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Engagement and Alienation among Manchester's Unemployed

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore some potential ramifications of what I see as an emergent notion of engagement, which is being utilised across spheres of work and non-work in the UK today. I do this through an analysis of the experiences of the contemporary unemployed in Manchester. I shall argue that, though new discourses champion engaged attitudes towards work and life as preferable to a cynicism and disinterestedness fostered during foregoing modes of work, urges to prompt such an outlook have unexpected consequences. For Manchester's unemployed population, institutions that aim at promoting their fuller engagement in work and its acquisition have led to unforeseen difficulties and now inform an intrusive disciplinary regime of jobseeking. As these state exhortations to seek work meet the current job market however, the will to engage in work is stunted. Ironically, then, where employability discourse aims to create engaged new working subjects, it contributes to an antithetical condition: that of a new yet familiar mode of alienation.

Introduction

'I do what they tell me to do, and then I do my job-search,'
Unemployed person in Manchester work club, 2014

The statement above 'I do what they tell me to do, and then I do my job-search' is the expression of an exasperated unemployed person I met in a work club in Manchester. He was describing his experience looking for work in the current job market. He had been unemployed for several years, had re-trained by gaining a degree from a Manchester University, but has since failed to find work. From the time of his redundancy from his previous job in computer programming, he has found himself caught up not only in the task of looking for work in Manchester, but in new forms of intervention the UK government currently make upon unemployed people. In order to keep receiving unemployment benefits, a person who is out of work must now prove to The Job Centre (the centralised UK labour exchange and benefits agency) they are looking for work. The reforms aim at the avoidance of what is known in quasi-official parlance as benefits culture: a slovenly loss of aspiration brought about by the dissipation of the habits and disciplines of work, a condition unemployment is seen to encourage. These reforms and the relatively new sector of the economy, which emerges under the name employability, now look to overcome this problem by promoting, measuring, and ensuring a re-engagement of unemployed workers with acquiring work. The irritation my interlocutor expressed is that, in his case, this has not worked, but has instead simply led to official and unhelpful injunctions being made upon his life. He wants to work and has done everything in his power to re-train himself and successfully re-enter the job market. Despite this effort, the Job Centre and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) still intervene in his life, pushing him to prove he is doing what he is supposed to be doing: looking for work.

In this paper, I argue that the concept of engagement is instrumental in producing the frustrated state of this unemployed person and others like him. The concept of engagement is currently gaining ground in the working lives of people within the UK (including anthropologists). It was also featured in the title of the RAI postgraduate conference of 2015, held in Manchester, 'Anthropologies of Engagement', which resonated curiously with a topic that emerged during my 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork with unemployed people. Engagement is a concept utilised by employability tutors in their interactions with unemployed people, re-training, and motivating them as they negotiate the UK job market. I suggest this common use of terminology within the spheres of both anthropology and employability is no coincidence, but rather indicative of a broad-scale shift in ideology

surrounding work, labour, and activity. I show how concerns to engage and motivate unemployed people in finding work now engender and legitimise disciplinary techniques that control, measure, and surveil this population (Foucault 1977).

In the life of the unemployed, the urge to ensure work-seeking engagement often fails due to shifts in the past 40 years in the nature and quality of waged work. Engagement becomes an exercise in the appeasement of bureaucracy, a ticking of boxes leading to new forms of alienation. One cannot understand the experience of Manchester's unemployed without first understanding the benefit reforms which have been implemented in the UK over the last couple of decades. After electoral victory in 1997, the New Labour government set about simultaneously reforming both the UK benefit system and the central labour exchange. The two were merged under the heading of Job Centre Plus which fused the tasks of claiming benefits and looking for work. In the process, the receipt of unemployment benefit, previously seen as monetary compensation for a structural problem, became conditional upon carrying out certain criteria (Dwyer 2004). An element of reciprocity was added to this exchange and, in order to receive a benefit, a claimant now had to prove they were both willing to work and actively seeking work. A succession of schemes was implemented from 1998 onwards, such as the New Deal (see Herd and Patterson 2002), which was quickly scrapped and followed by a new version of the New Deal. These schemes placed unemployed people into partially subsidised working roles in order to assure their ability and willingness to work was not lost in the absence of fulltime work. Unemployment benefit itself was re-titled Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and in this move, the problem of unemployment was re-understood. It was no longer a structural problem or systematic failure, but an issue to solve through the improvement of the workforce's employability (Rogers 2004). One's own employment became a matter of personal responsibility. From these discursive shifts, an entire sector of organisations, networks, and individuals developed to implement them. The outcome has come to be known in official circles as the employability sector. This relatively new sector offers unemployed people training, guidance, and support in order to increase their effectiveness in a competitive job market through fostering a greater sense of unemployed workers' engagement with work.

What does engagement mean in this context? An online consultancy (Engaging for Success 2014) promoting engaged working practices defines the term in the following way:
We want everyone working in the UK to want, and be able, to give their best each day, so that each day is a great day at work, and that workplaces in the UK are thriving, growing and developing through the commitment, energy, and creativity of the people that work in them.

The engaged outlook on work promotes an enthusiastic zeal for work. A person should not simply work to earn money, but should cherish the opportunity to utilise daily their passions and creativity in the work place. Such an outlook was present among the employability tutors I worked alongside during research. An effort was made to encourage unemployed people to envision work as something to be cherished. Goals and ambitions were located within the unemployed person themselves and, once found, the unemployed person would rediscover their passion for work. This process would increase their chances of finding employment, as well as generally improving their lives. The term engagement is also used by the Job Centre officials to describe degrees of participation in the task of job-seeking. In fact, as I show below, one can be sanctioned for failing to do so. The interventions made by the employability sector and the Job Centre Plus, I suggest, both stem from a similar discourse. Ideas of engagement in both anthropology and within the various institutions, which now intervene on the life of the unemployed person, come from the same epistemological shift. That is, the re-understanding of one's work and task as something which should be engaged with faithfully.

This engaged working outlook pits itself in opposition to what might be considered alienated approaches to work. Alienation, according to Pappenheim (1954: 12-13; see also Marx 1939 [1844]), involves an internal split between one's daily activities and one's sense of self. It is not so long since scholars were concerned with work as a source of such alienated human outlooks. Developments within capitalist production during the Fordist era, such as the increasing distance of workers from the means of production (Carrier 1992), processes of de-skilling (Braverman 1974; Nichols and Beynon 1977: 17), and loss of ownership of the means of production (Wright-Mills 1951) which this mode of production entailed, were thought to have contributed to a more general 'deadening of life' (Fromm 1960: 78-79). Workers during this time were, due the nature of factory work, thought to be involved in work cynically, for a wage only, and sought satisfaction outside of their working lives (Sennett and Cobb 1972). Such cynicism is the antithesis of current thinking about work and its acquisition. The disciplined but mentally sluggish robot required by industrial production is no longer sought after (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 58), as current management orthodoxies cultivate a more complete involvement between worker and task (Kunda 1992). Whatever working activity one is involved in, it is best to be fully engaged. Whereas managers of successful companies seek out active, lively employees while fostering a sense of involvement in organisational goals (Kunda 1992), the state also now looks to assure this type of engagement in jobseeking (the official title for looking for work). Disinterestedness and cynicism should be replaced by a zealous, working outlook. Employability and new approaches to dealing with the problem of unemployment are animated by this thinking.

The success of the employability project, which attempts to engage unemployed people in jobseeking through rigorous training, depends on having enough work for the entire population. What do people engage with, for example, if they cannot find work? My research suggests the completion of this project is not likely. Here, place and history become important, as Manchester's specific historical experience informs its current predicament. Though Mollona (2009) shows how working-class skill and work survived the industrial revolution in Sheffield, it is difficult to make the same case for my interlocutors in Manchester, as the city's history is dominated by industrial production. Accounts from the mid-eighteen-hundreds (Faucher 1969 [1844]; Engels 2009 [1845]) show Manchester and its population as almost totally defined by the styles of work and life engendered by the factory and machine production. It should be no surprise then, that recent processes of de-industrialisation hit those employed in Manchester factories and warehouses particularly hard. Giordano and Twomey's (2002) statistical study of changes in the Manchester labour market show that Manchester lost a quarter of its manufacturing jobs between 1966 and 1975 alone (Giordano and Twomey 2002: 50-52). This change hit certain parts of the workforce harder than others, with Manchester losing 76,000 of its 'male jobs' between 1971 and 1997 (Giordano and Twomey 2002: 55). Though there have been efforts at regeneration, Peck and Ward (2002) suggest recent labour-market changes have affected the city's working class people, particularly men, most harshly. Though work in public services and council roles could be seen to house some of the workers dispossessed by the decline of industry, government cutbacks mean many people employed in this industry are finding themselves out of work, as well. In Manchester, due to the fact that employment is difficult to find, engagement with the task of jobseeking does not necessarily yield the successes current discourses of engagement assume it will. What happens then, as discourses of engaged work and the social interventions they engender meet with a declining low-skill job market? What is the outcome when ideals of full engagement in work and task are imposed upon actual social life?

Any orthodoxy can become a source of human difficulty, no matter how benign the original intent that brought it into existence. In Weber's (1976) eyes, there was nothing fundamentally wrong in the Protestant value of working for a calling. He lamented the fact, however, that whereas original puritan thinkers such as Baxter and his contemporaries had chosen to do this on religious grounds, the people of his own time had no such choice (Weber 1976: 181). By Weber's time, the idea of a calling had become a social dictum, a coercive injunction and therefore a source of alienation through its curtailment of human freedom. Weber felt that whereas the early Protestant chose to work for a calling, he was forced to perform his work as a calling whether he felt it to be true or not. The same could be said of current ideals of engagement. In the world of the unemployed person in Manchester, the concern of

assuring a deeper engagement with task (which in this case is the business of finding work or jobseeking) becomes disciplinary (Foucault 1977). That is to say that state interventions into unemployed lives enforce job market engagement through increased surveillance and threats of punishment. Given the decline of work in Manchester, however, the institutional push to engage unemployed people in work creates outcomes not foreseen by the state or the employability sector. In fact, although implementing a project that assures engagement may be based on wholesome intentions, for my unemployed interlocutors it often produced the exact opposite: the cynical, faithless ticking of boxes, and new forms of alienation.

Work Clubs and Employability

Work clubs are a relatively new but numerous feature of Manchester's job market and their existence is made necessary by the aforementioned changes in the discourses and practices surrounding unemployment. The task of these clubs is to assist people find work and negotiate the many tasks now expected of the unemployed person. I spent most of my research volunteering in the Central Work Club, located in a religious institution, and a part of a ten-week course aimed at equipping unemployed people for re-entry into work. This role involved assisting unemployed people with their CVs, job applications, and IT problems; furthermore, it offered a window into current conditions for unemployed people, the employability sector and how these interacted in and with the current Manchester job market.

Work clubs are usually found in organisations like charities, community centres, and other local groups. Although information about setting up a work club is found through the central government website, work clubs must often seek funding from other sources. This means their position in relation to government employability discourses is slightly ambiguous. At the time of research, the Central Work Club was funded through the Job Centre Plus and the DWP meaning it adhered to official principles of employability: getting people back into work through training. When I extended my research into communities outside of Manchester city centre, however, I found clubs funded by housing associations (also known as social landlord agencies which are the newly privatised version of UK council housing) within community centres themselves, or the National Lottery. Such clubs are less bound by official guidelines and more concerned with the maintenance of the communities in which they are situated, whereas government-funded work clubs must show their results and outcomes to keep their funding.

In spite of any differences, however, in all clubs one deals not only with the job market, but the many bureaucratic requirements the Jobseeker Engagement now entails. The most prominent of these is the website *Universal Jobmatch* (UJM). When a person applies to claim benefits or signs-on for the first time, they are asked to draw up a Jobseeker's Agreement with an advisor's assistance. This document serves as a contract between a claimant and a Job Centre advisor stipulating what criteria a person should fulfil in their job search. As stated, the unemployed person must prove they are actively seeking work and this must be shown numerically, by recording the number of jobs applied for, employers contacted, or other steps taken towards finding work. A Jobseeker uploads their CV to the UJM and can then use the site to send this to employers who have posted available positions. When a person signs on, they must create a UJM profile. Upon creating this profile, they are asked to tick a box prompting them to agree to a Job Centre advisor monitoring their job-searches. The site then acts not only as a means of looking for work, but as a means of surveillance to ensure people are fulfilling the criteria of their Job Seeker's Agreements, namely that they are actively engaging in jobseeking.

UJM and the job search had become central in the lives of the unemployed people that I met, and I became accustomed to seeing the orange and white of UJM emblazoned across the computer screens being used by work club members. This is the life of the jobseeker. These people spent much of the day attempting to find work and fulfil these criteria. People often come to work clubs following the Job Centre's instructions to complete a CV and open a UJM account. Very often, these people have no knowledge or experience using computers and so work clubs provide essential assistance in this. Volunteers write or re-write their CV (if they have one) to make it more attractive to employers. They then help create the UJM account, passwords and usernames so their CV can be uploaded. Several work club leaders I met told me that Job Centre constantly referred people with instructions to create online UJM profiles and email addresses so they could log on.

What is often lacking is people's knowledge of how to use computers. People often came in very anxious about being asked to carry out tasks they did not know how to complete. The work clubs did their best to combat this problem and their volunteers spent many hours assisting people with online forms and accounts. The point remains, however, that, due to the rigid stipulations of the Job Centre and the DWP, many unemployed people are pushed to apply for work using computers, and their endeavours are monitored through technologies they have little understanding of.

Jobseeker Agreements themselves seem to have become harder on jobseekers as time has passed. The ever-increasing number of jobs needing to be applied for, and thus the

increasing number of hours spent searching online, caused anxiety for my interlocutors. The longer a person is unemployed the more suspicion they seemed to be under from their advisor. This means long-term unemployed people (someone out of work for one year or more) often face harsher agreements, which make their benefits conditional upon higher application quotas. These quotas become difficult to fill due to the fact there are often too few appropriate jobs available. I often heard jobseekers protest 'there aren't that many jobs to apply for', and indeed many struggle to fill the quotas for this reason. Nevertheless, the quotas have to be filled and to get around this people apply for jobs they know they have no chance of getting. People thus spend much time filling in applications for unsuitable jobs. Moreover, long-term unemployed people tell me the response rate from jobs is also low. Men and women in the work clubs often exclaim they have applied for literally hundreds of jobs without getting a single response. Life has become a struggle to find jobs to apply for to tick the Job Centre boxes, as opposed to genuinely searching for work. This leads to a sense of frustration and irritation as they feel they are being pushed to do something pointless and impossible to achieve.

Underlying all this and ensuring the jobseeker's continued participation is the threat of sanction. A sanction is the cessation of benefits for a period of time, either: 4 weeks, 13 weeks, or 3 years, a Job Centre official told me. Sanctions are given for infringements of the Jobseeker's Agreement: non-attendance of a course an advisor suggested, failure to fulfil quotas set by advisors, or even unwillingness to 'engage adequately' (which might mean non-attendance or insufficient participation in a training course) at the Work Programme (another government-run programme for long-term unemployed people). People in work clubs are afraid of being sanctioned, as many are totally dependent upon benefits for their livelihood. Among this group, sanctions are spoken about constantly and their possibility acquired a folklore-ish mystique. The sanction was a real and constantly present threat in the lives of my unemployed interlocutors. I met many people who had been sanctioned and they told me that, with the removal of benefits, they became dependent upon family, friends, or food banks. Some became homeless and most of those sanctioned accrued large amounts of debt. Those who had not been sanctioned were reminded of the unpleasant realities of losing one's benefit money by the cases of those who had. This added to jobseekers' anxieties and thus the threat of sanction, through managing this anxiety, ensured continued participation in the benefits regime. We can immediately see the disciplinary nature of a project implemented as a means of ensuring the jobseeking engagement of the unemployed population (Foucault 1977). The newly labelled jobseeker is monitored and threatened with economic sanctions should they not produce consistent evidence of engagement in looking for work.

Engagement, Anger, and Alienation in the Work Club

This form of digitalised regulation and its effects upon unemployed people was never more visible than during an experience I had during my first visit to a work club in Miles Platting, an ex-industrial area on Manchester's East side. Early in my research I gained a contact for this particular work club and e-mailed the coordinator. The woman I e-mailed told me she helped to run a social landlording scheme, which organised and funded their own work club in their building every Tuesday. I was welcome to join her, she told me, and so I went along one afternoon in early February 2014. Social landlords, or housing associations, take up where council housing schemes (operational in the UK from the mid-1940s) left off. They are privately owned, as opposed to council housing which was state-owned, not-for-profit schemes providing low cost housing largely in disadvantaged communities. In an ex-industrial working class area like Miles Platting, a social landlord likely houses a large number of benefits claimants, as did the one I attended that day.

To get to Miles Platting, I walked through Manchester town centre, through a lively and upcoming central area of bars and restaurants called the Northern Quarter, and finally down Oldham Road towards an area just east of Manchester city centre. When taking this route, one quickly gets a sense of the reality of Peck and Ward's claim that Manchester is currently subject to both dynamic and regenerative transformation in the centre and an ongoing decline in the areas outside it (2002 3). The building housing the social landlord also contrasts with its surroundings. It looks new and slick, its metallic black frame and glass walls and windows making it stand out from its rundown setting. Upon arrival, you press a button at the front entrance to be let in by security, then follow the stairs, sign in at reception, and enter the work club. The club itself is a large room at the back of the building, big enough to fit a large table holding approximately 20 computers. There are also noticeboards at the side covered with job opportunity leaflets. The room is crowded and slightly humid, and there are fewer computers than there are people. Although I arrived almost exactly when the club is supposed to open, there were already people waiting in seats at the side of the room looking at the noticeboards until a computer became free.

I am given a warm welcome by two smartly dressed young women, one of whom I have been e-mailing. I ask them a few questions about the club and they say it is free to use for everyone living in the social landlord's property. How is it funded? They tell me that the company funds the work club. It does this for two reasons. Firstly, an agreement was made

between Manchester City Council (MCC) and social landlords in the city's most deprived parts to cooperate in improving these areas. This plan, like many around the city, involves improving the employability of the workforce in a given area and thus many social landlords began running and funding their own work clubs. This improves their public image. But several work club coordinators also inform me that social landlords have begun running work clubs not only for altruistic reasons. As stated above, if an unemployed benefit claimant fails to carry out the activities stipulated by their Jobseekers Agreement, they will be sanctioned, meaning they have their benefits taken away and will be unable to pay their rent. If they cannot gain access to a computer or are unable to carry out these stipulations, they may be sanctioned. If this happens on a large scale, then the social landlord loses the income flowing from tenants' rent. This work club, then, partly exists to assure the continuation of rent payments from unemployed tenants by helping them conduct online job-searches and thereby insuring the organisation's income.

Most members at this work club are from a working-class background. There is an air of concentration in the room and I notice, while talking to the coordinators, the familiar orange and white of UJM on almost every computer. Every so often one of the people working on the computers asks for help and while people are working, it is also clear they find operating UJM difficult. It was mentioned that what have been considered 'male jobs' (Giordano and Twomey 2002: 55) in manufacturing and manual labour have declined substantially in Manchester in recent years and the work club bears this out. Nearly all the clients are men aged between 40 and 60. The smartness and friendliness of the female coordinators contrasts with the appearance of the unemployed people here. They wear faded sports clothes from discount shops, old worn-out trainers, or boots that might have been worn for work. They wear old parker jackets and do not take off their hats despite being indoors. Some smell of cigarettes and all speak with a strong, working class Manchester accent. They are less forthcoming towards me as I am not familiar to them and they go about their business with a sense of hurried focus permeating the room. The atmosphere is thick. As I speak to more people it becomes clear most are local, have grown up in Miles Platting or the surrounding areas and, as is obvious from their accents, from industrial working-class backgrounds.

I sit in the corner, not wanting to impose myself or distract anyone from the work they are doing until a man in his late 40s asks for help with his UJM account. He needs help applying for a job. He says he has been unemployed for 3 years. He previously worked in a

local juice factory for 14 years. The factory had recently been bought by another company and temporary or precarious working contracts were introduced. The workers were given the opportunity for voluntary redundancy, but he decided to stay on despite what he saw as a degeneration of his working contract. The company let him go the following year and he has been unemployed since then. Recently, the Job Centre sent him on a work placement, unpaid work often encouraged by employability officials as a way of gaining work experience and re-engaging with work, and thought if he worked hard enough the employer would offer him a genuine contract. Gaining work experience often requires such unpaid labour. He says he worked well for two weeks without wages, 'the best worker in the place', but when the two weeks ended the company did not offer him a contract as he had hoped. He seems sad and frustrated while telling the story. His 14-year working career prior to becoming unemployed suggests he is perfectly capable of working and his efforts at his placement suggest he wants to work. Scholars have shown that for many working-class people hard manual work was a kind of badge-of-honour which came from the sense of one's ability to keep going in difficult circumstances (Lamont 2000) and one's importance in the functioning of the nation at large (Dennis, Henriques, and Slaughter 1956: 33). As we struggle through a UJM Job Application, these working values are made clear. This man wants to work, he values work and yet, though his values do not conflict with the official urge to push him to engage with finding work, he is unable to do so. This is not due to his laziness or lack of employability, but to the fact that there is no work for him. He speaks to me about his irritation with the zero-hour contract jobs on UJM, contracts through which a company can recruit new employees without the obligation to offer them any hours. 'Don't apply for 'em!' he tells me, 'they will just mess you about'. His irritation is not based on an unwillingness to engage or work, but on the exasperation he feels in attempting to engage with something not yielding the expected return.

This brings us to another concern in the lives of unemployed people in Manchester today: the degradation of low-skill work itself. One of the few women in the work club told me about her experience in work. This woman was in her late 20s or early 30s with a husband and children, all of whom she was supporting financially. She was wearing a nurse's uniform and I asked her where she worked. She said she worked in the newly privatised Care in the Community sector just as the previous interlocutor did. She began describing a familiar scene. She was on a temporary and unpredictable contract, which paid only according to what she worked. She had no idea how many appointments she would attend in any one day and thus how much money she would take home. Her time was also closely monitored,

with targets for the length of time spent with each patient, which, she felt, had little to do with their actual ailments. Occasionally she would rebel against this by telling the company 'this person needs help, if you don't like it, sack me.' Such rebellious action is dangerous in an environment where workers are easily replaced. She was also monitored through her mobile phone, as she had to log on to affirm her arrival at the appointment. She found this frustrating, as her time with the patient was already perilously short and she regarded the constant justification needless.

Her presence in the work club raises a question; if she is working on an almost full-time basis then what is she doing in the work club? Surely, the fact she is working means she does not have to search for work. She tells me she is looking for work because she finds the job difficult, badly paid, and unrewarding. 'It's not the work itself, it's the crap that goes with it,' she tells me. I saw her again a couple of weeks later and she seemed even more frustrated. I asked her what had happened and she said she had earned slightly more money one week and had phoned up the DWP to tell them, as she did not want to compromise her Working Tax Credits (a benefit in the form of wage replacement granted to low-income workers). The DWP misunderstood the situation and repealed these benefits. She then had to appeal for their restitution and again provide the reams of identification necessary in such a claim. I asked if her wages were enough to cover her while the tax credits were not available. She replied, 'No, they're shocking'. Even for this woman who worked full-time hours (when they were available), the money she earned did not cover her expenses. She then had to enter into more complex and bureaucratised situations with the state in order to collect benefits, topping up her wage, to make her life financially workable. This woman had not only engaged in jobseeking but had found and was maintaining work. Nevertheless, due to its low pay and highly bureaucratised nature, her life was no simpler than those of the unemployed people she was surrounded by. She had engaged. However, this had not led to any improvement in her quality of life.

Here are two examples of people who have engaged in work or work-related activities hoping to find a job and whose efforts have not been rewarded. Stories like these are common in work clubs. As attractive as the New Labour dream of assuring a deeper engagement between the unemployed person and the task of jobseeking may have been, in the world of my interlocutors there is little employment for them to engage with. If they are lucky, they might get a job like the woman mentioned above. Yet this is not the end to difficulties and for most who are working, zero-hour contracts, unreliable hours, poor wages, and increasingly complex bureaucratic processes mean that a general faith in work – one that had doubtless existed among working people previously (see again Lamont 2000) – is chronically undermined. Here, work is simply not worth engaging with.

This decay of faith in work has definite ramifications for how one engages with finding work. While I talk to these people about their working (or non-working) experiences, I can hear other conversations taking place. There are mutterings about sanctions or other work clubs. People have conversations about their discontent among themselves and with work club coordinators. I hear a stocky outspoken man explaining to one of the smartly dressed women that Miles Platting work club members need another place they can go to. I hear him say, 'You need to have one place open all the time, if you don't do enough job-search they sanction you, that's why people like us have to come here'. He comes over to make himself a complimentary cup of tea and I ask him what he was talking about. He tells me the work club is only open for an hour and a half per week (on every Tuesday) and they cannot do the stipulated amount of jobseeking in that time. Some Jobseeker's Agreements require as much as 35 hours' jobseeking a week and the Job Centre constantly pressures them to do that. Problems arise because they do not have computers and only rudimentary knowledge of how to use them. They therefore need the work club's resources to fulfil their quotas and avoid sanctions. Their only option, this man says while more people begin to crowd around us, is to take buses around Manchester to attend whatever work clubs are open. Their financial situation is so tight they can barely afford these buses and must continually ask the Job Centre to subsidise these daily journeys. His life, he says, is consumed with the daily struggle to access the resources allowing him to fulfil the Job Centre quotas and avoid sanction.

What goes without saying here, and what was substantiated above, is that these men and women no longer believe their efforts will get them work. Their experiences of work demonstrate that work has declined to the point it no longer yields the sense of worth and financial stability that they seek. These men and women, then, spend large amounts of time – up to a full working week – travelling around Manchester, applying for work without any hope of finding it. These endeavours are undertaken simply to tick a box saying this person has done what is required to avoid being sanctioned. 'That's what life is like for people like us', the man tells me. To return to our core themes, and to paraphrase Pappenheim (1954) once again, the business of jobseeking becomes the source of an internal split between one's values or one's sense of self and what one does for economic survival. The push to foster a more complete involvement in task (here manifested through the UJM, employability, and the current benefits regime) therefore contributes to the production of its antithesis: alienation in Pappenheim's sense of the word.

What is the result of this situation for the lives of today's unemployed people? As I speak to the first man, I see others beginning to pay attention. No sooner has he finished than a large man with a shaved head, tattoos on his hands, and wearing a battered old denim jacket begins speaking to me aggressively. The work club members have realised I am a researcher and that I empathise with their problems, thus they are eager to tell me about their lives. He points his large tattooed finger at me and says: 'getting a job: it's just a load of fucking shit!' He says he and his friend have recently been placed on 35-hour-a-week job-searches monitored via the UJM. Again, both had struggled to find work since being made redundant. The man in the denim jacket tells me he has been sanctioned twice already. He worked in Grimsby as a fisherman in his youth and then did more manual work in fish factories but, since moving to Manchester, could find no work. He is currently dependent upon his wife who works part-time, which unsettles him. His friend who is sitting next to him tells me he learnt to drive in the hope of working in deliveries, but there is now a new certificate costing £350 to qualify for this. This is money he cannot afford. Instead, both men spend most of their time doing as the last interlocutor: travelling around Manchester to different work clubs, applying for jobs they feel they will not get to avoid losing their benefit money. Their fury is evident in the way they speak: the pointing fingers, raised voices, and furrowed brows merging with impassioned monologues expressing their scorn for the Job Centre and the current state of the world. This scorn is underlain by the frustration that there is little they can do about it. Their only choice of resistance is refusal and this will simply lead to more sanctioning. In the words of many a jobseeker that I spoke to: 'They've got you over a barrel'. Rather than being joyfully engaged in their tasks, these people were furious at being pushed to engage in something felt to be pointless.

Finally, after explaining their situation, they point out a slim looking man with white hair sitting quietly at a computer. 'You wanna talk to him mate', they tell me; 'he's really bad with it'. They gesture him over and he comes and sits silently beside me like a child waiting to be spoken to. He looks ill. He cannot be more than 50, but his eyes bulge bloodshot and his skin is wrinkled. He wears a shirt and looks smart; however, his face tells the story of a man who has suffered serious distress of some description. He tells me he used to work in IT, but was been made redundant 25 years ago. He has not worked again since and has become obsessed with finding work but, as he says, has fallen into bad habits. Without the structure of work in his life, he sunk into depression and habitually slept through the day, staying up all night. 'I don't mean to', he says, 'it just happens'. He has also become terrified of the Job Centre and the sanction. He knows people who were evicted from their homes and made

homeless due to the sanctions, and he is terrified the same will happen to him. 'They've got that many ways of getting you now,' he says, and he is sure they will find a way to sanction him and make him homeless. At this point, his head falls and he begins to cry. As tears role down his face he admits he has been thinking about killing himself. 'All I need is a placement with the chance of a job at the end of it', he says through his tears. Whereas the large man in the denim jacket expressed his emotion about the situation in terms of rage, this man is driven to despair by his social situation, that benefit conditionality which forces him to engage or be sanctioned.

Concerns about engaging the unemployed person in the business of jobseeking has led to new difficulties compounding old ones, making the experience of unemployment yet more difficult. Leo Howe's (1990) ethnography of unemployed people in Northern Ireland depicts some of the difficulties unemployed people encounter. Stigma amongst themselves and their peers compliment isolation and shame they often feel. These social ills are now exacerbated by a disciplinary mechanism owing its existence to the widespread urge to prompt a fuller engagement of the unemployed person with the task of jobseeking. In the situation of the work club just described, a social landlord funds rooms, computers, and staff to help people apply for work despite the likelihood this will not happen for most of them. Despite its lack of success in finding its clients work, however, this company must continue to provide these services to ensure its unemployed tenants continue to fulfil the Job Centre's quotas and can thereby pay their rent. As chronicled by Howe (1990) and reaffirmed here, the state of unemployed peoples' living conditions would be difficult enough without the constant pressure exerted on them by the Job Centre, the UJM, and the new benefits regime. The push to engage the unemployed in the business of finding work is therefore central in the creation of an emerging sphere of social life in which jobseeking is only cynically engaged in. Moreover, the institutions which exist to implement such discourses become punitive when the unemployed fail to actualise them, leading to more pressure being placed upon unemployed people.

Although it is work itself that is failing people in Manchester, there has been no respite in benefit reforms making benefit claims conditional upon engagement in jobseeking. Despite the fact there are more unemployed people in Manchester than there are jobs (Herd and Patterson, 2002, 194), schemes and initiatives looking to re-engage unemployed people with work are increasing in number and intensity. As long-term unemployed people lose faith in work through their experience of repeated failures in the job market, the

current benefits regime comes to induce the very modes of alienation, which it attempts to remedy. Here, jobseeking is not only engaged in only superficially, but the institutionalised injunctions demanding continued engagement in this task provoke, as I have shown, a sense of outrage, frustration, anger, and despair.

Conclusion

Clearly, the term engagement differs in its valence and outcomes across a range of social settings. The figure of the engaged anthropologist looks different to the engaged unemployed person. Nevertheless, this paper has argued that either notion stems from a similar place discursively, only manifesting in different ways according to the social setting into which they are deployed. Ideas of engagement become coherent and achievable in some settings and impractical in others.

As manifested through the UJM, the urge to foster engagement among unemployed people becomes coercive. The institutional exhortations to engagement made by the Job Centre push people to engage in something they feel is not worth engaging in. Here, unemployed people do not choose to engage; they are forced to. Generally, their job market experiences undermine any chance of faithful engagement and their core life activity becomes ticking the boxes proving they have engaged while knowing this engagement is only superficial. To the social alienation unemployed people are likely to experience at some point (see again Howe 1990), they now have added anxiety, a direct result of the urge of successive governments to push the unemployed to re-engage, and of the repetitive search for jobs which their daily experience tells them is pointless. The fury and despair I found lingering beneath the surface in work clubs, I have argued, are a result of the internal split between a person's thoughts and actions (Pappenheim 1954). This split is in turn induced by their coerced participation in social dictates following on from orthodoxies of engagement. This is a state project, which tries to induce, assure, and measure engagement, but instead induces a new form of alienation, which I have shown to be harmful in the lives of my unemployed interlocutors.

As well as highlighting some of the contradictions and emotions involved in the difficulties of current unemployed life in the UK, I have also highlighted a potential problem of what I see as an emerging pre-occupation with the concept of engagement. Engagement in a task makes some sense if there is something the individual deems worth engaging with or when one actively choses to engage. However, as the concept becomes popularised, crystallised,

and manifest as an institutional injunction, as in the case of my unemployed interlocutors, it becomes blind to the social setting onto which it is imposed. In such instances, the urge for deeper and fuller engagement is enforced rather than chosen and, just as Weber (1976) argued regarding the calling, becomes coercive and problematic rather than improving human lives. The crystallisation and imposition of notions of engagement through working practices thereby achieve outcomes precisely opposite of their original intent: the faithless and anxiety producing ticking of boxes and new yet familiar forms of alienation.

About the Author

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