Unemployed people facing future work: analyzing occupational expectations as 'feasible work'*

*Didier Demazière***, *Marc Zune****

Abstract

This article explores how unemployed people think of employment and work, in a context of scarcity of jobs and decline of standard employment. Our hypothesis is that unemployment reorganizes unemployed people's relationship to occupational norms and statuses as a result of their being subject to the uncertainties involved in job-hunting. We suggest that the concept of "feasible work" may prove useful in theorizing about how unemployment changes the expectations towards future employment and work, using the case of self-employment as an example. Our analysis draws on in-depth interviews with 21 unemployed people registered with the French public employment service. This study suggests that unemployment leads to a reconsideration of occupational expectations in response to the difficulties of getting a job. Then, it shows that the extent to which unemployed people sign up to these expectations varies widely, depending on the biographical and relational resources they have.
Keywords: unemployment, occupational expectations, narratives, France

1. Introduction

Occupational insecurity and precarity are spreading through labor markets (Gutierrez-Barbarussa, 2016); this trend is common to all western countries, albeit with varying levels of intensity and diversity (ILO, 2012). The resulting weakening of standard employment norms also favors inflows into unemployment, either recurrently between temporary jobs or in a lasting way

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** CNRS – Sciences Po Paris, Centre de Sociologie des Organisations. E-mail: didier.demaziere@sciencespo.fr.
*** Université de Louvain. E-mail: marc.zune@uclouvain.be.

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– like a trap from which it is difficult to escape (Gallie and Paugam, 2000). It also modifies employees' perceptions of job security and insecurity in labor markets (Hipp, 2016). Analysis of these employment and unemployment dynamics presents social sciences with a challenge; our aim in this article is to contribute to the analysis of the decline of standard employment (Vallas, 2015) dynamics by questioning it from the perspective of the situation unemployed people find themselves in. Indeed, unemployed people occupy a position of vulnerability on the labor market, which nakedly exposes them to non-standard jobs. There has been extensive study of how unemployed people react to job loss and cope with the resulting devalued condition. Beginning with the pioneering research conducted in the 1920s by Paul Lazarsfeld and his team (Jahoda *et al.*, 1972), a strong tradition of research has shed light upon the various deprivation effects of unemployment, recently conceptualized as an "overarching process of loss" (Sage, 2018, p. 1048). We argue, however, that this important tradition is in need of enrichment, by focusing less on the deprivation aspects of unemployment and more on occupational expectations. Our understanding of what unemployment means stands to benefit from also being explored in conjunction with people's expectations of leaving this devalued status behind, rather than mainly focusing (by reference to past trajectories) on how the unemployment situation came about.

More precisely, we want to highlight a less-recognized dimension of unemployment by examining its effects on the conceptions unemployed people have of employment and work. We argue that unemployment generates uncertainties as to its exit conditions, the qualities of the situations aimed for, and the possibilities of working again. Job-seeking (and its difficulties) lead to adjustments being made to occupational expectations – and these reappraisals rise in significance as the duration of unemployment lengthens (Lindsay, 2010).

We conducted in-depth biographical interviews aimed at exploring the points of view of unemployed people (mostly long-term unemployed) on their own occupational futures. The content analysis led us to theorize these expectations as "feasible work", in a bid to stress the wide range of situations and employment forms considered as exit options from unemployment, as well as the fact that these projections are framed by a sense of limitation (or of realism) forged during the social experience of unemployment. Following an interactionist perspective, we consider the unemployed to be immersed in contexts that are both uncertain and ambiguous, occupational projections being continuously shaped by definitions and meanings of the situation and events encountered (Thomas, 1923; Blumer, 1969) and the reinterpretation

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of past into present. This process is informed by in-depth interviews, yet because it is embedded in interaction (Becker, 2004), it is inseparable from exchanges with "significant others" (Mead, 1932) and thus avoids being individual or subjective.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we provide a review of the literature that pays attention to the occupational expectations of unemployed people. We consider the different research perspectives that examine what employment means to unemployed people, so as to capture the effects of unemployment upon the expectations towards future employment and by consequence on the diffusion of non-standard employment forms; in sum the both interpretative and objective effects of unemployment upon employment. This leads us to show that the concept of "feasible work" enables a shift in perspective. After detailing the research context and study methodology, we move on to findings and results. Our analysis focuses on occupational projections that have settled at the edges of self-employment and informality, because these targets are very distant from the stable employment standard – especially in France, where the fieldwork was carried out. Our results show that this movement toward autonomous work is invested with two contradictory meanings: either as a motivational alternative, or as a resigned withdrawal, corresponding to differing relational and biographical resources. In the final section, we discuss the main contributions made by this study, and identify some perspectives for future research developments.

2. Unemployment and occupational expectations

Some scholars have noticed that occupational expectations are neglected in the sociology of the unemployed (Demazière, 2006; Roberts, 2016); the subject is not given much consideration in comprehensive approaches shaped by a "deprivation theory of unemployment" (Boland and Griffin, 2015a). Moreover, it is only marginal in surveys that measure job search behaviors yet fail to capture what the expected and sought-after job is, from the perspective of the unemployed person (Bachmann and Baumgarten, 2013). Also, the way unemployed people develop their occupational expectations appears as a gray area in the sociological research. We have identified three research perspectives in which these expectations are considered through the study of activation policies, job-search difficulties, and long-term unemployment.

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Analysis of activation policies clearly reveals the strategies developed by institutions in order to control and monitor the behaviors of unemployed people. Beyond the surveillance and sanctions that are central components of activation policies, the aim is to mold unemployed people to match normative expectations, to prepare them for existing jobs. Such programs are implemented through a variety of organizations that deliver services for training, coaching, skills development, and advice on job-searching (Garrett-Peters, 2009; Smith, 2010; Boland and Griffin, 2015b; Van Oort, 2015). This disciplining process is organized around the norm of responsibilization, which implies that the unemployed must: be active and unstinting in their efforts; adopt a positive attitude toward employment possibilities; adapt to job offers; review their aspirations, and seize any opportunities that present themselves. Unemployed people's experience is thus radically transformed, inasmuch as these institutions engage, support or force a process of conversion: the unemployed person has to become actor of their own career path and be convinced that access to employment depends on themselves (Uchitelle, 2006; Sharone, 2014). Yet this kind of analysis mainly concerns institutional action and the underlying political project, rather than the effects these have on unemployed people and their beliefs. Moreover, it often leaves aside both the actual evolution of the unemployed person's beliefs and the adjustments made to their occupational expectations.

In studies related to job search experiences, occupational expectations are clearly secondary. A rich tradition of research inaugurated in the 1930s (Bakke, 1940) underscores how job search is thwarted and slackened by multiple adjustments that affect the organization of everyday life, practices of sociability, economic resources and self-esteem (for a review, see Jahoda, 1982; Boland and Griffin, 2015a). In this tradition, projections into the future are seen as being marked by great insecurity. The analysis focuses on the steps taken in search of employment, rather than the relationship to employment, or the professional targets. However, some studies suggest that occupational expectations are revised in response to the job search events and episodes, and especially under the effect of repeated failures (Riach and Loretto, 2009; Demazière, 2021). Thus, doubts can undermine job search, downgrade job targets and distort the meaning of unemployment, "from boost to bust" as Sharone (2007, p. 416) accurately puts it.

Such reversals have often been observed among the long-term unemployed, who are the most easily discouraged group (Clasen and Gould, 1997; Cottle, 2001). Unemployment duration has specific effects on professional paths: it reduces the likelihood of getting a job (Abraham *et al.*, 2019) while weakening belief in the possibility of such an outcome (Lindsay, 2010), and mitigates job search (Brand, 2015). Long-term unemployment is a vicious

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circle in which these elements are self-reinforcing. Yet a well-established body of literature associates long-term unemployment with a variety of social ills (Lahusen and Giugni, 2016), rather than with job expectations and their deterioration.

Though the occupational expectations of the unemployed are not the focus of the three research perspectives we have examined, a process of erosion is suggested. This is convergent with the downgrading phenomenon observed for the majority of unemployed people who do find work (Lizé and Prokovas, 2009). It is therefore necessary to study changes in occupational expectations during unemployment more precisely, and thus to examine how unemployment modifies employment, at least expected or anticipated employment.

3. Unemployment changes employment: the feasible work perspective

Following on from the abovementioned analyses, we can argue that the future projections and occupational expectations of the unemployed are a major dimension of the unemployment experience. Employment seen from unemployment – as seen by the unemployed – remains little studied. Our objective is therefore to examine how job perspectives erode during periods of unemployment, in the face of the difficulties encountered in getting out of unemployment. Our hypothesis is that unemployment, especially when it persists, initiates a process of redefining employment that does not stop at seeking downgraded positions, but also reorganizes employment standards. This means that it leads to a redefinition of what employment is: not just from salaried employment to self-employment or solo work, but also from formal employment to informal work and scarcely codified activities, and thus from employment to the broader phenomenon of paid work. Our approach articulates an interactionist and interpretive theoretical framework, a conceptualization based on the notion of "feasible work", and an empirical focus on solo work because in France (where our fieldwork was carried out), it is marginal relative to the prevailing wage employment norm.

Given that unemployed people are in the front line, subject to the uncertainties and insecurities that increasingly surround access to employment, their occupational expectations, demands and perspectives change over time. These projections are formed, distorted and transformed through a flow of contexts, events and interactions encountered by unemployed people, and frame their own perception of how their own situation is evolving and the professional positions they do (or do not) aspire to, and are capable (or incapable) of reaching. In an interactionist perspective, we consider unemployment as an accumulation of situations and interactions that both mark out the

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path of the job search and produce a "convincingness" about occupational future (Goffman, 1974). Unemployed people browse through job offers that are stuffed with various requirements; receive advice aimed at convincing them to adjust their expectations; test out their aspirations via applications, then assess the value assigned to their candidature. What they are confronted with is a few concrete job opportunities and offers, rather than employment as an abstract entity. Crucially, we argue that employment presents itself in a host of concrete forms characterized by conditions of possibility, levels of plausibility and degrees of desirability. As such, it is caught up in a stream of definitions of what might be within reach, acceptable, desirable, or feasible.

In this sense, there are two main benefits to the concept of feasible work. First, it allows us to consider the full range of occupational projections expressed by unemployed people, by embracing all the situations aimed at escaping unemployment, rather than only employment *stricto sensu* – this is what we mean by *work*. Second, it allows us to consider the meanings invested in these projections by unemployed people as they integrate adjustments to what is possible as they perceive it – this is what we mean by *feasible*. The content of this feasible work is limited only by the meanings that unemployed people confer upon it. Feasible work is the product of adjustments triggered by encounters with offers and judgments of employability pronounced by recruiters or employers, professional advisors or social workers, as well as acquaintances and relatives. Besides it results from cognitive and reflective work aimed at drawing lessons from these experiences (Denzin, 1989). A priori, the range of meanings associated with "feasible work" is very large: the concept covers every employment status as well as all paid work situations, since it allows us to examine how the unemployed perceive exiting unemployment.

While most unemployed people in France direct their job search toward waged work, some resign themselves, or choose to turn to independent or solo activities (Stevens, 2012). In order to inform the interest of the notion of feasible work, we have chosen to focus our analysis on particularly significant displacement of the norms of employment through unemployment: that which leads to various forms of self-employment. There are several methodological advantages to studying alternatives to the wage-earning norm: self-employment maximizes distance from the powerful norm of wage labor that prevails (at least within the French context of our research). Not only does it echo the exhortations to autonomy and self-help that are normative foundations of ALMPs, but also, by dint of being a minority perspective, it includes a healthy dose of ambivalence/hesitation, and this is conducive to capturing diverse levels of sign-up among those who refer to it.

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4. Data and method

4.1. Research context

The unemployment/employment situation in France has certain salient features. The unemployment rate has been high for several decades now: according to the ILO unemployment rate for France reached 10% in 1993, before decreasing during the 2000s then peaking at 10,2% in 2015 (the time of our fieldwork). This rate was 2 percentage points higher than the average for OECD countries – and the share of long-term unemployment was 42,8%, i.e., 10 percentage points higher. Self-employment accounts for less than 12% of total employment (OECD, 2020) among the economically active population. Permanent contracts dominate, concerning 83% of employees across the board, and 92,2% of employees over 30 years of age (Milin, 2018). This norm also serves as a massive aspirational benchmark for the unemployed: 96% of job seekers declare to the public employment agency that they are looking for a permanent contract. However, within recruitment, this type of contract is very much in the minority, since for more than a decade now, 90% of hiring has been through temporary contracts (COE, 2014). As a result, the unemployed (unless they have high-level or sought-after qualifications) are in a weak position in the labor market.

Furthermore, French public policy has promoted self-entrepreneurship and self-employment ever since the early 2000s (Amossé and Goux, 2004). In 2008, a new self-employed status called "auto-entrepreneur" was created. This status is easy to access and aims to make setting up a micro-enterprise very quick (Abdelnour, 2013). However, the social security cover it provides is minimal, and 80% of auto-entrepreneurs reported that they had generated zero turnover during the year 2015. It could be argued, then, that the dominant norm in France is the standard employment contract, and that the expectations of jobseekers, despite having facilitated access to a plurality of options, are oriented toward this norm: waged work. But at the same time, the jobs on offer rarely meet these expectations, making unemployment an experience that alters the expected job, in more theoretical terms, the feasible work.

4.2. Data collection

At the center of our investigation were the meanings attributed to work by unemployed people, and the many ways they justified these meanings (Bruner, 1987; Ezzy, 2000). Our analysis is based upon semi-structured interviews carried out in 2015 with 21 unemployed people registered with the

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French public employment agency *Pôle Emploi,* which had provided us with a list of 200 names and addresses. These people were living in a densely populated area in northern France, once heavily industrialized in the steal sector. In 2015, the unemployment rate was more than 2 percentage points higher than the national average. Part of a wider research focused on job search practices, this fieldwork was oriented toward unemployed people who had declared to their advisors that they were aiming to invest in some form of self-employment (solo, free-lance, entrepreneur, craft, and even certain kinds of resourcefulness). Specifically, we pursued the strategy of "typical case sampling" (Patton, 2014), which aimed to select participants somewhat "typical" of being a significant distance from the norm of permanent paid work. Though the interviewee profiles were quite varied (see Table 1), what they had in common was receiving little or no unemployment benefits, with the exception of three people whose monthly allowance exceeded 900 euros.

Table 1 - Interviewee profiles

Pseudonym	*Gender*	*Age*	*Qualification*	*Duration of unemployment (in months)*	*Last employment*
Anne	F	48	Did not graduate	22	Cleaning lady
Benoît	M	42	3 years h.e., communication	17	Copy writer in media sector
Bernard	M	34	2 years h.e., metallurgy	19	Hospital porter
Bruno	M	33	2 years h.e., computing	14	Computer technician
Claudine	F	53	I.v.d., tailoring	15	Craft tailor
David	M	29	I.v.d., accounting	19	Handler
Etienne	M	33	I.v.d., foundry	16	Construction worker
Eugène	M	56	Scientific Baccalaureate	29	Manager in banking sector
Florence	F	41	Literary Baccalaureate	16	Secretary
Françoise	F	35	Baccalaureate in plastic arts	14	Unskilled worker in fashion sector
Jack	M	52	I.v.d., plumbing	16	Department manager in trade sector
Jérémie	M	25	Literacy Baccalaureate	17	Unskilled worker
Josette	F	43	4 years h.e., marketing	19	Manager in trade sector

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Pseudonym	*Gender*	*Age*	*Qualification*	*Duration of unemployment (in months)*	*Last employment*
Julien	M	44	Baccalaureate economic science	10	Unskilled positions in entertainment sector
Louise	F	32	3 years h.e., psychology	17	Unskilled office worker
Magali	F	39	Not graduated	14	Employed in mass retail
Marianne	F	52	2 years h.e., theater	14	Various unskilled positions
Nacima	F	43	I.v.d., secretariat	20	Unskilled office worker
Philippe	M	53	Not graduated	26	Hotel front desk clerk
Reynald	M	28	2 years h.e., business	10	Various unskilled positions
Robert	M	39	Not graduated	16	Mover, handler

h.e. = higher education; I.v.d. = Initial vocational diploma

Because the experience of unemployment is socially devalued (Burman, 1990; Ezzy, 2001; Demazière, 2014), our interview protocol sought to establish trusting relationships. The interviews were conducted in places chosen by the interviewees (often in their homes). They took the form of conversations and were marked by reciprocity of interactional engagements. Factors such as interview length (often close to two hours), and the gratitude expressed by some interviewees at the end of the interaction indicate that a climate of trust had been created. The interview grid addressed various questions: occupational career; living conditions and way of life; activities (regarding both job search and private life); social interactions; expectations of possible outcomes, and revisions of these definitions of the situation. Numerous returns to these topics aimed to build detailed narratives of the activities, behaviors and practices developed during the period of unemployment, so as to trigger reflective processes that would generate meaning and interpretation. To protect interviewee confidentiality, all names have been changed.

4.3. Data analysis

Seeking to identify future occupational expectations, we focused on job search narrative, and broadly on escaping unemployment. We wanted to understand the lessons unemployed people had drawn from their job search

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practices: how they saw their position on the labor market; how they estimated their own potential value, and how they had defined, confirmed or revised their perspectives and goals. A series of operations was performed for each interview: identification of those passages relating to job search, and of which salient episodes had been mobilized as supports for reflective activity; extraction of the arguments associated with tasks (both undertaken and sidelined), relationships or events; explicit clarification of the ambivalences, tensions and doubts that run through the job search narratives, and reconstruction of the prioritization of what is seen as possible. We paid particular attention to the emergence of a main target, alongside the disqualification of other perspectives. And we tried to identify the reasons, motives and arguments behind this process of anticipation and its articulation with each personal story (Forster, 2012). We supported a methodology that pays attention to the evaluative dimensions of the narrative (Riessman, 1993) and examines the relationship between narrative plot and self-evaluation, because our goal was to understand what "feasible work" is for the unemployed.

We identified two opposite ways of expressing occupational perspective as autonomous work: motivational alternative and resigned withdrawal. This result indicates that the concept of feasible work should not be reduced to forms of employment or work, but that it also designates the ways of conceiving these occupational expectations and attributing meanings to them. Our inductive analysis revealed that the calibration process of what is feasible is dependent on a set of biographical and relational resources, and that these differ significantly in the two conceptions of feasible work identified. These resources are composite variables that cannot be reduced to objective attributes (professional background, age, gender, family situation, etc.) – even if they are not entirely disconnected from them.

5. Prioritizing and championing autonomous work

For eight of the unemployed people interviewed, non-waged work is considered positively as a future occupational prospect. For some of these people, feasible work looked a lot like classic forms of independent work, such as becoming a tradesperson (Jack[1] hoped to set up as a plumber) or taking on a franchise (Benoît was negotiating with a specialist company to open a wine

1. See table 1 for demographic information, such as age, gender, qualification and last occupational position of the interviewees.

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shop). Others were targeting informal jobs that could potentially become formal: Etienne was working as an undeclared sub-contractor in the construction sector, for the time being at least; Magali was gardening and processing on a growing scale (fruit and vegetables, jam and soups) while cautiously developing the sale of her produce at local markets; Reynald had various activities (graphic design, IT, minor building work) that amounted to informal work, exchange of services, and even unpaid work; Louise had started offering alternative therapies, mainly (though not entirely) on an informal basis; and Claudine was pursuing her former self-employed work as a seamstress in response to requests from former clients, which was propelling her toward undeclared work. The fluidity of their activities could also result in a hybridization of self-employment and wage-earning: Julien was trying to develop projects in the cultural and artistic sector while also taking on occasional jobs to «make ends meet».

The common point of the narratives of these unemployed people is that these various forms of autonomous work are invested in as motivational perspectives, and considered as a positive support in exiting unemployment. Targeting autonomous work does of course imply a great deal of uncertainty, since it rarely amounts to secure, definitive engagement in the creation of an enterprise. It is not easy to envisage such an alternative, and a break with waged work does not automatically mean setting up your own business. It involves many hesitations and much probing, including through undeclared work and informal activities. But these expectations are valued as positive alternatives to unemployment – and even to waged work.

> I saw this (the sale of her garden produce) as an occupation, and then a little extra income. Nothing more than that. It's more enjoyable than my old job as a salesperson. It is less tiring. And having children, the hours are convenient. I can't think of a better situation. And besides it works, it's becoming a proper little business, I really like it (Magali).

> I have had many contracts, sometimes in food, sometimes in the cultural scene that is my passion. And over the years… I can't stand compromises. I want to have my own projects, even if I don't know exactly where I'm going (...) Let's just say that today, taking risks is perhaps a way to turn my life around (Julien).

How is a perspective of non-waged work positively invested in by unemployed people, what are the mechanisms through which it comes to be valued, and what does it take for people to sign up to this form of feasible work? The eight unemployed people concerned do not have career paths that have prepared them for such a distancing from waged work (with the exception of

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Claudine, who had been a self-employed seamstress for a long time, and Julien, who had multiple artistic activities). Waged work predominates in their previous careers, even though the sheer variety of employment contracts and their combinations define heterogeneous involvement in waged work, whether in terms of contract (open-ended, fixed-term, temporary, one-off, short-term, casual) or terminations (mass layoff, contract expiry, resignation, difficulty in finding a new job). Other characteristics of these unemployed people are equally diverse: level of education (from no qualification to three years of higher education), age (from 28 to 53), gender (3 women and 5 men), family situation (single, with a partner, independently housed, or not), duration of unemployment (between 10 and 17 months).

The logic of assigning value to non-waged work thus appears fairly diffuse. However, analysis of the eight interviews in question makes it possible to identify three distinct resources that consolidate distance from wage-earning and favor engagement with alternative conceptions of work. The first resource (skill) is derived from the career path, some elements of which are appropriated by the unemployed people as assets with which to secure occupational autonomy. Possession of a skill, know-how, trade or craft – an expertise that has already been tested – provides a foundation on which a project can be conceived, and it also means being able to envisage producing something, whether goods- or service-based. The second (support) is embedded in the unemployed people's relational environment, from which some of the interviewees actively assemble an idea of feasible work. Advice from professionals and institutions devoted to business creation, the backing of friends and family who provide encouragement during the period of unemployment – these are levers that make it possible to restore a level of biographical continuity, (re-)legitimize existing skills, and delineate, fill out, test and concretize occupational perspectives marked by the risks inherent in the orientation toward non-waged work. The third resource (a demand) relates to the possibilities of starting to materialize feasible work and, in so doing, assess its viability. Lastly, the encounter with the third resource – a demand, small-scale start-up or market study – offers concrete possibilities, and there are many ways of embarking on experimentation that may confirm, or re-orient, expectations of the future.

Jack's career illustrates the combination of these three resources. Jack was 52 when the hardware supermarket he worked at closed down. As a widower with three children, he needed to get back to work quickly. But his efforts were fruitless, even when he widened his scope. A series of encounters led him to reconsider his experience. Discussions with an advisor (with whom he «gets on well») led him to see his age as a «big problem» in finding a job, and to open up another horizon for himself based on a qualification (in

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plumbing) that he had never put to use. In the course of these exchanges, and after success in a skills test, he made this perspective his own, declaring that he had a passion for the trade («I used to love it»). He was encouraged to apply to firms in that sector and gradually came around to the idea of working for himself. He was then directed to an agency advising on enterprise creation, which offered him support and reassurance, confirming that the sector was promising («there's a shortage of plumbers») and providing administrative backup («they help with the paperwork»). At the time of the interview, Jack's project was not yet a reality, but he said he was still set on becoming an independent tradesman, and that he had the advice of professionals to guide him. Moreover, he now looks down on waged work, which he considers – on the basis of his own experience – insecure («from one day to another you are nothing»). Jack now sees being his own boss as the best way to restore his livelihood and feed his family.

So – a trade or know-how, some support and advice, plus demand or opportunities – these are biographical resources related to the previous career path, the relational environment, as well as the activities undertaken. The value of these resources, which can be mobilized in order to conceive of feasible work outside of wage-earning, depends on the meaning assigned to them at the time of the interview.

6. Settling for, and resigning oneself to, autonomous work

For other unemployed people, non-waged work does not tend to be invested in as a project that gives meaning to their future, structuring its components and opening up potentialities for self-realization. Instead, it is reduced to being perceived as a forced response to the closure of the options of access to wage-earning. For the 13 unemployed people concerned here, it appears as a palliative for the growing risk of occupational marginalization rather than an alternative to unemployment that might delineate lasting occupational integration.

This is true even when projections target the most developed forms of independent work and are presented as «enterprise creation» or «creating my own job». However, such projections are always vague and uncertain. After explaining that she was no longer able to work in the field of theatrical costume, Françoise declared that she was going to «get into baby clothes» while stressing that it was «still only an idea» and that her «administrative phobia» was holding her back. Josette gave up her career as a sales executive with a view to being «her own boss» yet pointed out that she didn't «know what to do» and had «lost the taste for challenge». David was intending to «set up

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his own business», without knowing quite what he could do, but was looking for a way to escape an occupational past and be able to «earn a lot if I work hard» without «being hassled by colleagues». Marianne said that she was «cut off from the right networks» and had been reduced to casual training work, though she «can't carry on like this» – which led her to suddenly come up with an «idea that has just occurred to me» to «set herself up as a trainer» for B&B owners.

For others, the most numerous, feasible work was still more evanescent and abstract. Convinced that they would be unable to secure a waged job, these unemployed people fell back on solo work that was not even backed by adequate information. Bernard, who considered his past experiences to have always been underskilled and conflictual, concluded that he had «messed up» and believed he must «find a solution all by myself», but stated that his age was «a problem to which there is no answer». Nacima believed herself to have no occupational future because of employers being «racist», and she declared that she had to «put her project together from A to Z». Demeaning his own career path, which was in his own eyes «worthless», Jérémie declared that it was important not to «cling to the impossible», though he remained uncertain as to whether he would ever «discover the magic formula» that would enable him to become independent. Bruno considered that he wouldn't «get a job, that's for sure», so he found a refuge, planning to use his computer skills to offer informal «minor services» – yet stressed that he was limited to «word of mouth» because advertising would be risky. Eugène was trying to envisage other options but could go no further than evoking the vague prospect of becoming an *auto-entrepreneur*, because he had «heard it talked about, so, if I can possibly do that... it's not much fun, but I'm so fearful of the future».

Here, distance from waged work results from diverse occupational marginalization mechanisms, which push people toward a (singularly narrow and difficult) pathway outside of it. Both the fragility of their expectations of the future, and the weakness of the experiments undertaken, are signs of the internalization of exclusion from waged work. These unemployed people have thus been forced to imagine alternatives, pushed more by necessity than by institutional injunctions toward autonomous work.

The social characteristics of these unemployed people do not differ greatly from those of the previous category, and are no less diverse, whether in terms of education (from no qualifications to 4 years of higher education), age (29 to 53), gender (6 women and 7 men) or previous occupation. However, they have experienced longer durations of unemployment (between 14 and 29 months), which suggests that a person's definition of feasible work becomes downgraded with the passage of time. The two categories are not

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identical: whereas those unemployed people who prize autonomous work cumulate various resources that they go on to pull together in their narratives, those who resign themselves to such work are, on the whole, disadvantaged. Whether they used to be in skilled positions, or have earned diplomas, their know-how has been devalued by negative experiences, such as deskilling, temporary jobs, layoffs. Whether they are relatively isolated, have withdrawn into themselves, or have a rich social life, their occupational networks have evaporated, and they receive little support in their attempts to exit unemployment. Whether they have started to implement their plans or have not yet begun to make them concrete, their projections are fragile, and few opportunities for development present themselves.

Robert's case the paucity of the means he has at his disposal for making a reality of his expectations. Robert was 39, and after an early drop-out from higher education went through multiple periods of unemployment, interspersed with unskilled jobs. He had been unemployed for 16 months, and for several years had only been able to find temporary and very short contracts (as little as a few hours), mainly in handling. The persistence of this situation was a growing worry. And he said he had never stinted in his efforts to find a waged job, and that his chances were so slim that it would be «like hitting the jackpot». It seemed to him unlikely that he would ever get back to his original position. Nonetheless, he continued looking for openings, if only because «you have to keep hoping or you would shoot yourself». He then mentioned the possibility (formulated in rather muddled terms) of «setting up his own business» by working for «a sort of pal, although I don't really know him» who was going to set up a delivery firm. This sole way out was seen as a distant prospect – a rather vague option requiring no specific action because he could only «wait and see if it works out».

Like others, his narrative was channeled by arguments that showed a certain disorientation and, above all, did not make it possible to work out alternatives to waged employment that could be built and pursued. The narratives of these unemployed people reveal their exclusion from wage-earning, which also means exclusion from employment – even self-employment – because their expectations were so vague.

7. Discussion

Focusing on the emblematic case of the unemployed seeking to get out of unemployment through different forms of self-employment, we have shown that unemployment is a period during which employment standards get re-

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defined. Our analysis has shown that unemployed people seek to define realistic expectations regarding their escape from unemployment. We have proposed the concept of feasible work to refer to the effects of unemployment on employment, mediated by what the unemployed consider to be their own achievable and/or realistic occupational goals – this is what we propose to call *the work of unemployment on employment*. Thus, those who feel themselves to be in difficulty with regard to waged jobs are looking for alternatives on the autonomous work side. However, the forms of work envisaged can hold very different meanings. We have shown that these can sometimes be opportunities that are highly valued by unemployed people, and other times be relegations to which they resign themselves, depending on the person's own biographical and relational resources. Beyond the case of autonomous work, the concept of feasible work paves the way for a broader analysis of the occupational expectations of unemployed people, by which we mean the concrete forms of job and work they envisage for themselves, the dynamics of these perspectives during their experience of unemployment, and the process through which forms of employment having inferior conditions (in terms of employment norms) are accepted.

Our interpretive approach serves to enrich knowledge of the dynamic of occupational situations and the norms that organize them, and also the diffusion of non-standard employment forms through the feasible work'becoming. It shows how the very category of unemployment is discreetly transformed through the experiences of those who are deprived of employment. This transformation is the consequence of different social processes. First, some studies have shown that the difficulties encountered in securing a job lead to falling expectations and requirements among unemployed people (Brown, 2000; Gabriel *et al.*, 2013). Second, other analyses have established that this can be strongly encouraged by the professionals whose job it is to offer them support and guidance on their journey to the job market (Sharone, 2014, Van Oort, 2015). Therefore, we argue that sociological research would benefit from studying the relationship between unemployment and employment by redefining the latter as feasible work, and considering how this category is invested in – not just by the unemployed, but also by the professionals who guide and monitor them, as well as by their entourage, who support, advise and influence them. Our central argument is an invitation to examine how social policies and their front line professionals, as well as those supporting unemployed people informally, might affect this reconsideration of what feasible work is, as a core category internalized by the unemployed.

Otherwise our fieldwork highlights social processes differentiating unemployment experience. The two opposite expectations we determined are linked with some biographical and relational resources that the unemployed

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can (or cannot) identify, recognize and mobilize. This result provides additional conclusions on the role of biographical and relational resources on joblessness. The role of these resources in widening inequalities between the unemployed has been extensively highlighted in the literature, though not with regard to occupational expectations. Yet a great deal of research has focused on the heterogeneity of the experiences of the unemployed and job search conditions, exploring the impact of key properties such as education level, age or gender (Hammer and Russel, 2004; Riach and Loretto, 2009; Demazière, 2014), or the importance of social relations and relational networks, especially on job search practices and conditions of access to waged jobs (Granovetter, 1973; Mongomery, 1994; Tutic and Wise, 2015). Our results confirm that biographical and relational characteristics matter, since those unemployed people who prize autonomous work as a way of anticipating the future tend to cumulate skills and experience with the support and advice of others, whereas those who resign themselves to autonomous work lack any such resources. It can also be argued that these composite variables (biographical and relational resources) are the product of social conditions, and properties whose effects could be measured by a more extensive survey. We know, for example, that representations of work (defined both as individual projections and normative constructions) vary according to such factors as gender, family status and generation (Méda and Vendramin, 2013). This opens up avenues for further studies. A perspective in terms of gender is a key dimension to be explored since participation in the labor market as well as family and domestic responsibilities remain strongly gendered. The same goes for unemployment duration, given that we also noted that the two (small) groups identified stood out from this angle – attesting to the fact that time has wrought changes.

The value of the notion of feasible work is that it sheds light on these revisions of (and adaptations to) the constraints of the situation of unemployment. This notion, developed in the interpretive fieldwork, makes it possible to grasp not only the subjective perspectives of unemployed people but also deep-seated (and less perceptible) shifts in what it means to work. These broader changes in the norms of work and employment make it more difficult for many unemployed people to reintegrate and stabilize their positions in employment, which in turn play a part in consolidating those changes through adjustments of expectations to forms of work or employment that are seen as feasible. To go further, it would be necessary to pay more attention to how being unemployed over time affects occupational expectations, and to identify specific events, precise sequences and particular interactions, that influence unemployed people as to how they view feasible work over time. The fact that the concept of feasible work emerged during the analysis

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of materials did not allow us to design a more efficient method – especially one that is both longitudinal and non-retrospective – to grasp the temporal dimension, which is central here.

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