

The death of unemployment and the birth of job-seeking in welfare policy: governing a liminal experience¹

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Abstract

The category of ‘unemployment’ is gradually being replaced with ‘job-seeking’, in contemporary welfare policy – driven by ‘liberal’ or neo-liberal politics. Here we attempt to go beyond the ‘deprivation theory’ of unemployment, emphasising how the experience of ‘unemployment’ or ‘jobseeking’ is shaping the way it is governed – drawing on the Foucault inspired governmentality approach. Firstly, we examine the apparatus of supervision, interventions and sanctions introduced in Ireland under *Pathways to Work*. Secondly, we analyse a set of interviews with job seekers in 2014, specifically focusing on interactions with the social welfare office, internships, sanctions and job-seeking activities. Building on these empirical investigations we suggest that unemployment/job-seeking can be understood as an artificially produced liminality, characterised by uncertainty, self-questioning, tedious time to be filled and frantic seeking to escape to a job, and, in many cases, repeated failure.

Keywords: unemployment, job-seeking, deprivation theory, governmentality, experience, liminality

Our provocative title doesn’t suggest that the rate of ‘unemployment’ will be reduced to zero, nor that ‘jobseekers’ are a new ‘class’ or ‘group’ *sui generis*; rather, following Foucault, we take discourses as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (2001: 48). Thus, ‘unemployment’ emerges from a long discursive history of political economy and social policy, successively implemented in poor houses, labour exchanges and social welfare offices. Such categories are still changing and ‘unemployment’ is only slowly being replaced by ‘job-seeker’ – more in policy than media discourse for instance. This Foucauldian approach emphasises that these definitions and

categories are not neutral, have a history, are subject to political contestation and may change; welfare policies may become harsher or more generous or transform in unpredictable ways.

Categories and categorisation are forms of power and knowledge which shape society. In 1954 the International Labour Organisation defined unemployment as being without work, available for and actively seeking work. Contemporary welfare regimes emphasise the 'active' element of seeking and contemporary welfare payments are given only to 'job-seekers'. Of course, there are other categories; pensions, disability, single-parent, family income supplement remain; some of these are automatic entitlements, others involve means-testing and demand job-seeking, making the 'working poor' quasi-unemployed. Meanwhile, unemployment has been re-categorised as job-seeking accompanied by contractualisation, monitoring, interventions and threats of sanctions to ensure constant and persistent 'labour market activity'. These elements constitute a liminal experience; the 'in-between' transition of enduring a spell of unemployment or job-seeking is not a pre-existing experience governed by welfare policy, but one constituted through governmentality.

While employees sometimes look for alternative employment, our concern here is 'job-seeking' as a governmental category, particularly as introduced in Ireland in 2012 through the *Pathways to Work* policy. Employees are simply not subject to the same categorisation, supervision and pressure when they seek work. However, the population effected by this category is not limited to the Live Register or the long-term unemployed, but all those moving between welfare and short-term jobs, part-time workers, youths seeking their first job and precarious workers. Even when the aggregate numbers of the unemployed are decreasing, the 'in-flow' into the Live Register still numbers thousands per month due to frictional unemployment, leading to spells of unemployment of varying lengths.² Government statistics measure 'long-term' unemployment at over 150,000, although this ignores internships and other training schemes numbering over 80,000. Individuals who encounter this new welfare category for longer or more frequently are subjected to more governmentalisation, which in turn may be negotiated and resisted, but gradually pressurises individuals to become 'jobseekers'. However, our aim is not to quantify the numbers subjected to governmentality, but to qualitatively investigate the experience of 'job-seeking'.

Empirically, this paper examines the new governmental measures within the social welfare office and analyses how these are experienced through in-depth interviews with 'jobseekers'. Theoretically, the paper argues that unemployment/job-seeking is not simply an economic experience but significantly created by governmental interventions. More speculatively, we suggest that unemployment/job-seeking is liminal, though less a meaningful rite of passage or a joyful carnival, but a tedious limbo punctuated by frantic job-seeking. Economic and policy discourses have long constructed unemployment

as a 'transition' (Foucault 2008), wherein an individual's worth is unclear until the labour market offers them employment; meanwhile, they are subject to suspicion, scrutiny and assessment combined with compulsory divulgence and attendance, training and other exercises to become 'job-ready' all backed up with threats of sanction. The interpretation of unemployment/job-seeking as liminal emerges through our analysis of the interviews.

Theorising unemployment

Generally, unemployment is considered the absence of work. 'Deprivation Theory' suggests the unemployed lack social goods accompanying work, particularly social status, networks and solidarity, regular activity, a sense of collective purpose and a structured experience of time. This thesis emerged from *Marienthal* (Jahoda *et al.* 2002), an exhaustive case study of an Austrian town in the 1930s that has become a sociological classic, and since taken for granted – in policy and media discourse, and among right and left in mainstream politics (Cole 2007). Importantly, deprivation theory explains the psychological, health and economic consequences of unemployment sociologically (Young 2012).

Jahoda (1982) recognised that Deprivation theory is salient where the culture of work or the 'work-ethic' pervades life so that unemployment is experienced as absence. For instance, even during mass unemployment in *Marienthal*, husbands suffered more psychologically than their wives, who continued with domestic work, undergoing comparable poverty but without the subjective and social deterioration triggered by unemployment. Indeed, Jahoda's theories extend beyond unemployment to a universalistic social-psychology of 'ideal mental health', yet, modern assumptions about work seem encoded in this model. Here 'work' means waged employment, typically in larger organisations. Defining 'work' theoretically is problematic (Edgell 2012), but what really matters is the institutional categorisation of work; if individuals are defined as 'employees', their remunerated activities are 'work'.

Problematically, deprivation theory does not address 'unemployment' in itself, but withdrawal of work. Certainly, individuals who become redundant are 'deprived' of earnings, yet some unemployed persons have never worked. Essentially, deprivation theory suggests that the experience of unemployment is precisely the 'lack' of the social and cultural conditions of work, but it does not examine this experience of 'lack' or 'absence'. Effectively, it theorises unemployment negatively, as a lack or absence of work, and therefore fails to explore or interpret what this experience is in itself. Furthermore, it neglects the ways in which the experience of unemployment is shaped by governmental institutions. As these shift historically the experience of 'unemployment' is reconstituted. Finally, by positing unemployment as the problematic absence of work, deprivation theory feeds into the presumption that work is paramount

in social life and full employment an axiomatic economic good, ignoring the question of how 'work' and 'non-work' are constructed by the state and society, which is surely a political question.

Certainly, deprivation theory improves on economic theories which posit unemployment as simply financially unpleasant or 'incentive' theories which suggest that the unemployed receive so much benefit that they do not seek work adequately, the so-called 'welfare trap'. These theories neglect the experiential dimension entirely, though even quantitative research demonstrates that 'unemployment is far from a pleasant experience even if the levels of social security benefits are comparatively high' (Ervasti and Venetoklis 2010: 136). Yet, within such research there is no disaggregation between different welfare regimes nor sufficient historical data to show how the experience of unemployment is changing. Recent approaches have differentiated between welfare regimes at the political level (Gallie and Paugam 2000, Esping-Anderson 1990), but research has only begun to explore how citizens experience these regimes (Brodkin and Marsden 2013, Boland and Griffin 2015).

More free time has been a goal of workers for centuries, and the average hours worked per week declined consistently in the latter half of the twentieth century (Coote and Franklin 2013), although this trend slowed in the twenty-first century. More free time is also the goal of technological innovation and the promise of labour-saving devices. Thus the paradox: Why is the free time of unemployment so unpleasant?³ Moving away from conceiving unemployment as an antonym for work, taking cognisance of the recent shift towards 'job-seeking' and in the light of our empirical work, we suggest a new approach: *Unemployment is not just the absence of work; it is the experience of being subject to a host of governmentalising interventions.* Experience may initially seem to be utterly subjective; it concerns how individuals feel, their sense of self, their understanding of what is happening to them. No two people ever have exactly the same experience. Most basically, experience means something that we go through, for instance, unemployment. Yet 'unemployment' is a category not an experience. Instead, there are a plethora of loosely connected concrete experiences; completing or leaving education, losing or quitting a job, living through weeks or months with little funds and unclear commitments, and the practices of job-seeking. Perhaps the ubiquity of statistics around unemployment obfuscates how little we know about the actual experience. Even statistics about the psychological consequences of unemployment enumerate suffering rather than illuminate the experience. Experience is ephemeral, articulated tentatively between individuals, by interviewees to researchers and grasped interpretively, provisionally and incompletely.

If unemployment were merely the absence of work, then the experience of unemployment would be various, vague and irreducibly particular. However, in our research the experience of unemployment was clearly patterned. The free time of unemployment was experienced as a burden; it was an unstructured

time of constantly waiting with intermittent, frantic job-seeking. Everyday life becomes peculiarly drained of meaning, and 'spare-time' including structured leisure activities are implicitly illegitimate pleasures rather than deserved releases from work (Elias and Dunning 2008). To make sense of this experience, we draw on Turner's theory of 'liminality', not to suggest that losing or seeking a job is a sort of modern ritual – which would be to overstretch or universalise the term 'ritual' – but to analyse how unemployment is constructed as a transitional experience: It is isolating, unstructured, dull and tedious, yet also demanding and bewildering; provoking intense reflexivity, often leading to alienation, cynicism and despair. However, this 'subjective experience' is not relativistic or unfixed because it is a matter of 'subjectification', that is, how modern individuals have their conduct shaped by disciplinary institutions.

'Governmentality' has become a fully-fledged paradigm (Dean 2010). Following Foucault (1984), governmental interventions shape individual subjects. Governmentality refers to the myriad discrete interventions of state agencies, from the most miniscule of procedures to aspirational social policy. Governmentality emerges gradually with the modern state, as it seeks to manage and optimise the productivity of its population. Governmental interventions around unemployment range from the forms that must be filled out by new claimants, the architecture of social welfare offices, the surveillance and management of jobseekers within those offices, and even how the unemployed are spoken of in the media. Gradually, a dominant perspective emerges about the 'unemployed', conceived as a problematic population to be monitored and cajoled. Ironically, our interviews showed that this perspective is shared by many 'jobseekers' trying to escape the 'ranks of the unemployed'.

Governmentality attempts to survey, categorise, monitor, control, develop and optimise the whole population, usually towards certain ends, for instance, social control, sustainable economic growth, market freedom or individual flourishing – depending on the 'welfare-regime'. In Ireland, and increasingly across Europe – 'All these measures have the objective, following the liberal logic, of encouraging the unemployed to actively seek work and to accept, if necessary, a precarious job' (Gallie and Paugam 2000: 10). New 'active' unemployment policies position unemployment as a personal responsibility, but the institutions governing the individual are bureaucratic and impersonal, seeking to fulfil political goals, particularly the neo-liberal introduction of market principles into welfare policy. Moreover, there are political 'feedback' effects to welfare policy; the reduction of benefits and the demand for constant job-seeking reduce the resources of people without jobs to organise politically (Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014). Furthermore, the 'interpretive' effect of new welfare policies suggest that the 'unemployed' are undeserving, and should be subjected to interventions, including the threat of sanctions (Campbell 2012). However, beyond governmentality at the level of policy, our focus is the 'street-level' of experience.

The contemporary array of ‘governmental’ interventions builds on the assemblage of previous years, creating an ‘apparatus’ – which scarcely constitutes a ‘system’ because these interventions emerge erratically over time, for different purposes, which gradually ossify creating an impersonal edifice to be negotiated by applicants and officials. While neo-liberal concepts of the individual and the market clearly emerge from social policy documents, the ‘street-level’ application shifts more slowly, constituting an immense ‘grey area’ of disparate acts, knowledge and relations, struggles and co-operation between situated actors, on both sides of the glass panels in the welfare office. Gradually, the self within the ‘system’ begins to internalise the ‘system’, and sees themselves through the gaze of governmental power; they learn to ‘conduct their conduct’, as job-seekers actively participating in the labour market by constantly offering their skills.

Clearly, the experience of unemployment does not exist in isolation, but must be understood in terms of the multiple state and social forces governing it. When individuals speak of their experience, they bear witness to the forces which shape their experience. Firstly, we examine key transformations of governmentality. Secondly, we explore lived job-seeking in detail, giving voice to the unemployed, but also making sense of their experience. Herein, we synthesise the insights of interpretive sociology and anthropology with governmentality, drawing empirical support from the Irish case, not because Ireland is unique, but because it is a microcosm of the wider transformation of unemployment into job-seeking

Governmentality: the new regime

Internationally the transformation of welfare policy is part of wider processes of the transformation of the economy and the state termed ‘neo-liberal’ (Brodkin and Marsden 2013). More concretely, ‘job-seeker’ is a category created by ‘ordo-liberal’ thought within state institutions, where the state will ‘create the conditions’ for the optimal operation of markets, including the labour market (Foucault 2008). Such states prefer not to intervene but act ‘neutrally’ to guarantee relative stability and therefore liberty within the free space of the market. The state is liberal, in that it allows ‘freedom’ or ‘choice’, but also frugal and vigilant, constantly prodding and cajoling its ‘clients’ to take up productive employment. This transformation of welfare means the state is no longer the automatic guardian of each citizen’s rights, even to basic shelter and sustenance. Instead, the state minimally supports jobseekers as participants in the labour market, presuming they constantly offer their labour for sale and retrain or ‘up-skill’ if unsuccessful.

This transformation emerged gradually in the US and Australia, then in Europe under new ‘Employment Action Plans’, mooted by the OECD since 1993.⁴ In Ireland it was largely ignored under booming economic conditions

until the EU/ECB/IMF ‘bailout’, which required the introduction of ‘activation policy’ in the ‘Memorandum of Understanding’. Since then, Ireland has undergone austerity and the rapid transformation of the welfare system. In January 2012, with unemployment standing at 15 per cent, the government published *Pathways to Work*⁵ which links employment and entitlements with new *Intreo* offices which replace the ‘dole-office’ with a ‘one-stop shop for employment, training and entitlements’. High unemployment is addressed as a transitional crisis to be overcome through governmental intervention in welfare: ‘The key is to implement an activation policy which engages with every unemployed individual, and, in particular, those at risk of long-term unemployment in order to provide them with a pathway to work’ (DSP 2012: 10). Here, individual unemployment is re-worked into a transitional category to be managed through ‘activation’. Indeed, this ‘pathway’ is offered in order to stave off the ‘transition’ or ‘drift’ into long-term unemployment. What exactly is activation?

Firstly, social welfare is contractualised:

Individuals must commit themselves to job-search and/or other employment or education and training activities or face sanction in the case of non-compliance.

The signing of a rights and responsibilities contract and commitment to a progression plan by claimants. (DSP 2012: 10, 13)

Under the new system benefits to citizens are conditional on their pursuing employment or education, rather than being the moral obligation of the state to care for the citizen. Unemployment thereby becomes an individualised problem rather than the result of a poor labour market and the individual is the target of all interventions. Furthermore, benefits for the under 25s were cut to €100 a week, perhaps to increase the ‘incentive’ for young people – who suffer disproportionately from unemployment – to be good job-seekers, including emigrating for work. Policies are particularly concerned with youths not in employment, education or training (NEETs), principally because this leads to lower earnings in later life, a budgetary problem for a greying population. The long-term unemployed (12 months and over) are also explicitly made the target of *Pathways*, as are ‘jobless households’ (DSP 2013: 9). These are the targets of governmentality; especially the 100,000 unemployed for over three years in 2014 (DSP 2014: 11).

Claimants of jobseeker’s allowance/benefit are contacted and made aware of services, their rights and the possibility of sanctions. Their ‘individual needs’ are assessed, not just through personal contact with a professional, but through a standardised Probability of Exit model (PEX), an instrument which assesses their likelihood of exiting the Live Register. With this knowledge, an Employment Services Officer will give them job-seeking guidance, or refer them to options in training or education; in 2015 this will extend to referral to private sector companies who are paid on commission for getting people a

job (any job). Those with a higher probability of long-term unemployment will be brought more promptly to ‘Group Engagement’ sessions with other unemployed people managed by a case worker where they will be given guidance on how to improve their job-seeking. After twelve months, further intensive one-to-one interviews and guidance are given and claimants may be directed to work-experience and training programmes. Under *Pathways*, claimants are obliged to sign up to a ‘progression plan’ with bureaucrats and caseworkers who are expected to implement and monitor the interventions. Employers are rewarded financially for employing the long-term unemployed.

Non-compliance with these interventions can lead to sanctions, as made explicit in letters to claimants:

If you fail to attend, your jobseeker’s payment may be reduced or stopped completely. Your payment may also be reduced or stopped completely if you refuse to co-operate with Employment Services in its efforts to arrange employment, training or education opportunities for you.

These sanctions include a cut of €44 to the basic rate of €188 euro per week, or even the suspension of welfare payments for a period of up to nine weeks. Such sanctions can obviously create suffering or even destitution; but are generally greeted warmly in policy documents or media coverage which presume they are ‘deserved’. Policy documents mainly discuss ‘passive’ and ‘active’ welfare spending, contrasting entitlements with measures designed to connect workers with the labour market, such as education or retraining. However, this distinction conflates offering opportunities and threatening sanctions under the rubric of ‘activation measures’; for instance, retraining via FÁS during the ‘boom years’ was government policy but not enforced with automatic sanctions.

In 2011, 100 people were sanctioned compared to 3000 in 2013 (DSP 2014: 36). Indeed, the ESRI report *Carrots without Sticks?* (McGuinness *et al.* 2011) found that without threats of sanctions, clients would not take every job or training opportunity suggested by the welfare office. This outcome was interpreted as evidencing the need for sanctions, rather than the benevolence or justness of a system without them. Of course, 3000 is only 1 per cent of the 300,000 on the Live Register, but everyone was subjected to the same threat. In our reading it is the threat of sanctions which radically changes ‘job-seeking benefits’ from entitlements to a precarious stipend dependent on pleasing the office.⁶

These interventions run concurrently with the requirement of job-seeking, which must be proven through documentary evidence. Each of these interventions seeks to motivate the individual, inciting them to greater efforts in job-seeking, and diagnosing their ‘personal strengths and weaknesses’. Sharone (2013) analyses American job-seeking culture as individualist; failure to secure work is taken personally, leading to negative psychological consequences. Clearly, *Pathways* fosters a similar culture. These interventions have an effect

in shaping the conduct of the claimant and in monitoring them, creating knowledge about them and (re)shaping them individually as a job-seeker. The claimant must become a 'good' job-seeker as imagined by liberal governmentality or face financial deprivation (Rogers 2004).

Alongside this shift in the regime of welfare for recipients, *Pathways to Work* has a facility for employers, who can contact the new office with details of what employees they require. Between welfare and the labour market there is the *JobBridge* programme, which gives state funding to internships. Generally, 'governmentality' studies reacts against Marxist-inspired critiques of capitalism and therefore tends to focus critical attention on the state and how it dominates subjects, yet it is important here to note the continuity between state and economic power. In particular, 'social welfare' constitutes 'labour market participation' as wholly compulsory, under threat of destitution, thereby tilting the balance of power firmly in favour of employers, whatever quality of employment they offer. Moreover, companies may apply to *JobBridge* to advertise an internship; interns then work and train for six to nine months, in receipt of their social welfare and a 50 euro bonus, all paid by the state. This scheme undermines the value of labour in general; furthermore, there have been *JobBridge* positions advertised which scarcely constitute internships as they involve unskilled labour, or conversely, internships for university research assistants, and others which require a PhD qualification. From 2014 the *Gateway* scheme offered 3,000 part-time positions with local councils for 22 months for the dole plus 20 Euros; refusal to participate will lead to reduction or suspension of social welfare payments. Other jurisdictions, particularly the US, UK and Australia have seen the introduction of targets for street-level bureaucrats, who are incentivised to refuse claims, impose sanctions, prescribe retraining and generally force jobseekers to take any job whatsoever (Brodkin and Marsden 2013). In the Irish case, private employment agencies will be offered 'commission' on each unemployed client they 'guide' back to the labour market.

Applicants for 'Job-seekers assistance/benefit' fill out a specific form ('UP1'; previously 'Unemployment assistance/benefit'), which includes a variety of monitoring questions, ranging from two pages designed to determine citizenship and nationality to a series of declarative questions to determine if the applicant has any other source of income, or is connected to any other welfare payment. Question 19 covers the type of work the person is seeking, whether they would accept alternative work, where they have sought work and a demand for documentary evidence. How strictly this demand is applied in practice varies, but clearly there is an injunction for claimants to 'perform' as a job-seeker. Subsequent questions deal with registration with employment agencies and education, implying that the applicant may need to retrain for another occupation. The individual claimant must swear they are without work, available for work and currently seeking it, bringing them within the ILO definition of unemployment. However, the new *Pathways to Work*

regime of intense job-seeking, group sessions and individual interviews clearly intensifies the pressure on claimants to seek work, and implies that the long-term unemployed should reassess what work would be acceptable to them, effectively 'proletarianising' society (Grover 2012).

The subject position of jobseeker is distinct from the unemployed person in a number of crucial ways. Compared to the medieval position of 'vaga-bond' condemned for having no work, the unemployed person was recognised as being available for work; their present lack of work is a consequence of economic factors – as succinctly expressed in Beveridge's 1909 title – *Unemployment: A problem of industry*. The new position of 'job-seeker' gives little acknowledgement to the macro-economic climate, but positions employment or its absence in terms of purely personal efforts. Unemployment is a state, a sort of transitional limbo between jobs, wherein inactivity, idleness or the humble pleasures of leisure are illegitimate. Job-seeking is an activity defined by lacking a job, but also by the interminable search for scarce opportunities. Neither the unemployed nor the job-seeker has a job; but for the former it is a case of either having or not having, for the latter, existence is characterised by a particular form of being, either frantically seeking or inactivity which is the sign of failure. Thus, the meaning of everyday life, from routine tasks to simply 'being', becomes problematic for the job-seeker. Until they find work, claimant's lives are defined by the welfare office as incomplete, provisional and sub-standard. Of course, individuals may resist this categorisation, and understand themselves as merely economically unemployed, yet the discourse of 'job-seeking' pervades the institution which holds most power over them.

Overall, job-seeking is governmentally constituted as a transition. Non-economic elements of identity such as nationality or gender remain, but in the 'meantime' the individual is no longer what they are, and not yet what they hope to become. The key elements of deprivation theory, loss of status, social contacts, regular action, purpose and time-structure are not simply absent; they are explicitly construed as problematic: The new and uncertain status of 'job-seeker' is foisted on the individual under the threat of withdrawal of welfare payments. Old social contacts within work or education are no longer mere acquaintances but implicitly part of a 'network' which must be 'worked' for opportunities. The act and art of job-seeking is minimally predictable and routine in checking daily for openings, but mainly implies opportunistic attempts on disparate occasions, presenting oneself as suitable and enthusiastic for any position whatsoever. All actions become suffused with a sense of purposelessness, whether it is ordinary life or repeatedly frustrated job-seeking, or even re-training or internships where the exercise is largely futile, as many of our respondents attested. In unemployment/jobseeking, an individual's time-structure is particularly disjointed; redundancy appears as the key life-event for job-seekers as it inaugurates their new identity. Thereafter, whether time passes in frenetic job-search or idles away in 'pastimes', everything is unsatisfactory,

provisional and even meaningless until a job is secured. Effectively, job-seeking is an experience of artificially produced liminality.

Liminality: the experience of doing nothing

Experience is central to interpretative sociology, yet somewhat neglected in governmentality studies (Szokolczai 2004). Experience refuses any dichotomy between individual and society, because all individual experiences are socially constituted. While the minute particulars of experience might be irreducibly personal, the broad contours are shared socially. Furthermore, the meaning given to experience by culture – or disciplinary power/knowledge – shapes it decisively. While many approaches emphasise experience, we will turn here to an anthropological focus on experiences of transition, or liminality.

Liminality refers to the transitional space in-between well-defined structures. The concept was originally developed by Van Gennep (1977) and ‘rediscovered’ by Turner (1969), both anthropologists trying to understand rituals. Both argue that rituals exist throughout human societies, and have a three-fold structure. The first phase is a suspension of order, where existing status is removed and social life becomes open to question and transformation. The second phase is a ritual performance, often a trial or test of ritual initiates which gives them a new status. The third phase is reaggregation, a recognition and celebration of the new status, often characterised by feasting. Liminal rituals are important and potentially dangerous situations, overseen by ‘masters of ceremony’ – shamans, elders or priests – who suspend order and give new status to initiates.

What are the characteristics of liminality? The first phase of liminality entails the suspension of existing statuses, norms and beliefs. This opens up the possibility of reflexivity about culture, or even provokes critique (Boland 2013). Liminality levels social distinctions, often through deprivation of food, sleep, speech-rights and so forth, sometimes leading to a sort of *communitas* or solidarity among initiates who are all levelled to the same absence of status. Liminality entails the suspension of structures and routines, which can initially be unnerving or exciting, but eventually can become tedious. Rituals demand a performance wherein participants prove they are worthy of their new status – like students in university. Thus, the initiates are subjected to the absence of structure, necessarily question their culture and must undergo certain tests and trials.

Liminality is a fruitful concept for sociology, as it illuminates de-structured times of change and transition which are so significant in modernity (Thomassen 2013). Classic conceptions of modernity emphasise transition, from Durkheim’s shift from mechanical to organic solidarity or Marx’s ‘all that is solid melts into air’, from modernisation theory to Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’. Modernity can be understood as chronic ‘permanent liminality’ characterised by unresolved events and constant change, like the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath (Szokolczai

2014). Clearly, this is relevant to understanding ‘neo-liberalism’ as a constant de-regulating and de-structuring force, which subjects everything and everyone to the performative test of the market. Of course, here ‘liminality’ is a heuristic device used to illuminate the wider processes of modernisation; our world is not literally a prolonged liminal crisis.

Modern disciplinary institutions replace rites of passage; schools, factories, asylums, hospitals and prisons are all sites of transition which suspend and supersede communal and social norms, taking individuals out of society and placing them alongside similarly ‘destructured’ individuals, then transforming them through certain tests and trials. Again, these are not ‘actual’ rites of passage, but they do artificially reproduce many of the characteristics of liminality. Unemployment is particularly defined and experienced as a transition, and has clearly liminal elements. Participants in focus groups on unemployment described their time as ‘suspended animation’, ‘limbo’ and ‘cold storage’, and complained that ‘The day will drag on interminably’ (Delaney *et al.* 2011). Concurrently, job-seeking involves perpetual efforts, a Sisyphean task of scouring the media, internet and the streets for jobs for which there will be dozens or even hundreds of applicants. Such a trial sometimes provokes individuals towards questioning society, yet under governmental direction this critique usually turns towards self-doubt and demands personal re-invention.

To pass through liminality, the suspension of structures and the resultant limbo, individuals must undertake a performance which defines them, for instance, the tests and trials of hazing in college fraternities or confession in religion. For the ‘unemployed’ the principle way out of limbo is to find a job. Thus, the social welfare office appears as the site of liminality, where people come to claim that they are ‘between jobs’ – that is, between two definite statuses – and then are referred to case workers and employment agencies. These operate as ‘masters of ceremony’, who define marketable skills as the essence of the human being, work as the primary value, and job-seeking as the necessary performance. However, by contrast to most liminal situations – say schooling – the standard for performance is not set, but constantly moving, and the many initiates compete against each other. Furthermore, the performance is often repeatedly a failure, even entirely unacknowledged. So not only is there often ‘nothing to be done’, but the unemployed person’s only task is frequently fruitless. Liminality is often identified with carnival moments, holiday spaces, recreational practices, art and sport, with the implication that it is an inherently enjoyable and potentially subversive space. However, being stuck within liminality creates a boring, grey, repetitive and meaningless experience. Liminal spaces enact and constitute life in terms of ‘deprivation’, so that investigating the governmentalisation of unemployment allows us to explain the experience of ‘absence’ or ‘lack’ highlighted by Jahoda and others, but understand this experience not as absence, but concretely as incessant waiting and repeated meaningless performances. Eventually, some individuals do get jobs,

which may retrospectively transform their perceptions of the experience of job-seeking, yet the experience in itself is our focus, keeping in mind that many individuals are repeatedly returned to unemployment.

Job-seeking as liminality

Here we will turn to interviews where seven graduates, effectively ‘job-seekers’, interviewed a selection of ‘unemployed’ people in the summer of 2014. The rationale for this collaborative research method is that interviewers have a ‘shared horizon’ with the interviewees, thereby producing more naturalistic conversations which capture the experience of unemployment. Each interviewed two individuals, with a balance between short and long-term unemployment, a variety of ages and a gender balance roughly reflecting the Live Register (see Table 1):

These interviews were analysed thematically, with particular focus on narratives which recounted experiences with welfare offices, internships and job-seeking.

Other studies have focused on the experience of the financial and subjective consequences of unemployment (Boland and Griffin 2015; Delaney *et al.* 2011). These were replicated here, for instance, ‘I find the unemployment scene almost devastatingly disappointing’ (Interviewee 8). These responses resonate with the ‘Deprivation theory’, the absence of activity, time structure and meaning ‘I mean there’s days you’d be sitting there depressed, or a day like that where you can’t do anything’ (Interviewee 10). Yet, the real question is how this experience of meaninglessness is generated – and we will see that it is connected to the governmentalisation of job-seeking. Indeed, the experience of interminable limbo of unemployment was succinctly articulated: ‘I just feel like I’m going to be on this for the rest of my life’ (Interviewee 4).

Interviewees had mixed views on the welfare office itself, most finding staff helpful with some surprised to find ‘normal’ people queuing there. Others had stories of difficulties with their claims and saw officers as judgemental and even capricious. What matters here is the power-relation between claimants and officials.

Before I had got my first payment the last time I received a letter off them wanting to know why I was not looking for work, and I had to show them proof that I was looking for work (Interviewee 11).

Table 1: Overview of interview participants

<i>Interview</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>14</i>
Gender	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	F	F
Age	27	20	37	24	38	35	48	22	57	22	50	25	44	36

Clearly, the burden of proof falls on the claimant. Thus, unemployment becomes figured as a trial of job-seeking under pressure and surveillance. Other clients had their cases refused:

I had to go for an interview and be examined by an examiner, because I challenged the refusal, and I won that, but that is kinda stressful. When you are worrying and have nothing and going proving yourself (Interviewee 8).

Refusals and reviews are not infrequent, and always possible within *Pathways*, so that claimants are always vulnerable, and required to 'prove' themselves eligible and a genuine jobseeker. Unemployment here becomes precarious and pressurised.

Before I felt like I was just looking for a job, but now I feel like I'm working for the social welfare officer (Interviewee 12).

This woman was comparing her current unemployment with an occasion about five years ago, which succinctly encapsulates the way *Pathways* has transformed unemployment into job-seeking. Moreover, unemployment is less 'deprivation' of work than compulsory job-seeking, equated to work in this quote. However, what is more important here is how the position of the 'claimant' has changed from entitlement to a vulnerable position maintained through performances of job-seeking.

Each interviewee was asked about their experience of activation measures. Most found 'Group Engagement' particularly pointless, for instance, 'It's just paying more people to sit on their arses and make the unemployed feel stupid' (Interviewee 11). Many were surprised to find these meetings included discussions of fraud, but then accepted this official definition that many other 'unemployed' people were potential fraudsters. Overall, such interventions were experienced as unhelpful or absurd at best, or directly threatening where welfare officers required individuals to engage in 'schemes' or internships:

You got the impression that you had to do this, you know, he never said to me 'so would you like to do this?' it was oh so I found this scheme for you, it was . . . like he never actually said you have to do this but it was almost implied that if you refused that you would have a problem with your claim (Interviewee 3).

I have skills you know, but they'd rather I didn't use my skills, they'd rather I went and picked up rubbish off the street for 20 Euros a week, you know. Rather than hire someone in 12 or 18 months. So . . . I find it very hard to understand their system (Interviewee 14).

Here, becoming 'job-ready' or 'upskilling' as described in aspirational social policy emerges as forced acceptance of labour below the minimum wage. Claimants are offered the choice between complying with official demands or undergoing sanctions. Thus, unemployment/job-seeking is constituted by humbling or even humiliating activity, less a liminal leisure time than a

liminal submission to the trials prescribed by authorities. Another claimant completed *JobBridge* successfully but the employer went out of business:

When I heard that I didn't get the job or anything because of the JobBridge, it kinda made me feel more depressed, more than anything else. So I kinda lost hope in the whole situation more than anything now (Interviewee 4).

This experience of being forced into an internship then being without any 'pathway' into work is a possibility for tens of thousands of like-wise 'activated' individuals. It is also symptomatic of the mixture of compulsion, performance and individualised failure generated by *Pathways*.

Job-seekers are defined as seeking work, yet this is less a liberal space of choice than a directed and compulsory activity:

I've had bastards before who are just 'oh no well you have to do this' [...] I was obligated to go to this interview for a receptionist position like I had to go. Like they told me that there's a receptionist interview go to this or we will stop your job seeker benefit or whatever so I went [...] they read my CV [...] and they stopped the interview and just went 'Obviously this is not for you. You don't want to be a receptionist' and I was like 'Well obviously'. But, em, they were quite understanding about it (Interviewee 1).

This extract points clearly to the power exercised over jobseekers, and that the result may only be 'job-churning', as individuals are forced to chase and accept positions which do not fit their skills. Here the employer is sympathetic, yet the power disparity between employees and employers enforced by the welfare office is evident. Furthermore, this is continuous:

I'd basically been in town looking for, handing out CVs a lot and my CVs was just getting put on file; I wasn't getting anything. They asked me about if I would look for anything, anything in work and I said I would. [...] But they told me that if I didn't reply to them my social welfare would be cut (Interviewee 2).

Here we see the pressure for continuous job-seeking and the requirement to accept anything or face sanctions. Thus unemployment is continuous job-seeking under official surveillance.

What does this experience feel like?

The routine is really – panic – looking for jobs for two hours on jobs online and then crying into your Coco-Pops because you can't find anything, right? That's been the, that is the routine (Interviewee 5).

Interviewees described searching on-line, developing CVs, writing letters, approaching employers and using personal networks to find work. Each time any of these activities is completed without success the individual's position as a job-seeker is reinforced:

At the start I felt like, you know, I didn't feel too bad. It was just regular looking for work and as time went on and I didn't get any work it became really depressing (Interviewee 4).

Effectively, jobseekers must continuously seek work, yet repeated failure leads to increasingly negative subjective feelings. *Pathways* is positioned as an aid to failing job-seekers, and perhaps, occasionally, finds them work, though such work may be temporary, precarious, low-paid, in poor conditions or merely an internship. Furthermore, such welfare policies implicitly define individuals as 'failing job-seekers' rather than citizens with rights. So rather than attributing the negative consequences of unemployment to the purely economic situation of being unable to find work in a weak labour-market, we must recognise that welfare policy forms experiences.

Lastly, interviewees generally found that their definition of an acceptable job had shifted while they were 'job-seeking' – under the pressure of interventions:

I'd probably try anything and even if the thought, y'know like, I wouldn't be that good at it or I mightn't like it but I think I definitely got over being picky (Interviewee 10).

At this stage now I'd take anything, I would. Like, years ago, y'know you'd be coming down the road and the men would be going along, the corporation lads, sweeping the streets and you'd say to yourself 'I'd hate that job', now you would kill for that job, y'know. You really would do anything, well except prostitution (Interviewee 13).

Any job whatsoever appears acceptable, which points to a definite power-imbalance between employers and employees under this welfare regime. Here, the idea of deciding between a job or unemployment based on one's skills is described as being 'picky', something to be gotten over rather than a choice which citizens should have. The reference to prostitution is spoken mainly in jest, but indicates that there are almost no limits to job-seeking.

These extracts demonstrate the pressures in the new welfare regime, which can be illuminated by the concept of liminality. Unemployment is defined in social policy as a transition within the labour market. This transition is realised within the welfare office, where individuals are subjected to assessment and monitoring. Most obviously, liminality ensues in empty days which stretch into weeks, months or years of interminable and meaningless waiting for opportunities. However, what emerges from our interviews is that unemployment is also liminal in that it demands constant self-reflection, searching and performing in an attempt to prove to employers that one is an ideal candidate, and to prove to welfare officers that one is actively seeking work. To the former one must appear an incipient success, to the latter, a worthy failure. Jobseekers are required to anticipate that acceptable work will emerge soon, even from the latest application, despite serial rejection or a revolving door between precarious work and unemployment. Furthermore, individuals are subject to constant scrutiny and injunctions to accept whatever is available, anything to 'become' a worker. Interviewees explicitly said they would rather

do anything than be ‘unemployed’, but it turns out that what they are actually trying to escape is a perpetual and unfulfilling seeking.

Conclusion

Sociological theory attempts to keep pace with social transformations and emergent phenomena by rethinking the complex world of state, society and self through paradigms and concepts. The deprivation theory has its merits, but stops short of explaining the experience of ‘lack’ or absence’. Delving into our interviews with jobseekers we find tedium, meaninglessness and uncertainty coupled with constant demands to perform and succeed, often marked by repeated failures. These experiences are distinctly shaped by the governance of unemployment, especially the intensified regime of monitoring, interventions and the threat of sanctions in *Pathways to Work*. We propose that unemployment should be understood as a governed experience, by contrast to deprivation theory which only understands unemployment negatively, asking ‘what isn’t it?’ and answering ‘work’!

We argue that these experiences amount to an artificially produced form of permanent liminality. Unlike most rituals which end decisively in a successful and meaningful performance – an oath, an exam, a wedding – most job seekers are recursively returned to the start of the process, to an unstructured life of tedium, frantic seeking and self-examination, there to contemplate their insufficiency in securing work. Even those who do find secure work may be ‘scarred’ by this experience, that is, negatively defined by their liminal experiences. This is not an attempt to superimpose a classic anthropological concept but to understand how the experience of unemployment/jobseeking changes alongside the general shift towards the ordo-liberal state, through processes of individualisation, and linked to institutions which artificially produce liminal-like transitions. Such states of uncertainty and constant change are described elsewhere as ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000).

Finally, the genealogical metaphor in our title, of ‘birth and death’, reminds us that ‘unemployment’ is not a neutrally existing economic ‘thing’, but the creation of institutions and discourses. Just as the welfare state emerged in the early twentieth century in response to the institutional pressures of trade unions and others, the contemporary impetus to dismantle universal provisions and ethics of care reflects political forces. Contemporary states, whether characterised as neo or ordo-liberal, show a form of market authoritarianism; the state exists to enforce market processes. Change is only a matter of time in modernity; however, a return to the solidarity and care of universal welfare is not guaranteed, and the pressure on job-seekers may well be increased, as has occurred in the UK. The older doctrine of universal entitlements underwrites a sense of security, and where payments become conditional, arbitrary and subject to specific performance, social security loses its essence and becomes

precarious. Therein, human life becomes traduced to ‘labour-market participation’ compounded by the ‘liminal’ dimension of modernity, whereby all values are continuously changing and subject to revision (Szokolczai 2014). To oppose this, following Foucault, we criticise governmentality, not from some supposed position of detachment, freedom or transcendence, but seeking ‘not to be governed thus’, but to be governed differently. Particularly, we suggest that ‘jobseekers allowance’ should be transformed into an ‘unemployed citizen’s entitlement’, not only providing a secure payment, but one which acknowledges individual’s non-liminal status as members of society.

Notes

- 1 This article draws from our book on unemployment. Our thanks to the Waterford Unemployment Experience Research Collaboration project (WUERC). We would also like to thank the editor and three anonymous reviewers, each of whom provided excellent direction and suggestions on earlier drafts, prompting us to rewrite the paper thoroughly; any remaining faults are entirely ours.
- 2 <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/Ir/liveregisterjanuary2015/#.VN3AOC6b67A>.
- 3 The unpleasantness of unemployment is general, although not universal. Its unpleasantness can be evidenced by a host of psychological studies which demonstrate that unemployment triggers a social and subjective decline, leading to isolation, poverty, poor mental health and potentially suicide (Young 2012).
- 4 Janoski (1990) differentiates ‘activation’ policies which involved retraining and upskilling from those which principally involve sanctions and minimal support in the US and, then, West German states. Since then EU states have generally intensified the compulsion to accept any work whatsoever or face sanctions, for instance in the Hartz I-IV reforms in Germany.
- 5 Broadly replicating the UK system, which has become increasingly harsh since its introduction.
- 6 Cases of homelessness have meanwhile doubled in Ireland in the past two years, and half of the homeless are either working or jobseekers. Since the recession began, 80,000 people have left the labour force in Ireland on grounds of a physical or mental disability, a figure which invites speculation; perhaps the pressures on job-seeker are too onerous.

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