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Chapter 8

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Professionals of Policies for Fighting Unemployment in France: the construction and de-construction of professionalism

Abstract

The increase in unemployment that occurred in France at the end of the seventies is one aspect that has favoured the creation of jobs specializing in the field of social welfare for the unemployed.

This paper focuses on the analysis of the professional group of advisers specializing in job seeking. The first section traces the circumstances of the emergence of such a group and explains the heterogeneity of these advisers who seem, nevertheless, to have developed a specific common expertise and the same interpretation of their professionalism. In the second part, the activity of these professionals is situated in the larger framework of unemployed policies which result from a combination of international, European and national influences. The study of recent changes to unemployment policies reveals the effects of the 'macro' on the 'micro' level. In the third section, it is explained that new measures of social welfare for the unemployed tend to challenge the moral and deontological principles of these advisers whose professional identity and professionalism are challenged. These challenges to their identities are due to the intensification of the follow-up of the unemployed and to the application of bureaucratic, monitoring and measurement techniques and logic to assess the efficiency of the tools for promoting a quick return to work.

Keywords: Support of job seekers in France, accompaniment, the unemployed, advisers, professionalism, French unemployment policies, European Employment Strategy.

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Introduction

The increase of unemployment that occurred in France at the end of the seventies has, among others things, favoured the creation of jobs specializing in the field of social welfare for the unemployed. Faced with the prospect of massive unemployment, job centres, training and guidance institutions have been inundated with requests which are more and more difficult to satisfy because of the general labour market deterioration. These institutions have had to diversify the range of their services. One consequence of the demand for labour becoming scarce, is that job centres and guidance institutions have gradually developed or implemented job support services.

Thus, the ‘ANPE’ⁱ (National Agency for Employment) has recruited new agents, but the rise in agent numbers has not been proportionate to the growing number of the unemployed. Overwhelmed with the influx of users, the Agency has called on services providers as an outsource, mostly made up of associations and liberal consultants. The ‘Conseils Régionaux’ and the ‘DDTEFP’ⁱⁱ (Departmental Directorate of Work, Employment and Vocational Training), as the financers of training and professional integration, have added sessions on job guidance to the list of their services. At the same time training institutions for adults, ‘Grandes Ecoles’, universities, and others institutions of higher education have also provided such services.

This paper focuses on the analysis of the professional group of advisers specializing in job seeking. The first section traces the circumstances of the emergence of such a group and explains the heterogeneity of these advisers who seem, nevertheless, to have developed a specific common expertise and the same interpretation of their

professionalism. In the second part, the work activity of these professionals is situated in the larger framework of unemployment policies which result from a combination of international, European and national influences. The study of recent changes to unemployment policies reveals the effects of the 'macro' on the 'micro' level. In the third section, it is explained that new measures of social welfare for the unemployed tend to challenge the moral and deontological principles of these advisers whose professional identity and professionalism are challenged. These challenges to their identity are due to the intensification of the follow-up of the unemployed and to the application of bureaucratic, monitoring and measurement techniques and logic to assess the efficiency of the tools for promoting a quick return to work.

Emergence of professionals specializing in the support of job seekers

Professionals for the support of job seekers form one of a new category of workers in the field of 'social intervention' (Ion and Ravon, 2000 *Sophie – reference needed* **OK**). This field emerged in the early 1980's at the same time as the implementation of a twofold policy, professional integration and the improvement of rundown urban areas. The creation of these jobs came about in response to economic difficulties and labour market shrinkage. The worsening of social inequalities and tremendous expansion of casual labour have, in some ways, generated an extension and a de-specialization of social work. The boundaries of this professional field have become unclear due to the arrival of new workers who have failed to adopt a clearly defined mission and purpose.

The professionals who support job seekers form a rather blurred professional group for several reasons. Firstly, the huge range of employers contributes to maintaining

the diversity of this group. Among the employers are the institutions of the Public Employment Service (PES), such as the 'ANPE' or the 'AFPA'ⁱⁱⁱ (a national public association of vocational training for adults), but all the employment service providers of the PES (Fressinet, 2004) are also included. In general all these professionals are divided between four types of service providers and organizational location: private training centres, public training centres, associations of the social or socio-cultural field, and advisory associations or offices (Chevrier-Fatôme and Simonin, 2004).

In addition, the professionals who support job seekers have various job titles which are constantly changing. For example, the 'ROME'^{iv} (a book of job definitions), put together by the 'ANPE', includes a list of thirty-four job titles under the heading for 'professionals in the socioeconomic field'. Names such as 'adviser in...' or 'chargé de...'^v (no English equivalent) are numerous and their general nature demonstrates the instability of these titles. This list, which remains incomplete, ends with an interesting section concerning the qualifications and the professional experience required to be recruited as an adviser : 'There is no specific training or professional experience to practice these jobs. The required qualifications are heterogeneous and depend on the jobs and the institutions. These required qualifications can vary from school leaving certificates to university Masters degrees. The knowledge or experience of the social and economic environment of businesses, and an interest in understanding individual and collective behaviour are two advantages which make access to this field of employment easier.'^{vi} [*Sophie – page, reference needed here : OK, see below, foot note*]

As a consequence of the diversity of employers, the lack of an established job title and of a specific required qualification, it is not possible to give an accurate description of the characteristics of the advisers who support job seekers. Without quantitative data and clear definitions, the researcher has to adopt a different approach, that is to say questioning the professionals about their practices and work activities. The first findings of our inquiry conducted by semi-structured interviews with advisers (see methodology appendix), demonstrate a whole combination of things in common and, particularly, a shared professional identity. The advisers have forged their own identity, not under the influence of definitions or instructions given by managers or employers, but in everyday encounters with the same situations, requests, constraints, difficulties and limits. Although there are various kinds of job seekers (young people without experience, qualified or not, long-term and/or 'older' unemployed, immigrant unemployed, etc.), the advisers are all faced with the same objectives, that is to say the integration of the unemployed into the workforce. The findings reveal, for instance, that in spite of a few variations, the content of the advice is nearly always the same. The advisers help the unemployed to take stock of their occupational career, to define an occupational project, to write a *curriculum vitae*, to send applications, to practise interviews, to analyse the results of their job search, and so on.

Beyond the shared and common work practices, the discourse of the advisers about their professionalism is very similar. They refer to a professional ethos closely linked to moral and deontological values associated with the field of social work. This way of thinking seems in fact to be widespread in the field of 'social intervention' as Dubechot, *et al.* (2000, p. 152) state : 'The generic category of social work remains operating to provide components of the representation of the social role played by the

new workers [in the field of social intervention]. This representation includes claimed – personal and social – skills and a professional identity’.

The advisers refuse to be aligned with simple technicians for job seeking. They do much more than passing on tools and methods useful to find a job. However, they don’t want to be taken for ‘assistantes sociales’^{vii} (no English equivalent). They can not solve the personal, social, financial or health problems of the unemployed. But that does not mean that they avoid speaking about these problems. On the contrary, they offer a sympathetic ear, and where possible refer the unemployed to other professionals.

The advisers are experts in human relations, in particular between job seekers and employers, and knowledgeable about labour markets (Divay, 1999). Their relations with the unemployed are guided by the professional principles of social work : benevolence, support, non-judgmental attentive ear, good professional distance, voluntary participation of the unemployed, needs analysis, introspection, verbalization of the problems, moral support, identification of unconscious blocks, help the unemployed to be or become autonomous. The unemployed are encouraged to make, and own, their own choices and decisions.

Therefore the counselling professions of social work are a relevant system of reference for these new workers. They share a common definition of their professionalism which has not been imposed by their managers. Moreover, they do not try to claim it in order to strengthen their professional group and get recognition. They do not have such intentions because they are scattered in different institutions

and have various employment statuses. These advisers do not form an entity, but they have a clear awareness of having a specific role, in particular because their activity becomes more and more an important political and economic issue. The support of job seekers is in fact a central issue due to its link with measures for fighting unemployment in France and with the changes and variations in the unemployment rate.

Developments in and changes to unemployment policies in France

A complete study of support for job seekers and the emergence of new advisers could entail going back at least to the end of the 19th century, when the categories of ‘unemployed’ and ‘unemployment’ were designated (Topalov, 1994 *Sophie – reference needed* **OK**). The purpose of this paper is more modest and restricted to the study of a shorter period, from the 1970’s to the present. In particular, it is important to consider a turning point at the end of the 1990’s. Whereas the advisers had been obscure until this time, their activity then became more visible due to an intensification of political and institutional demands about unemployment as a social and economic problem. These demands have gradually taken shape under different international influences which will be considered next.

International influences

French unemployment public policies are formed principally by main actors, such as Government, Senate and the French National Assembly, which involves the individual participation of ministers, senators and deputies. Decisions are made with reference to international models and directives. The origin of these models is usually difficult to identify accurately.

Barbier (2001), in his work on the European Employment Strategy (EES)^{viii}, outlines the complex relationship between international, European and national levels. He states that the EES does not constitute an independent body, but that it is widely interlinked with other spheres of activity. The politico-economic discourse for the EES, according to this author, is based on a prevailing neo-liberal ideology, that is to say an orthodox economic paradigm. However, this international system of reference is not the only factor influencing the system of social welfare and EES macroeconomic policies. Another influence is the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) which has affected EES guidelines with investigative reports dictating preventative and active measures against long-term unemployment and for the most disadvantaged job seekers.

The European Union or ‘ “Brussels” represents only one of the channels where the construction of this common economic thought is developed. “Brussels” is both a forum and one of the relevant political arenas which has a powerful influence on the adoption of a common reference system. However the transformation of ideas in the French political system of relevant actors did not depend on the EES.’ (Barbier, 2001, p.89).

Economic or political science analyses show the relatively quick spread of neo-liberal models in France which can be identified in the political discourses and choices of the early 1980’s. According to Jobert (1994), this conversion to neo-liberalism happened in 1983, when the socialist government of the time announced the implementation of a ‘politique de rigueur’ (austerity measures). These measures basically consisted of a

transition from Keynesian policies, based on State intervention, to an economic strategy of liberalization and deflation dictated by monetary priority. From this perspective, solidarity principles altered. The change resulted in a concentration on the reduction of poverty, but at the cost of less emphasis on inequalities. This global objective affected above all the most disadvantaged in society.

The intention here is to underline the complexity of the factors which have impacted on national public unemployment policies. These factors include a combination of complex 'universal' ideological influences and international aims. The influences and aims are a result of OECD, EES, relationships based on unstable alliances between certain Member States, but also by actors who use the EES simply as a 'lever' (Barbier, 2004) to advance their own political agendas. After reviewing these issues, it can be seen that when studying the content of the EES, no direct link exists between European directives and national measures. In fact the EES has only non-coercitive influence on the Member States which are not obliged to obey its recommendations. Furthermore, the European Commission does not have enough financial means to have a direct effect on professional integration, even if the European Social Fund (ESF) can have influence at certain basic levels (Rouault, 2002).

Parallels between the EES directive and French unemployment policies

The support for job seekers, the study of EES developments and French unemployment policies show certain parallels, but a direct relation of cause and effect cannot be attributed, because of the reasons previously stated.

In the Treaty of Amsterdam (June 1997) a place is given to the issue of employment with the additional title 8 'Employment' (art. 125 to 130). Later, in November 1997, the European Council in Luxembourg launched the EES. The first of the four main sections (called 'pillars') is entitled : 'Improving Employability' of which the first two guidelines^{ix} are as follows:

1: 'Every unemployed young person is offered a new start before reaching six months of unemployment, in the form of training, retraining, work practice, a job or other employability measure.'

2: 'Unemployed adults are also offered a fresh start before reaching twelve months of unemployment by one of the aforementioned means or, more generally, by accompanying individual vocational guidance.'

The French National Reform Programme (NRP)^x, in 1998, announced in its guidelines the implementation of the 'Service Personnalisé pour un Nouveau Départ' (SPNDE)^{xi} which has been set up by the 'ANPE'. 'SPNDE' was intended for the long-term unemployed and the under-25s having work integration difficulties. Each unemployed person had a meeting with an adviser and, at the end of the interview, four types of action was offered depending on the degree of difficulties of the unemployed: support to active job search, access to training, personalized advising, personalized advising with social support. *[Sophie – I'm not clear about personalized accompaniment. Could you explain further to enable me to find a better English word if 'advising' is not appropriate]*

Later, in 2001, the EES guidelines mentioned the notion of ‘New Start’, but the second guideline stressed unemployed encouragement to ‘seek and take up work’ and the necessity to increase ‘significantly the proportion of unemployed and inactive persons benefiting from active measures to improve their employability with a view to effective integration into the labour market.’^{xii} [*Sophie – page and reference needed* **OK see below, foot note**] With this aim in mind, the sixth guideline indicated that States have to develop the ‘job-matching capacities of their employment services’. Then the seventh guideline recommended the development of ‘pathways consisting of effective preventive and active policy measures to promote the integration into the labour market of groups and individuals at risk or with a disadvantage’^{xiii}. [*page and reference needed* **OK see below**] In July 2001, France implemented the ‘PARE-PAP’^{xiv} (Support Plan for Return-to-Work – Personalized Action Project), which took the place of the ‘SPNDE’ and made provisions for personalized advice at least every six months for all unemployed (with or without unemployment allowance).

Other measures have emerged since 2001, but their detailed description would go beyond the remit of this paper. Only the more significant changes will be indicated. One of these is the reform of the ANPE in 2005 which instigated the end of the Agency monopoly^{xv}. Since the 1980’s, the ANPE had already used service providers but, with this reform, the existing practices become official. This has not been without effect. The ‘UNEDIC’^{xvi} (French national organization managing unemployment benefit schemes) has also been authorized to subcontract support for job seekers to private operators. Because of the growing number of advisers, competition in the advice market has increased, notably with the arrival of temping agencies from this point authorized to participate in the Public Employment Service.

French unemployment public policies do show similarities with EES aims. The notion of 'activation', present in the official documents of the European Commission or Council (employment guidelines, reports, recommendations for Member States, etc.), has clearly affected French measures and the implementation of support for job seekers now called 'unemployed advising' (*accompagnement* in French) [*Sophie - again accompaniment not clear : could we make this addition in brackets?*] (Barbier, 2002). Since 2001, the unemployed have more numerous and frequent compulsory interviews with 'ANPE' advisers. Such follow-up becomes massively generalized, yet gives more individualized attention. This starts very quickly after registration at 'ANPE' in order to avoid the long-term unemployment risk. Barbier (2001) states that the introduction of 'SPNDE', and afterwards the 'PARE-PAP' its successor, has been marked by the debate between preventative and curative policies, an issue introduced by EES. These fundamental changes have had a direct impact at the ground level on the unemployed and the work practices of advisers.

Challenged professionalism of advisers supporting job seekers

Intensification of control and development of the support of job seekers is closely monitored and examined. The financers of these activities, ('ANPE', 'UNEDIC' and local authorities) are more and more engaged in the measurement and assessment of such measures. Both 'ANPE' advisers and service providers are subject to precise targets and intentional placement rates which apply to most of the unemployed, with the aim of a quick-return-to-work. The advisers have to get good results. So, they are obliged to stimulate and encourage the unemployed and increase their job-search motivation and activity. These practices are more or less easy to carry out depending

on the type of unemployed and their likelihood of finding a job. The advisers will have a better placement rate with the young qualified unemployed, than with the long-term unemployed older adults. A young female adviser, employed by an association, has had (as she says) to ‘assume everything’ on behalf of the illiterate unemployed. She has had to help them to find a job during a project financed by the ‘ANPE’ :

Question: ‘And how long did the advisory period last?’

Answer: Three months. That is why we were obliged to adapt ourselves and the people were not quite... We were obliged to act on behalf of them. Because the duration of the session was not elastic, it was not possible... Even if the people needed a six months advisory period, it was not possible...

Question: It was not renewable ?

Answer: Well, no! Anyway, we could not ask [for an extension], because that would have been misinterpreted : “Well, give us more...” We can not either... We can make recommendations, but they are not supposed to take them into account. And, then, there must be a budget!

Question: So, generally, that was only for three months?

Answer: Exactly!

Question: When you are dealing with people who are not able to read and write, how can they use the curriculum vitae for their own use?

Answer: Well... Then, they are not able to do that. That is why I tell you, we do it ourselves, because it is true, the people... er... they are not able to write a CV. That is the same when they have all their papers and hand them in, that’s good! But, when they have nothing... We have to find the dates, how long they were employed in each job, and etc. ,etc. That is also a little bit tedious! Then after, the people will appreciate the CV well done, will be happy to be able to make calls on employers. But writing their CV on their own.... No! They can not even read! So, the unemployed trust us.

Question: And after, how do they go about commenting on their CV to an employer?

Answer: Well, you know, we make appointments. In most cases, we make appointments on their behalf. So, obviously, we have to sell their skill to the employer.’ (Adviser, about thirty, Paris).

Moreover, many advisers stress that the emphasis on a quick return-to-work does not go together with training. Since the implementation of ‘PARE-PAP’ in 2001, they have noticed a decrease in financed training for the unemployed. It does not seem that the investment in ‘human capital’ is the favoured way to improve employability. Instead priority is given to abilities to sell skills on the labour market.

The advisers are not only subject to strict targets during the advisory process, but also at its end. The financers (‘ANPE’, ‘UNEDIC’ or local authorities) have reinforced their bureaucratic tools of control. These consist of detailed forms and questionnaires.

Documentation needs to be rigorous in order to account for all actions taken by job seekers and the results of their efforts. This tightly controlled structure renders the work of advisers more complex. The questionnaire itself (a quantitative tool) does not necessarily correspond with the steps taken by the job seekers during the advisory period (qualitative reality). The criteria, that the advisers are then obliged to submit, prove difficult to apply to their professional practices.

The priority given to the quantitative aspects of the support of job seekers influences the work done by experts. They are required of necessity to assess the cost effectiveness of their activities. The support of job seekers is also analysed from a more qualitative perspective. In this case the advisers are considered as professional intermediaries in the labour market. Their methods are unquestioned and their role is regarded in general as being useful and beneficial to society. Based on qualitative factors, the analysis is first and foremost focused on exchanges between supply and demand and on types of matching. The advisers practical input remains invisible, whether this is because only quantitative results count or because their work is by definition presumed to be *a priori* beneficial.

It is also the case that the increase of competition in the advisory market, due to the arrival of new services for the unemployed, has weakened certain associations. The managers of advisers have to negotiate shorter contracts in which renewal is uncertain. Thus, more and more time is devoted to active promotion and obtaining market tenders. These managers have to justify their own activities by giving a complete demonstration of the methods, skill tools and the expertise of their employees.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the work of advisers who support job seekers is now a changing arena of public action. It is redefined and reconstructed by numerous questions, attempts and experiences which result from national, European and international directives, ideologies and discourses. The trends and achievements of this highly organized and monitored rationalization are closely monitored with the clear objective of a 'quick return-to-work' and the constant assessment of measures for fighting unemployment. The reduction of Public Employment Service costs often represents a major objective which proves onerous for advisers as cost reduction represents a challenge to their practices and professionalism. The reference to and identification with the social work ethos loses its relevance. The adviser's role of guidance and support is more strengthened and focused on the 'motivation' and measurable 'activation' of the unemployed and on direct advice (without a training period). This rationalization is being further developed. New measures and techniques are appearing such as stricter controls in the process of job search (Gervais, 2006) or the use of econometric tools of 'profiling' among the unemployed (Georges, 2006)^{xvii}. The advisers have to deal with conflicting issues such as the increasing technical aspects of their job, and the diminishing relational and human aspects, which result in low professional esteem and job dissatisfaction. Within their professional bodies, the 'appeal of professionalism' (Evetts, 2003) or of protest mobilization, is not standard associational practice. Their organizational hierarchies prefer managerial pressure at local level.

Sociological research on the advisers who support job seekers is worth continuing because of its emerging and developing changes and stages. On the one hand, these inquiries show how the structuration of a professional group is situated at the crossroads of micro and macro political levels and how policy changes affect work practices and professional identities. On the other hand, it is vital to complete studies in progress on this topic taking into consideration the effects and consequences of the assessment of advisers. Quantitative measurement techniques have the drawback of ignoring the day to day content and overall sense of the advisers work, their relations (with clients, managers and fellow professionals) and perceived professional practices and identities.

Methodology appendix

This article presents the first findings of research in progress, started in November 2006 and financed by 'DARES'^{xviii} (Direction of the Organization of Research, Studies and Statistics) of the French Ministry of Employment.

This research focuses on 'the process of unemployed job seekers towards work'. Three laboratories are involved: the GREE of the University of Nancy 2, the LESSOR of the University of Rennes 2 and the Centre d'Economie de la Sorbonne/MATISSE of the University of Paris 1.

The data collection is based on qualitative methods and applied in different stages :

- an inventory of existing research on the topic,
- an analysis of national and European official documents : laws, decrees, circulars, institutional documents of the European Employment Strategy (EES), etc.,

- the conduct of about a hundred semi-structured interviews (recorded and analyzed using a thematic method) with managers of job support centres and with advisers.

The fieldwork is carried out in three regions in France : Brittany, Lorraine and Ile de France.

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ⁱ 'ANPE' : Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi, created in 1967. The National Agency for Employment belongs to the Public Employment Service.

ⁱⁱ The 'Conseil Régional' is elected local council at the level of the 'région'. The 'DDTEFP', at the 'départemental' level depends on the Ministry of Work. The 'Conseil Régional' and the 'DDTEFP' finance training and support of job seekers for the unemployed.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'AFPA' : Association pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes, created in 1946 (Santelmann, 1999).

^{iv} ROME : Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois (see the internet site of the ANPE : <http://rome.anpe.net/candidat>).

^v 'Chargé de mission' means for example, project leader.

^{vi} Source : http://rome.anpe.net/candidat/?url=liste_rome.php&dp=232 : in "Les fiches métiers", catégorie professionnelle : "Intervention sociale, développement local, emploi", n°232 "Professionnels de l'intervention socio-économique.

^{vii} The 'assistantes sociales' are social workers specialized in social, psychological and financial assistance provided to poor people. The other kinds of professionals in the field of social work are 'éducateurs' and 'animateurs'.

^{viii} 'At the Lisbon European Council (March 2000), the European Union set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: *to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*. The strategy was designed to enable the Union to regain the conditions for full employment and to strengthen cohesion by 2010. The Council also considered that the overall aim of these measures should be to raise the overall EU employment rate to 70% and to increase the number of women in employment from an average to more than 60% by 2010.' (web site of European Union : http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/index_en.htm).

^{ix} Source : http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/index_fr.htm, internet website of the European Commission.

^x Every Member State draws up a National Reform Programme (until 2005, National Action Plans) which describes how the Employment Guidelines are put into practice at the national level. They present the progress achieved in the Member State over the last 12 months and the measures planned for the coming 12 months: they are both reporting and planning documents.

^{xi} SPNDE : Personalized Service for a New Start.

^{xii} Source : http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/index_en.htm, "Development of EES".

^{xiii} Source : http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/index_en.htm, *op. cit.*

^{xiv} PARE-PAP : Plan d' Aide au Retour à l'Emploi-Projet d' Action Personnalisé.

^{xv} The end of the ANPE monopoly is linked with recommendations of the International Labour Organization and in particular with the C 181 Convention of 1997. It emphasizes participation of private service providers in order to optimize the exchanges in the labour market. As mentioned above, French employment policies are the result of several international influences.

^{xvi} UNEDIC : Union Nationale Interprofessionnelle pour l'Emploi dans l'Industrie et le Commerce, created in 1958.

^{xvii} 'According to the European Strategy, profiling is nowadays a relevant tool each country would have to develop in order to fight against long-term unemployment.' (Georges, 2006, p.4). This method is used in France by the UNEDIC and the ANPE.

^{xviii} 'DARES': Direction de l'Animation de la Recherche, des Etudes et des Statistiques.