

P.J. Robertson

TITLE OF PAPER: Career capabilities in disadvantaged youth

Theme:

Theme II (Social justice).

Context/Scope:

Community contexts.

Abstract

Drawing on the “capability approach” of philosopher and economist Amartya Sen, this paper outlines a small empirical study to identify what kind of intervention may empower unemployed young people. Research interviews were conducted with 14 young people engaged in a support programme. Data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Participants reported detrimental effects of unemployment, and associated psycho-social difficulties prior to engagement in the programme. Team participation, overcoming fear, and diverse activities seemed to be powerful experiences during the programme. Growth in confidence, social re-engagement, and reconnection with life-career goals were outcomes of the programme. Whilst there was no single effective component, participants reacted uniquely to experiences, and became better able to deploy their existing personal resources as career capabilities to build their future.

Keywords:

Youth unemployment; social justice; social inclusion; capability approach.

Introduction

The capability approach is a way of thinking about promoting well-being and economic development originating in the work Amartya Sen (e.g. Sen, 1993). Its emphasis is on freedom, empowerment and human agency: enabling individuals to do and to be that which they have reason to value. The capability approach is abstract, and content free. It is best thought of not as a theory, but as a paradigm, or a framework for thought (Robeyns, 2005). As a result it is flexible and adaptable to many contexts, whilst retaining a focus on social justice. To apply the capability approach requires considerable work to contextualise and

operationalise the concepts in a way that is useful to the problem in hand.

There have been attempts to apply the capability approach to issues of career choice and career development, and to educational and vocational guidance including Robertson (2014), Galliot & Graham (2014), Picard *et al.* (2015), Skovhus (2016). A valuable first step in this work was the transnational “Workable” Project. This involved case studies exploring the application of the capability approach to youth in different European contexts (see Bifulco, 2012).

This study seeks to explore the experiences of young people who are NEET (not in employment education or training) as they engage with a support programme. Through the conceptual lens of the capability approach, the intention was to identify those elements of a support the participants found empowering, or moved them closer to being and doing that which they had reason to value. This is a small scale qualitative research project, funded by a grant for early career researchers awarded by the Richard Benjamin Trust, a small charity in the UK. The research was conducted with young unemployed people in urban Scotland, participants in a personal development programme run by another UK charity: the Princes Trust.

Methodology / Process

Participants were young people in the age range 18-24 and from diverse educational and social backgrounds. They were involved in the Princes Trust group programme. This is a 12 week programme for disadvantaged youth intended to re-engage them in work or learning. The programme highlights team-working and mutual support, and presented participants with a varied series of challenges including an outdoor adventure experience, a funding raising activity, communication skills training, and work experience. Semi-structured research interviews were conducted with 14 participants close to the end of their programme, enabling them to reflect back on the experience. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) following the approach outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

Results / Discussion

Analysis focused on three main areas (with three themes emerging in each):

- participants’ accounts of life before joining the programme and their experiences of unemployment,

- participants' recent experiences of engaging in the programme,
- participants' views of the outcomes of the programme i.e. their perceptions of the impact it had on them.

In terms of accounts of life before the programme, three main themes emerged. Firstly, participants described being isolated or reclusive, and several described symptoms of depression. It seemed clear that the detrimental psycho-social impact of unemployment was experienced in some form or another by nearly all participants. Secondly, there seemed to be an absence of career and life goals. In some cases individuals had successful experiences of work that had not been sustained: their life-career goals had been lost and not replaced. They became purposeless and talked in terms of 'not caring'. Thirdly, there were important factors unique to individuals, including major disruptive life events (such as migration or bereavement), periods of problematic drug and alcohol use. A minority had experiences of gang membership and associated criminality and imprisonment.

Turning to participants' experiences of the Princes Trust programme, there were three main themes emerging. Firstly, the peer group was important; perhaps not surprising in a programme that stressed team working. The great diversity in the group was challenging but also a benefit in terms of broadening horizons and a sense of having a shared experience in spite of difference. Several participants spoke of having fun. Peer support in coping with the stress of challenges was also identified. Secondly, the programme offered an experience of overcoming fear. This was most clear in accounts of an outdoor challenge that involved overcoming fear of heights, but it also featured in relation to giving an end of programme oral presentation. Participants spoke in terms of being gently encouraged to leave their comfort zone. These experiences seemed to result in a sense of achievement, and perhaps a sense that other stresses can be overcome. A third theme related to describing participation in the course as an important experience, a landmark or maturational experience. This was associated with a sense that a lot was done in a short space of time, a sense of being busy, and having grown up or changed. Nonetheless, it was clear that different participants found different challenges to be important or personally meaningful to them; there was no single activity or component of the programme that was valued by everyone.

Views of programme outcomes were overwhelmingly positive, with few reservations. Again three themes emerged in relation to participant's perceptions of what they took away from their

experiences. Firstly, greater confidence came through strongly as a shared experience. This meant a positive change in social confidence, self-esteem and an ability to express feelings and views. This has resonance with Egdell & McQuaid (2016) amongst others, who have stressed the importance of “voice” as a capability. It also meant positive change in both a global sense of personal agency, and in vocationally specific confidence. Secondly participants had discovered or recovered life-career goals. These might be specific occupations or industries to work in, or study plans. They were engaged in pro-active career exploration and job seeking. In the language of the capability approach, it seemed that identifying valued “beings and doings” enabled them to release pre-existing personal resources and begin to convert them to capabilities, which can be deployed in pursuit of a desired lifestyle. Thirdly and finally, participants had a sense of social relationships formed on the programme becoming lasting peer relationships and staff being an ongoing source of support into the future.

Conclusions / Proposals

There seemed to be clear evidence that the Princes Trust programme had positive benefits to participants, in spite of its short duration. No single ‘active ingredient’ was identified. Indeed the provision of both diversity and challenge in activities seemed to enable participants to react positively to elements that they found personally meaningful. The social context of these experiences is also important.

The capability approach can help to make sense of interventions by maintaining a focus on personal agency and social justice. It clarifies the goal of such programmes: to promote individuals’ career capabilities - to enable them to do and to be what they have reason to value. It suggests that programme content should support young people to find personally meaningful experiences and life-career goals for themselves. This is in stark contrast to the dominant public policy paradigm of labour activation, with the promotion of employability and rapid re-engagement with work as their objective (e.g. McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

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