes | Decide on a moderation | Suffer disorientation | Resign to downgrading | Hold a resistance |
| | + | + | + | + |
| | Maintain requirements | Accept any job | Hope of better opportunities | Design subsidiary options |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Positioning in the labour market | Fear of discrimination Protecting oneself | Being isolated Losing oneself | Diversifying targets Adapting oneself | Opportunities for testing Imposing oneself |
| Biographical elements | Professional break-up Endangerment | Weak job experiences Marginalisation | Strong job experiences Vulnerability | Good employability Self-confidence |
| Relational elements | Institutional supports Seeking various advices | No institutional support Withdrawing into close circle | Dependence on institutions Expecting for advices | Devaluation of institutions Own personal networks |