



Disabling Employment Interviews: warfare to work

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ABSTRACT *Employment interview research displays a greater concern for refining employment interviews to benefit employers rather than prospective employees. The interviewee's perspective is often overlooked. Further, generally scant attention has been paid to the interview experiences of disabled interviewees. In this paper I present findings from a project that sought to understand disabled interviewees' experiences of employment interviews. My analysis suggests such experiences were dominated by feelings of anxiety and manipulation, particularly when contextualised within contemporary labour market conditions. In this context, I reflect on the need for ethical rather than technical concerns into employment interviews and how innovations in interview techniques may be having a negative affect on interviewees. I further stress the need to reject victim blaming ideologies when researching disabled interviewees' experiences of employment interviews to counter the over emphasis of past research into changing the disabled person rather than the disabling interview environment.*

Background

Between 1994 and 1997 I was involved as a community psychologist in a participatory action research project on the employment interview experiences of disabled people (Duckett, 1998a). During the two and a half years of fieldwork I met a broad range of research participants including disabled and non-disabled people, people who were unemployed, employed and employers. Participants discussed their experiences of employment interviews during individual interviews, telephone interviews and focus group discussions. In the action phases of the project, where participants and I sought to turn research into practice, discussion occurred in welfare benefit advice interviews (securing benefit income for unemployed and disabled participants), and consultancy and steering group meetings (targeting change in employer recruitment practices). In this paper I summarise themes that arose during these discussions. First, I briefly review the empirical literature on employment interviews and then describe the literature on disability and employment interviews and employment discrimination issues.

An Overview of Employment Interview Research

Employment interviews are one of many means used by employers to select employees. They are often used in combination with other methods of staff selection such as reference checking, psychometric testing, and bio-data (biographical data). Employment interviews can vary widely in content (from general to focused discussions) and structure (from informal meetings to formalised oral exams).

There has been a consistent research interest in employment interviews, dating back to the early 1900s. Periodically, there have been a number of research reviews (Wagner, 1949; Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965; Harris, 1989). These generally report low levels of reliability and validity of the employment interview as a selection device and the call from researchers has been for employment interviews to be abandoned as an employment selection device.

Despite this, employment interviews continue to be popular with employers. The most recent body of employment interview research has reacted to this by exploring refinements to the interview that increase reliability and validity. Such research is technological in nature—the interview is viewed as a tool which researchers seek to refine. Such so-called refinements include the use of board interviews that are seen as more reliable than interviews with only one interviewer (Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988) and the more structured interview that is seen as more valid than the unstructured interview (Dipboye, 1994).

The most persistent criticism of empirical research into employment interviews has been its lack of applicability to the real world, known as ‘ecological validity’ (e.g. Mayfield *et al.*, 1980). The majority of empirical studies have either been based on artificial, laboratory interview settings, bogus application forms, hypothetical interviewees, and/or undergraduates assuming the role of interviewers (Zedeck *et al.*, 1983). There have been calls for research on employment interviews to be contextualised in ‘real’ settings and with ‘real’ people (Dunnette & Borman, 1979) but there remain only a small number of studies that are real in this sense (e.g. Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). The field has remained ripe for fresh insight and contextualisation for a considerable time.

Ideological Context

The dominant focus in the employment interview literature has been with the concerns of employers and little attention has been given to the perspective of employees. Anderson (1988) applies a theoretical distinction between *objectivist–psychometric* and *subjectivist–social perception* approaches. The former views the employment interview as an objective employment selection device comparable to forms of psychometric testing (e.g. Campion *et al.*, 1997). The latter holds that the employment interview is a social encounter characterised by negotiation and a bilateral exchange of information between interviewer and interviewee.

Anderson concedes the latter perspective is naive in the face of an increasingly competitive labour market where labour supply considerably outstrips demand. The

dominant conception of the employment interview is as a one-way decision-making process where the decision-making process of the interviewer is more privileged. Very rarely in the past has the interview been thought of as involving the interviewee receiving, interpreting and acting on information presented during an employment interview. Moreover, little research has considered the effect the interview has on the interviewee, though there are exceptions (e.g. Powell & Goulet, 1996).

The Literature on Disabled People and Employment Interviews

When attention is turned to the issue of disabled people and employment interviews, it is the disabled interviewee rather than the employment interview that is problematised. For example, Wright and Multon (1995) studied the effect of non-verbal communication of disabled interviewees on interviewers' judgements. The problem of poor interview performance was located with non-verbal deficits in the disabled interviewees. Readers of this journal familiar with the distinction between the Social and Medical models of disability (UPIAS, 1976; Oliver, 1990) will recognise the stamp of the latter on the ideological underpinnings of this type of research. Indeed, the literature on employment and disabled people is most prevalent in the field of vocational rehabilitation where the Medical model occupies an hegemony. The focus is on changing the individual (Lunt & Thornton, 1993) with little attention paid to changing the structural environment in which 'problematised' behaviours occur. Rehabilitation rarely recognises the shaping of disability by social policy (Hahn, 1984), rather it targets individual client behaviour for change. Farley (1987), for example, trained rehabilitation clients in social skills to increase their employment opportunities. Other examples include teaching: communication skills (Sigelman *et al.*, 1980); skills in completing job application forms (Means & Farley, 1991; Nelson *et al.*, 1994); employment interview skills (Taves *et al.*, 1992); and, job-seeking skills (Keith *et al.*, 1977). More generally, research programmes have sought to ensure that clients are 'psychologically prepared' (Farley *et al.*, 1990) and motivated for employment (Means, 1987). Leahy *et al.*'s (1992) review of doctoral dissertations in the field of rehabilitation points to a preponderance of research on intervening with individuals and a relative paucity of research on more macro level interventions. Redress is taken against the appearance of impairment rather than the appearance of discrimination.

Recently, some researchers have taken a human rights perspective with a focus on the potential inequitable treatment of marginalised groups in employment interviews and the application of justice models to selection procedures (e.g. Williamson *et al.*, 1997). This body of research, although small, documents the negative impact the employment interview may have on minority group members. For example, Reilly & Chao (1982) advised that interviewing was unlikely to be a fair selection method, believing it likely to have a disparate impact on minority group members. Such research has focused on women, ethnic minority groups and elders in employment interviews (e.g. Harris, 1989; Perry *et al.*, 1996) with relatively little research on disabled people. There has, however, been some recognition that disabled interviewees may be discriminated against in employment interviews (Stone

& Sawatzki, 1980; Tagalakis *et al.*, 1988; Cesare *et al.*, 1990; Gouvier *et al.*, 1991; Marchioro & Bartels, 1994; Williamson *et al.*, 1997). While studies like these show biased appraisals of disabled people in employment interviews, the literature documenting discrimination against disabled people in job interviews is often less than convincing. A number of studies suffer from the 'halo effect' where disabled job applicants are either rated, in terms of desirability for employment, as either equally as attractive (Krefting & Brief, 1976; Stone & Sawatzki, 1980; Colorez & Geist, 1987) or as more attractive (Nordstrom *et al.*, 1998) than non-disabled job applicants. Other studies have shown conflicting results with some disabled people with particular types of impairment being rated more favourably than non-disabled candidates (Czajka & DeNisi, 1988). Social desirability may have played a part in the responses of research participants in such studies (Gouvier *et al.*, 1991) through research participants rating disabled interviewees more positively to gain positive social appraisal. It may appear clear that the impairment of the interviewee they are judging is the pivotal variable to the study and participants may be sensitive to experimental settings that are seeking to show how interviewers discriminate against disabled people. The findings from these studies may tell us more about how interviewers wish to be perceived by researchers than about their decision making in employment interviews. However, suggesting the existence of socially desirable responses in these empirical studies needs to be made with a degree of caution as we may be operating a similarly negative bias as those who problematise disabled people in other areas of disability research (Wright, 1987; Meyerson, 1988). We may be questioning how 'real' positive appraisals of disabled interviewees are but leaving unquestioned the existence of negative appraisals.

The issue of whether to disclose a disability at an employment interview is problematic for disabled people (Huvelle *et al.*, 1984; Tagalakis *et al.*, 1988). Employment selection decisions are built upon rejection and negativity, with the interviewer finding reasons to reject rather than accept prospective employees (Schmitt, 1976; Rowe, 1989). This may have particularly disadvantageous consequences for disabled job applicants where impairment is predominantly thought of in negative terms (Fichten, 1988; Marchioro & Bartels, 1994) and where impairment can predominate how an individual's identity is perceived (Tagalakis *et al.*, 1988). This may lead impairment to be used as a negative factor that will speed the interviewer to reject a job candidate (Christman & Branson, 1990). Such an outcome is suggested by research showing how in employment interviews early negative information that is followed by later positive information results in a less favourable outcome than early positive information followed by later negative information (Peters & Terborg, 1975). If the initial impression made by a disabled applicant at an employment interview is negative, this may not bode well for the interview outcome. It may make disabled interviewees defensive and cautious over giving interviewers information on their impairment (Weiss & Dawis, 1960). However, more recent research suggests that disabled applicants wished to discuss the job-related aspects of their impairment and that some disability-related discussion connected to job performance was actually rated positively by non-disabled interviewers (Macan & Hayes, 1995).

Discrimination Against Disabled People in the Labour Market

Discrimination against disabled people has been well documented in the literature (Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Robinson, 2000), so much so that Stone and Sawatzki (1980, p. 96) refer to it as “a virtual cliché in the literature of psychology and related fields”. There is convincing evidence to suggest employment opportunities for disabled people are considerably restricted (Leviton & Taggart, 1977; Hahn, 1984). For example, in the 1970s disabled people were three times as likely to be unemployed as any other group in society (Walker & Sinfield, 1975; Bowe, 1993) and this ratio remains high today. The *1995/6 Labour Force Survey* reported the unemployment rate for disabled people was approximately two-and-a-half times that of non-disabled people. Further, of those disabled people in full-time work, male workers earned about a quarter less and female workers earned about a third less than non-disabled workers (Barnes, 1991). Johnson and Lambrinos (1985) found a third of the disparity in wages between disabled and non-disabled people was attributable directly to discrimination, that is, rather than lower levels of productivity on the job. Further, only 12 per cent of disabled people were in professional or managerial positions, whereas 21 per cent of non-disabled people were in such positions. The poor employment circumstances of disabled people are reflected in the statistic that over 60 per cent of disabled people live below the poverty line (Barnes, 1991).

Discrimination may be particularly harsh against disabled women. Fine and Asch (1985) reported that between 65 and 76 per cent of disabled women were unemployed. There is further evidence that disabled women are less likely to be employed than disabled men (Hanna & Rogovsky, 1991; Pfeiffer, 1991). Further, disabled minority group members—such as ethnic minority groups—are in a similarly marginalised position in the labour market. Despite the gross inequality of opportunity for disabled people in the labour market, Floyd (1991) reports disability and employment is a neglected area of research, both internal and external to the Employment Service.

Employers often hold discriminatory attitudes towards disabled people (Williams, 1972), perceiving them to be a greater risk to health and safety and to have lower rates of productivity than non-disabled employees (Fuqua *et al.*, 1983; Johnson *et al.*, 1988; Blanck, 1991). The attitudes of co-workers present particularly unassailable barriers to employment for disabled people (Nathanson & Lambert, 1981; Matthes, 1992). Increasingly, in the face of anti-discrimination legislation, employers are being asked to confront disability prejudices that circulate the workplace (Mello, 1992). However, most employers remain unaware of disability employment legislation (Blanck, 1991). Further, disabled people are often subjected to tests that attempt to predict their employability. These tests are potentially discriminatory (Kelman, 1991) and may stand as an additional barrier to the employment aspirations of disabled people in particular (Rogan & Murphy, 1991) and minority groups in general (Kelman, 1991). Even with anti-discrimination legislation in place, Yelin (1991) described the employment prospects for disabled people in the US as getting worse more slowly rather than getting better.

Townsend (1981) reported that disabled people differ in the discrimination they face in the labour force according to the type of impairment they have. Most severely disadvantaged were people with cognitive and psychiatric impairments. Gouvier *et al.* (1991) point to people with neurological impairments as discriminated against particularly harshly. Such people include both people with learning difficulties and people with mental health difficulties. Typically, the former find themselves working in Adult Training Centres (now renamed 'Resource Centres') where the work is often monotonous and poorly paid and where there is little prospect of moving on into open employment (Wertheimer, 1981). The latter group has been a category often excluded from consideration as disabled, even though they are disabled in their employment opportunities as much if not more than any other group of disabled people (Hebditch, 1981). Indeed, the discrimination facing people with mental health difficulties may be particularly pernicious (Carling, 1993; President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, 1994).

The decision over whether or not to identify oneself as disabled is most common in adult life when people are seeking employment (French, 1994). With high levels of discrimination in the labour force against disabled people it may be prudent for disabled people, for those that can, to hide their impairment. Gouvier *et al.* (1991) concluded that impairments that were most visible were particularly discriminated against. Hahn talks of a disability continuum based on the visibility of an impairment (Hahn, 1984), suggesting that the greater the visibility, the greater the level of discrimination. Further, it may be difficult for people to keep their impairment undisclosed particularly as employers are geared up to highlighting an employee's disabled status. Sometimes job applications require the applicant to include a photograph of her/himself which can be a "none-too-subtle instrument of employer discrimination" (Lloyd Jr., 1985, p. 301) particularly for people whose impairment is more visible. Barnes (1991) views pre-employment medical tests and the presence of 'health' related questions on application forms as effectively screening out disabled job applicants. Disabled people have typically found medically based assumptions about the nature of their impairment are often used to discriminate against them in employment (Barnes, 1991).

Yelin reported on recent changes in the nature of the labour market, where there has been a move away from physical jobs to more information-managing jobs. He suspected this would create employment opportunities for people with physical impairments. However, he reported that labour force participation of such people was actually decreasing during that time (Yelin, 1991). Discrimination was widespread in the labour market even when the nature of jobs in the market was, theoretically at least, benign to people with physical impairments.

Contemporary society is heavily influenced by the ideologies of individualism and the meritocratic state—where society will reward based on merit alone. Individuals are asked to pit themselves up against one another to attain merit, status, wealth and additional social privileges. Under this ideology it is assumed that equality will be achieved simply if "the contestants in a race are lined up evenly at the starting line" (Hahn, 1984, p. 362). The starting line, though, is difficult to trace in the face of the enormous socio-economic and cultural barriers that confront disabled people.

More often than not, disabled people are less favoured than non-disabled people and for them merit is not enough. "... to be a person with a disability [*sic*] is virtually synonymous with being a person who either does not contribute to society through employment or participates only within narrow, socially devalued economic parameters ... to be disabled is to be poor" (Rioux & Crawford, 1990, p. 99).

Research Findings on Interviewees' Employment Interview Experiences

In this study I looked at the interviewee's experience of the employment interview and, in particular, the experiences of disabled interviewees. Here, I report on the findings from my fieldwork. I use pseudonyms rather than participants' real names to protect their anonymity. Participants ranged from 22 to 57 years of age and included disabled and non-disabled people. There were an about equal number of males to females and the sample included some participants from minority ethnic groups. Later I concentrate on the views of disabled participants when disability is introduced as a factor in employment interviews. First I concentrate on participants' general experiences of employment interviews.

From Welfare to Warfare

Participants often spoke about their employment interview experiences in metaphors signifying a struggle or battle. This was particularly so in my meetings with unemployed participants who were seeking to move into employment. This is what I call "from welfare to warfare" as this material often depicted research participants trying to get off the dependency and insecurity of welfare benefits through struggling to compete for a place as an active participant in the labour market. The interviewer's role in the employment interview was often described as 'interrogator'. For example, Alex referred to interview panels as "employers hunting in packs" with interviewers "ganging up on you" (Alex, individual interview). Sue talked of "two people sitting across from me and firing questions" (Sue, individual interview). In this way, interviewers and interviewees were often described as in sharp opposition to one another. This opened an interaction characterised by calculative, defensive actions of interviewees.

Diane felt that the employment interview was a place where you had to explicitly lie about yourself. The main aim was to get the job no matter what. She described the need to tell the interviewer/employer what they wanted to hear, irrespective of whether that was the 'truth'. Hers was perhaps one of the extreme views, but it was familiar to material from other participants that described the need for interviewees to be economical with the truth. Interviewees sought to manipulate the personal information they disclosed during the employment interview.

Participants justified such tactics through their perception of the intense competition for jobs dictated by labour market conditions. Diane described her experience of applying for a job that over 200 other people had applied for and 25 people had been offered interviews for. In this way, the employment interview became a valuable and scarce resource. Participants felt the odds were stacked against them in

getting an employment interview, but if one was offered they felt concerned to exploit it to the full. This intense competition also led to an intense pressure felt in the employment interview, involving feelings of considerable anxiety.

Anxiety

Sue described herself as feeling intensely anxious and intimidated in employment interviews. "I get myself so worked up into a state and I start to stutter and I get my words all mixed up. What a mess I get into" (Sue, individual interview). Sue felt that the atmosphere in the interview was crucial to how anxious she felt. This was about the settings she walked into rather than internal states she brought with her. She referred to the formality of how interviewers introduced themselves, their tone of voice, and the expression on their faces. She described the employment interview as a tinder box due to the intense competition that surrounded each employment opportunity. This tension would ignite considerable anxiety in her depending on the social climate interviewers created in the interview setting.

Anxiety was also provoked by being outnumbered by interviewers. Interview panels were experienced as particularly intimidating. Participants described walking into a room full of interviewers where the layout of tables and chairs led them to feel encircled and entrapped. For some participants they found the setting stifling: "It was like piggy in the middle. All these people sitting around me, watching my every move, it was really horrible, you know?" (Dawn, focus group). Dawn felt unprepared for the situation and this was an unpleasant experience for her. Alistair was prepared for being outnumbered in his employment interview. He was sent a letter a week before the interview to let him know that there would be three people on the interview panel. However, he still felt considerably anxious during the interview:

It is difficult to calm down when you don't know who you should be looking at. When one of them asks you a question, you look at them, but then you know that there are two other people there that you should be looking at as well. Because you are sitting there, they're not all talking to you, but you have to talk to all of them. They just talk to one person, you have to talk to three. It's awkward and doesn't really put you at ease at all.
(Alistair, individual interview)

Alistair was describing what was an unfamiliar social interaction. Though it was a group setting, it was experienced as multiple, one-to-one interactions rather than a group interaction. At one and the same time, the interviewees was asked to interact both with individuals (the questioners) and the group (the interview panel). Interviewers were asked only to interact with the interviewee. The unfamiliarity of many participants with how to manage this type of interaction exacerbated the feelings of anxiety they experienced. Throughout such material, interviewees had feelings of being outnumbered and intimidated by interviewers. The tension was palpable.

Trick and Stupid Questions

Some participants expressed their concern over the type of questions they were asked in the interview, referring to them as ‘trick questions’. “... they asked some funny questions that had nothing to do with ... that to me were irrelevant but it must be how they find out what you are like and how you deal with situations” (Carla, individual interview). Carla felt some of the questions she was asked in her employment interview were irrelevant but she was also aware the questions may have been part of a clever interviewing technique: a way of uncovering information about her she was not aware she was disclosing. She experienced this type of questioning as covert and intrusive.

Alex referred to some questions as “very stupid”. He described questions as wasteful, particularly those that he felt he had already answered either through the job application form or through an answer he had given to a previous question in the interview. The type of questioning participants experienced in interviews often left them feeling manipulated and disempowered in the selection process. Alex felt manipulated by interviewers repeating the same questions, though slightly differently worded, throughout the interview. He felt they were trying to trick him into providing inconsistent answers and he found it insulting. There was a feeling of information being extracted out with the control of the interviewee with questions having a hidden or secondary purpose. This made it difficult for participants to know how to respond and insecure over how their answers were being used.

Where questions felt insufficiently tailored to a participant’s own circumstances, this led to feelings of insignificance, of not being treated as an individual. This felt like being processed *en masse*.

You’re just one of many ... Someone else has been sitting where you are sitting, shook the same hands as you’ve shook, drinking the same cup of coffee ... answering the same silly questions. You are trying to stand out and they are trying to treat you all the same. (Bill, individual interview)

Feedback

Occasionally, though only occasionally, participants received feedback on their interview performance. In particular, the experience of being told “your name will be kept on file” was felt to be a fairly insidious form of feedback. Simon felt in a state of limbo after this happened to him. “I felt, like, have I got a job or not ... maybe they’ll give me a job next week. I’ve been waiting for two months and I haven’t heard anything ... you don’t know where you stand. I doubt they kept my name anyway, maybe they were just saying it to keep me quiet” (Simon, focus group). Simon felt unable to voice criticism about the employer or the selection procedure. He was unlikely to criticise them when they still held an offer of employment over him. This employment offer, however, was sufficiently intangible to leave him feeling suspended in his search for employment. He was caught between feeling he had attained a partially successful outcome, feeling he had sufficiently impressed the employer for them to keep his name on their records, to feeling the employer was

just making an empty gesture. He had no means of knowing which it was. In a way, this felt more problematic to him than receiving no feedback at all.

Not receiving any form of feedback following an employment interview would be a more frequent experience of research participants. Often, participants were left knowing they had been unsuccessful at a job interview but not knowing why. Also, there were several instances where participants were not even told they had been unsuccessful. "I was waiting ages to hear from them. They said they would be in touch in two weeks. By the end of the third week there was still no news, so I just figured that I didn't have the job ... they couldn't even be bothered to let me know ... there's too many of them that do that" (Ken, individual interview). Realising your employment interview had been unsuccessful was a conclusion the participant had to draw for her/himself. This depended on how long they felt 'no news' was indicative of them not getting the job. In the meantime they were left in limbo. This lack of feedback was described as particularly debilitating.

Employment Interview Experiences of Disabled People

When disabled participants talked about their experiences of employment interviews, many of the concerns identified above similarly arose but their context and nature were very different.

Anxiety

Feelings of anxiety continued to play a central role. For example, similar to the previous section on anxiety, Lorna talked of how in one employment interview she had the "sweat lashing out" of her (Lorna, individual interview). She felt under particular pressure because she was disabled. She felt there was more that was against than for her in such settings. Diane felt it was particularly important for disabled people to relax in employment interviews. She felt disabled job applicants may feel everyone was against them, be more likely to lack confidence, to feel awkward, and to be nervous in an interview. She felt this was due to a disabled interviewee's lack of experience in interviews and experience of being 'put down' by the comments and actions of others. This type of material came from disabled as well as non-disabled participants. In the case of the latter, it was framed in terms of the hypothetical other rather than the participant talking of their own performance at job interviews. Where disabled participants reflected on their own experiences, the material changed focus and additional concerns emerged.

Sandy talked of how he could detect interviewers were nervous when he entered an employment interview. He sensed their discomfort at asking questions around his impairment. This unease in turn made Sandy feel ill at ease. Kate found interviewers to be uncomfortable with her hearing impairment. When she did not hear an interviewer's question, she felt awkward when the interviewer then avoided asking the question again. She was also aware of interviewers becoming increasingly self-conscious which, in turn, made her feel uncomfortable.

I was nervous to start with. It didn't help when you have these gibbering wrecks in front of you ... I can [lip] read fairly easily when people are talking straight at me, but I think they were a bit embarrassed, you know, worried about patronising me. One of them kept covering his face, which made it hard to read what he was saying and I ended up getting myself all het up. If they were more relaxed ... I think I would have done better.
(Kate, steering group)

Thus, the nervousness and anxiety felt by disabled interviewees was often worsened by their perception of the interviewer's discomfort. This added to the interview nerves the disabled job applicant was already feeling.

Feedback

The lack of feedback on interview performance was particularly felt by disabled interviewees where they were not certain whether their abilities had fully been recognised over and above their impairment. Alex spoke of taking a sight test. "I don't think that I could read the screen at all ... but I'm not sure ... they never gave me a reason" (Alex, individual interview). For Alex, the outcome of the interview, in terms of securing employment, was unsuccessful. He was left not knowing whether he failed the interview because he failed the eye test or whether it was due to some other aspect of the interview. Indeed, he was unsure whether he had even failed the eye test, though he had suspicions that he had. Feedback figured prominently as a concern for disabled interviewees as they were left not knowing what was wrong with their interview performance. Disabled interviewees were uncertain over whether the employment decision had been made on the basis of their merit or whether it was based on their impairment.

Feedback was further viewed as crucial when litigation was threatened against an employer. If a disabled job applicant was left feeling uncertain over whether it was their lack of merit or their impairment that had the greatest impact on the employment decision, this could leave the door open for litigation. "I know I've felt that I'd been turned down because I was disabled, and because they never told me why I got turned down there's nothing to stop me thinking that, is there?" (Sandy, consulting group). However, the employment interview was felt to be a place where interviewers could practise discrimination covertly, and where such discrimination would be impossible to prove under law. Diane described how employers could just say the disabled interviewee failed the interview, which would hide the discrimination that was going on during the selection process. Feedback could just be rhetoric that would cover up discrimination. She felt that most employers would have clever enough lawyers to do this for them if they were unable to do it for themselves.

Distorting Detail

As mentioned earlier, Diane did not balk at the idea of being dishonest in an employment interview. However, here she linked the need to be dishonest directly

to her impairment. She felt she would never disclose her impairment during an interview because she wanted to demonstrate her abilities. The act of identifying herself as disabled to an employer was, for Diane, commensurate with stating that she lacked abilities. She felt an implication of this would be her having to hide her impairment from then on if she was offered the job. She could find no way around this, preferring whatever the consequence not to disclose for the sake of getting the job. She appreciated this was only a possibility for disabled people who were able to hide their impairment. Diane felt that disclosing her impairment would have been problematic in her attempts to secure employment.

The issue of being asked about their impairment at the time of applying for a job meant participants were caught in a quandary over whether to disclose and risk discrimination or not disclose and risk being found out as dishonest later in the selection process. The latter could result in them being either rejected from the selection process or dismissed following a job offer. A particularly strong concern was the threat of early rejection. Just putting 'disability' on the application form was often felt to lead to immediate rejection. "Putting epilepsy down on the application form is the same as asking the employer to put your application in the bin. If you are going to do that you might as well bin your application yourself and cut out the middleman" (Marion, benefit advice interview). Occasionally, this dilemma was eased if the participant felt they had something positive to offer through disclosing their impairment. For example, Claire talked of mentioning during employment interviews the Employment Service schemes she was eligible for: her impairment meant she had access to funding and equipment from the Employment Service. Here, disability was felt to be introducing negativity into the employment interview. This required interviewees to bring in something positive alongside the disclosure of their impairment to compensate and lessen its negative impact.

Sometimes the felt need to keep impairment undisclosed was intense. Marion talked of her fear when she was younger of disclosing in an interview that she had epilepsy. "I used to sit there and say [to myself] 'they know I'm an epileptic, I am not going to get this job'. I couldnae go through with the interview" (Marion, benefit advice interview). Diane described one interview where she had disclosed her impairment to the interviewer. She said no, when an interviewer asked if she required a special chair because of her impairment. She told me this was a lie, but she felt if she had said yes to the employer's question, this would have compromised her chances of getting the job. Thus, participants described the way they would distort information about themselves, leaving some detail undisclosed and deliberately distorting other detail. Conspicuous was a perceived lack of trust between the job applicant and the employer organisation. This was both a lack of participants' trust in employers/interviewers and participants perceiving employers/interviewers lacking trust in them.

Awareness

Some participants felt the employment interview was a means of increasing awareness of disability issues in an organisation if disabled applicants were to apply for

employment with that organisation. “If they see there’s a disabled person can answer all their questions, to me that’ll help get rid of all their misconceptions, and probably the next time it happens, [interviewers] will be more prepared and more at ease” (Sandy, individual interview). Sandy further identified a lack of communication within employer organisations which he felt would impede any awareness raising that takes place in an employment interview. He felt that if communication between personnel and other departments in an employer organisation was not sufficiently strong, raising awareness on disability issues would be difficult.

Sandy, a wheelchair user, attributed his own positive experience of an employment interview to the fact the recruiting employer already had disabled people working in the organisation. He felt this helped as the interviewer was well informed about disability access issues. Diane also felt that having a disabled employee already in the employer organisation, and more so having a disabled person on the interview panel, was helpful in her employment interview, though in a way she did not realise at the time. She only found out that a member of the interviewing panel was disabled after she had been offered the job. She felt there being a disabled interviewer present was an important factor in her getting the job, feeling that particular interviewer would have been more understanding of her circumstances.

However, having a disabled interviewer on an interview panel was by no means a guarantee that a disabled interviewee would get a fair hearing. One disabled participant talked with embarrassment of how he would probably discriminate against disabled people, even though he was disabled himself and had experience of being a disabled interviewee. “I sit here feeling guilty because the position I am in now I do interview people ... and maybe it is being ignorant about, you know, different thingummies ... but I am afraid that the shutters come [down], you know?” (Ewen, focus group). Ewen was having difficulty expressing this view, this was perhaps especially difficult in a focus group of disabled people, but his views were honest and insightful. He admitted that though he was disabled himself he would still discriminate against other disabled people when he was interviewing people for a job. He said he would discriminate when he was uncertain what an impairment meant. He mentioned epilepsy in particular as an impairment he knew little about and which he would probably have a ‘knee jerk reaction’ to and discriminate against.

Merit and Proof

Disabled participants talked of having to ‘prove themselves’ in the employment interview. Often this was felt to be important due to the unequal treatment disabled applicants received. “You go for this interview and they go ‘wait a minute, look at this medical history, there is no way ...’ you know? So you have to fight and prove to them that you can” (Lorna, focus group). Where an employer looks at your medical history and begins to see you in more negative terms, you have to counteract this by proving to the employer that you can do the job, more so than if you were non-disabled, or the employer did not view you as disabled. Here was the strong feeling that people should be judged on merit, and that impairment should be put to one side. For example, Ewen talked of how he was offered a job once an employer

had learnt of his work experience and once the employer had looked beyond his impairment. In particular, interviewees needed to counteract a tendency of interviewers to identify an absence of ability when interviewees presented themselves as disabled.

My discussions with disabled participants were replete with examples where they had been treated unfairly in the selection procedure. Here the employment interview itself was described as a barrier to employment. Lorna talked of her experience of having to go through four separate employment interviews for one job, where other non-disabled applicants were only asked to attend one interview. Moreover, she was asked to hand over a report from her doctor before the employer would allow the selection process to move on. She talked of her personal outrage and the outrage of her doctor of her having to go through such a long, drawn-out and humiliating procedure. She was put through such an extended selection procedure because the employer knew she was disabled. Her awareness that she was being singled out for 'special treatment' because of her impairment invoked strong feelings for her. Sandy also wanted to be treated fairly at an employment interview. He wanted the chance to prove himself in the same way non-disabled people were allowed the opportunity to prove themselves. He felt that often interviews would obstruct disabled people from showing employers their ability to do the job.

Summary

From my discussions with both disabled and non-disabled participants, my understanding of employment interviews was of a social setting that could be considerably hostile. Interviewees were suspicious of interviewers and felt interviewers were in turn suspicious of them. The labour market conditions were intricately implicated in much of this. With competition for employment being so fierce, the employment interview became the focus of increasing pressure for interviewees. The interview setting was seen as a 'tinder box' of tension. The practice of interview panels (multiple interviewers) often exacerbated the feelings of anxiety and stress of interviewees with feelings of being 'ganged up on'. This was described as impacting upon the way information was handled by interviewees in the interview setting. Participants talked of 'bending the truth' in their attempts to secure employment. Further, the nature of how information was handled by interviewers was described as characterised by manipulation. Interviewees felt as though they were being processed *en masse*. Combined, this led to feelings of disempowerment and dislocation from the employment interview. Little information was being exchanged back to interviewees which led to people feeling confused and insecure about the whole experience.

The above themes took on additional meaning in the context of the experiences of disabled interviewees. Stress was highly characteristic of such experiences, but here it was also seen as a characteristic of interviewers. Interviewers were described as reacting nervously and insecurely with disabled interviewees. This led to disabled interviewees picking up on and in turn experiencing such anxiety and tension themselves. Lack of feedback also took on additional significance for disabled

interviewees. With no feedback about their performance, disabled interviewees were left not knowing whether it was their impairment or something else that was the reason for being unsuccessful at interview. With such information absent, this was felt to be a source of possible litigation: disabled interviewees having little reason to counter their feeling that an employer had unfairly discriminated against them. The employment interview was also identified as an effective medium through which an employer could disguise any discriminatory practices towards disabled people they may have been guilty of. Information was described as distorted by disabled interviewees, this time driven by concerns to hide or avoid disclosing their impairment. As one participant put it, if you mention your impairment on the application form you are effectively inviting the employer to put your application form in the bin. However, if impairment was addressed in employment interviews it was seen as having the potential to benefit subsequent disabled people who were applying for employment. Giving interviewers and employers more experience of disabled applicants had the perceived potential of ironing out problems of employers' unfamiliarity with disability issues. This was described as having the potential to benefit disabled job applicants in the future even if meanwhile disabled people had to experience unsatisfactory and inappropriate interview arrangements. Contact with disabled people was seen as having further benefit if such contact was in the form of the employer already employing disabled people, or better still, if disabled people were on interviewing panels. Although it was also noted that just because an interviewer was disabled her/himself, this did not preclude them from discriminating against disabled people. However discrimination was experienced, it left disabled applicants having to counter the negativity their impairment brought into the minds of interviewers. Disabled people had to prove themselves above and beyond the negativity they encountered in employment interviews.

Conclusions

This was a qualitative, inductive and hence exploratory study that was not necessarily meant to be representative of all disabled interviewees. Rather, it sought to discover contextual layers of meaning in the experiences of the participants in this study and to therefore suggest new ways of conceptualising employment interview issues for disabled people. The following lessons are those I consider most important for the attention of researchers and policy makers alike.

Socio-economic themes were particularly implicated in the research findings, most notably the context of the labour market. This context was often invoked through descriptions of the high levels of hostility within the interview setting and the 'battle' to secure employment and be removed from benefits: *from welfare to warfare*. This is a feature that is markedly absent from the majority of employment interview research. When this contextualising focus is taken, particularly in respect to disabled people (though it holds for unemployed non-disabled people also), human rights issues are invoked.

Unemployment levels throughout the UK were high during the time of this study. Looking at the Government-released seasonally adjusted figures in Spring of

1997, there were 1,625,700 people unemployed which amounted to 5.9 per cent of the economically active population in the UK. However, this figure may not have accurately reflected the unemployment rates and other figures had been calculated that suggested that unemployment was actually considerably higher. The Unemployment Unit Slack Labour Force Measure, for example, cited the count as 5,171,000 (16.8 per cent of the economically active population). This figure would have approached six million if we included 703,000 of the 1,673,000 workers on temporary contracts who were seeking but unable to secure permanent employment (Unemployment Unit, 1997a,b). Turning to the number of jobs available, in May 1997 there were 274,000 unfilled vacancies notified to Employment Service Job centres (Unemployment Unit, 1997a). Depending on which count we use this calculates out as between 6 and 21 potential employees competing for each notified vacancy. Although the number of notified vacancies is likely to be only a proportion of the actual jobs in the labour market, these figures still suggested clear evidence of a high labour surplus in the UK. Placed in this context, I would question the employment interview researcher's role as technocrat on issues of validity and reliability and suggest that they position themselves towards the uses and abuses of employment interviews in the context of labour market conditions.

In the US, over half a decade after the introduction of the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, there had been little to suggest optimism over the employment prospects of disabled people. Disabled people continued to be under-represented in the labour force (Blanck, 1995). The same appears to be happening in the UK following the passage of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA). The material I have presented in this paper suggests that discrimination in employment interviews is very much apparent in the experiences of disabled people. In this study, participants offered an insight into the difficulty of the task that lay ahead.

The pathways to employment for disabled people may be further strewn with hurdles if researchers choose to take the side of the employer rather than the employee in their interest in the employment interview process. Researchers have begun to win the favour of the business community by abandoning earlier work that demonstrated the fallibility of the employment interview and by concentrating on promoting the utility of the employment interview through asserting the superiority of more structured, standardised, multiple-interviewer styles of interviewing. Participants in this project found these to be the features of employment interviews that were particularly disabling and alienating. Recent work has suggested that discrimination against minority group members may be avoided through using just such interview formats. Indeed, it is now common Equal Opportunities practice for employers to use standardised, highly structured, board interview formats. However, in whose interest is this practice? It is not clear whether it primarily helps protect interviewees from discrimination or employers from litigation. A quote from Williamson *et al.* suggests to me the latter when they say that the more structured, standardised board interview "may not be scrutinised by the courts as closely as traditional interviews that involve much greater interviewer subjectivity. Accordingly, it should be easier for an employer to discharge its burden of articulating a non-discriminatory reason for the hiring decision and producing some evidence in

support of the reason” (Williamson *et al.*, 1997, p. 902). Research that shows the effectiveness of new advances in employment interview ‘technology’ appears to be increasing employer legal defensibility rather than interviewee cultural and psychological safety.

In this study I did not cover any instances where disabled interviewees applied for jobs where their impairment might be perceived as an additional qualification for the job. Such is increasingly the case for employment opportunities in organisations run by disabled people and research positions on projects that focus on disability issues where human resource managers and research grant holders have an allegiance to the Social model and/or acknowledge the expertise of disabled people on disability issues. However, recent rather volatile debates in this journal and elsewhere have examined the implications of the role of disabled and non-disabled people in the disability movement and disability studies (Branfield, 1998, 1999; Duckett, 1998b) and have highlighted the tensions involved when seeking to reverse discriminatory practices away from disabled and onto non-disabled people. More specifically, employment opportunities remain restricted while the Medical model dominates how employers perceive the potential of prospective disabled employees and legislation remains cautious over the issue of positive discrimination where disabled employees are recruited in preference to non-disabled employees. Indeed, positive discrimination became illegal for organisations that come under the *Local Government and Housing Act* of 1989 following the inception of the *Disability Discrimination Act*.

Finally, this piece of research contrasts with mainstream research into disability and employment interviews in that its focus has avoided a victim-blaming ideology. Victim blaming is apparent in the rehabilitation literature in particular and employment interview research in general and is embedded in a Medical model perspective. In this project, I did not look for faults in disabled interviewees to account for their negative experiences of employment interviews and I aligned my research to the Social model of disability. Still today, rehabilitation specialists command most of the research resources invested in this specialist area. Historically, they have invested these resources in fixing people rather than places. The material I have presented in this article gives suggestion to those elements in the employment selection process that lead to the negative experiences of disabled interviewees. I have spelt this out in more detail elsewhere (Duckett, 1998) where I develop material that points more readily to political rather than personal fixes. In this paper I have sought to contribute to work on the ‘problem’ of disabled people at employment interviews through the perspective I oppose as much as through the perspective I adopt.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for their funding of this research, for Falkirk Council and Clackmannan Council for providing additional funding for the action phases of the research and for the two anonymous reviewers who offered constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this

article. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily of the funding bodies.

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