

## **Understanding Interactions between Social Security Claimants and Frontline Employment Advisers – Public and Private Provision in the UK**

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### **Introduction**

Advisory and job brokerage services for unemployed people have been delivered, traditionally, by the public sector in the UK (Bruttel 2005).<sup>1</sup> However, under Blair's New Labour Government, some of these services were contracted out to private providers. This included a pilot, from 1998 to 2000, of 'Employment Zones' (EZs), which were aimed at those, aged 25 or older, who had been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance<sup>2</sup> for a minimum of 12-18 months (Bruttel 2005, Conolly et al 2010, Griffiths, Durkin and Mitchell 2006). To qualify for EZ status, providers had to operate in one of the UK's 150 worst local authority areas as measured by a set of employment-related indices. From 2003/04 to 2009/10, 15 "fully fledged EZs" were contracted to provide certain services in place of the public sector organisation, Jobcentre Plus (JCP) (Bruttel 2005, 391). In effect, the EZs offered either a replacement for, or alternative to, the relevant 'New Deal' programmes on offer at the time through JCP (Bruttel 2005, 392). This dual operation allowed for a relatively direct comparison between public and private sector provision.

Large-scale quantitative evidence indicates better performance by the EZs with respect to job entry and sustained employment at 13 weeks – at least for mandatory claimant groups (Bruttel 2005, Griffiths and Durkin 2007). Previous research also provides insight into the kinds of macro-level factors that may have driven this difference in outcomes. However, we know very little about what occurred on the frontline in each setting – how EZ and JCP advisers handled the 'work-focused interviews' that served as "a key vehicle for achievement of the core objective of moving individuals into work" (Rosenthal and Peccei 2006, 664). Thus, the micro-level, interactional features that may have differentiated EZ and JCP interviews are largely unknown. We address this gap in the evidence through a fine-grained comparison of interviews recorded in each setting. By the time of recording – July 2007 to June 2008 – the remit of EZs included lone parents claiming the state benefit known as Income Support. Our study thus compared interviews conducted with:

- JSA clients on the JCP New Deal 25+ programme (ND25+) and its EZ equivalent;

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<sup>2</sup> Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) was the main state benefit for unemployed people in the UK at the time this study took place.

- Lone parents on the JCP New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and its EZ equivalent.

### **Comparing EZ and JCP performance: what do we already know?**

At the time of our study, New Deal 25+ was a mandatory programme for those aged 25 or older who had been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for 18 of the previous 21 months. During a period of up to 16 weeks, clients received intensive support from a Jobcentre Plus (JCP) adviser. If they did not find work, clients could access further support, "including subsidised employment, full-time education and training, voluntary activity or environmental work experience, which are externally contracted/provided" (Adams and Carter 2008, 15). New Deal for Lone Parents differed in that it was voluntary. However, similar forms of support were provided, including regular advisory interviews and "a wide range of... incentives and transitional and inwork benefits" (Thomas 2007, 16). EZ provision – also mandatory for JSA clients and voluntary for lone parents – was more flexible than the New Deals because EZs had fewer restrictions on their activities (Griffiths and Durkin 2007). However, EZ and JCP New Deal programmes shared many features (Hales et al. 2003), most notably:

- Intensive one-to-one support from a 'personal adviser'; and
- Various forms of support, including training, referrals to other organisations, and funding to support back-to-work activity.

Quantitative evidence that EZs outperformed New Deal 25+ is derived both from Government statistics and two major econometric studies (Hales et al. 2003; Hasluck, Elias and Green 2003; and see Bruttel 2005). These evaluations reveal a complex mix of similarities and differences, but conclude that "Employment Zones significantly increased the chances of participants gaining paid work compared to what would have been the case if New Deal 25 Plus had been the programme operating in these areas" (Hales et al., 2003, 4). In addition, Hasluck et al (2003) show that EZ participants were less likely than their JCP counterparts to become unemployed again (Bruttel 2005). The evidence is not uniform across client groups, however. Griffiths and Durkin (2007, 55) report that "for job-ready lone parents interested in securing work" – but not mandated to look for work as a condition of claiming benefits – the EZ programme may have been no more effective than the equivalent New Deal. For mandatory clients, however, a synthesis of the evidence produced the same conclusion as the initial evaluations: that "EZs significantly outperform[ed] comparative New Deals" (Griffiths and Durkin 2007, 3).

So wherein lay the difference? Hales et al. (2003) account for their findings largely on the basis of the different funding regime in the EZs, where job entry was emphasised and there was further reward for jobs sustained for 13 weeks. Griffiths and Durkin (2007, 1) also point to the "highly incentivised funding regime" in EZs, as well as their "financial and operational flexibilities". EZ advisers also tended to have fewer but higher targets than their JCP counterparts, and to be better paid but with less job security (Joyce and Pettigrew 2002). The physical environments also differed, with EZs reported to be more "informal", "friendly" and "relaxed" than JCP offices (ibid., 52). Unlike JCP, EZs also offered additional 'motivational' features, such as refreshments and a drop-in service, which included provision of computers for clients' use.

To what extent clients received a different kind of advisory interview, however, is unclear. Hales et al. (2003) argue that there was little difference in clients' experiences or in the approaches used by advisers. However, the evidence is mixed. In support of the 'little difference' claim, a qualitative comparison found that advisers reported using "similar tools and strategies" when working with clients (Joyce and Pettigrew 2002, 21). In both settings, advisers viewed the interview as the most important aspect of the programme and emphasised trust and rapport. However, the qualitative component of Hales et al.'s (2003) evaluation (and see Hirst et al. 2002) showed some differences in clients' reported experiences. EZ clients were more likely to report feeling that the adviser had influenced the outcome when a job was acquired, and more reported that their adviser could spend money to help them into work. EZ clients also tended to describe their advisers as "more supportive" and the programme's content as more tailored to their "individual needs" (Hales et al. 2003, 3). Likewise, Griffiths and Durkin (2007, 1) conclude that: "By treating unemployed people as valued customers, EZs are also more client orientated and achieve greater customer satisfaction than would have been the case had the programme of support been New Deal".

These previous studies – while providing useful evidence of advisers' and clients' experiences of the interviews – were not designed to identify actual interactional practices as performed in the interviews themselves. To do this requires analysis not of retrospective reports, but of the detail of what really happened between adviser and client (Drew et al. 2010). A focus on this level of detail is necessary if we are to better understand *how* EZ advisers may have achieved their better employment outcomes. The adviser-client interview is a crucial site for developing this understanding, not only because it is viewed by advisers and policymakers alike as key to the service provided (McNeil 2009), but also because the approach taken to the interview is one of the few components of these programmes over which the adviser has direct control (Toerien et al. 2013). Outcome measures (such as job entry figures) inevitably reflect numerous factors, only some of which could be affected by any back-to-work programme; they thus offer only an indirect way of understanding 'effective practice'. By contrast, an analysis of actual advisory practices gives us a direct window onto how these worked in the moment-to-moment interaction with the client. In light of this and the evidence that EZs tended to outperform equivalent JCP programmes, we were commissioned by the UK's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to compare advisory interviews in each setting.

### **Recruitment and sample size**

To our knowledge, ours was the first study based on audio- and video-recordings of advisory interviews within JCP and the only one to record a comparative sample of interviews within EZs. The sites for recording were selected in consultation with our DWP project managers, as were our agreed sample sizes. Participation, for advisers and clients, was voluntary. All participants were given an information leaflet and had an opportunity to discuss the study with a researcher before deciding whether to take part. Several confidentiality guarantees were given, including the assurance that raw recordings would not be made available to anyone in JCP, the DWP or the EZs. Almost 80% of the clients approached agreed to be recorded. In total, 243 interviews with 47 advisers were recorded in eight JCP offices and two EZs across four regions in England. For the purposes of the present comparison, our sample consists of a subset of 88 recordings: 48 from JCP and 40 from EZs (see Table 1). For more detail, see Drew et al. (2010).

Table 1 JCP-EZ comparative subsample

<i>Jobcentre Plus</i>		<i>Employment Zones</i>	
First interviews for New Deal 25+	4	First interviews for 25+ clients	7
Subsequent interviews for New Deal 25+	17	Subsequent interviews for 25+ clients	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>
First interviews for New Deal for Lone Parents	12	First interviews for lone parents	9
Subsequent interviews for New Deal for Lone Parents	15	Subsequent interviews for lone parent	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

### Analytic approach

We were commissioned to use the qualitative methodology known as conversation analysis (CA). CA is a systematic, comparative and inductive approach to studying real-life interaction. It depends on recordings of interactions to allow for direct observation and detailed analysis of what took place. CA is increasingly becoming the method of choice for studying interactions in institutional settings (Heritage and Maynard 2006). In accordance with CA's methodology (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Heritage and Clayman, 2010), we worked inductively and on the understanding that talk is a means to perform some activity, ranging from everyday actions like making a request or responding to an offer, though to specialised activities like enquiring about clients' job goals. Since the same activity may be accomplished in different ways, the key question is not *whether* something occurred, but *how* it was accomplished. Analysis begins with transcribing recordings in detail, using symbols to represent features of the timing and manner of speech (see Appendix for a key). Next, collections are made of all instances of phenomena of analytic interest. The aim is to identify the range of ways in which the same activity may be performed and the consequences – within the interaction – of these differences. Markers of effectiveness are *internal* to the interview; e.g. client responses which indicate greater understanding or engagement, a commitment to carry out an agreed step towards work, or a visible 'turn around' in the client's stance (Drew et al. 2010; Toerien et al. 2013).

Using this approach, we found that EZ advisers tended to handle comparable activities in different ways to their JCP counterparts. For instance, as we will show, comparisons of how advisers drew up an action plan, addressed clients' efforts to apply for jobs, and supported clients to find suitable childcare revealed patterns of difference in the interactional practices used. In what follows, we illustrate these patterns by showing contrasting cases in which advisers from each setting performed the same activity with a client. This does not imply that these differences are best explained at the level of the individual adviser. On the contrary, we will argue that the systematic patterning of observable differences in these interviews is evidence for the impact that organisational and policy-level differences can have on frontline service provision. We will also argue that these observable differences offer a compelling interactional explanation for the EZs' tendency to outperform JCP.

**Advisory style: collaborative, directive, proactive, positive and challenging**

There were five key interactional features that characterized EZ interviews to a markedly greater extent than their JCP counterparts in our sample. In brief, EZ advisers were typically more:

- Collaborative in their approach;
- Directive, providing explicit instruction to clients and seeking to ensure they followed this guidance;
- Proactive, pursuing opportunities during the interview and initiating activities to support the client directly;
- Positive about the client; and
- Challenging, requiring clients to do more to get into work.

Although a matter of degree, rather than absolute difference, this pattern was evident irrespective of client group; it occurred in both lone parent and 25+ interviews, despite variation in structure and content, and the key distinction that the former were voluntary and the latter mandatory. In what follows, we illustrate each of the above features in turn.

**“We’re here to buddy up with you”:** Constructing the interaction as collaborative

EZ advisers were more explicit than their JCP counterparts in seeking to create an understanding of their relationship with the client as a ‘partnership’. The EZ Members’ Charter, which explained the mutual expectations of client and adviser, emphasised ‘teamwork’ as a cornerstone of the EZ approach. In first interviews, EZ advisers typically explained this to clients, as Extracts 1-3 illustrate.

Extract 1 (200; first LP, EZ<sup>3</sup>)

We’re here to buddy up with you.

Extract 2 (236; first LP, EZ)

... we’ll pair up... And how I look at it is it’s more of like of two friends working together to achieve a goal.

Extract 3 (237; first 25+, EZ)

... we’re gonna develop this fifty-fifty relationship, this partnership in trying to find you work...

Not only was explicit reference to teamwork much less common in the JCP sample, but active efforts to make the interview collaborative in practice were more characteristic of the EZ interviews. This was particularly evident in the tendency for EZ advisers to include clients when using the computer. The contrast between Extracts 4 and 5 is typical. In both, the advisers had the same data entry task to complete: they were producing an action plan for the client on the basis of their prior discussion. However, they handled this in different ways. In

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<sup>3</sup> Each extract is labeled as follows: with the unique identifier for the given recording, whether it was a first or subsequent interview, with a 25+ or lone parent client, and whether it took place in the EZ or JCP. Ellipses are used to show where talk, which is irrelevant to the present analysis, has been omitted due to word limits.

Extract 4, the EZ adviser engaged the client in constructing the action plan as a collaborative task. This was done through her repeated use of a two-part design to her turns:

1. She informed the client of what she was inputting, on a point-by-point basis, so that the client had access to the plan as it was being written (see shaded lines);
2. She added a ‘tag question’ (Hepburn and Potter 2011) to these informings (e.g. ‘right?’; see boxed lines), thereby seeking the client’s agreement with each point. Crucially, the adviser was not gathering new information by means of these questions – the information was already gathered earlier in the interview. Rather, she was creating explicit slots for the client’s contributions to the data entry process.

As can be seen in Extract 4, this strategy worked to secure verbal acceptance of some of the points (e.g. ‘Yeah’ at line 2, ‘Mhm’ at line 15). Significantly, for the developing content of the action plan, it also gave the client a chance to make amendments. For example, she corrected the adviser’s understanding of what sort of ‘updates’ were required for her CV (lines 8-12). This led to a change in plan on the part of the adviser – from suggesting that they would only update the ‘marketing’ of the CV (lines 6-7), to stating that they would “review and update” the CV itself (lines 17-18).

Extract 4 (200; first NDLP, EZ)

Note that the adviser is audibly typing throughout much of this extract, including the silences on lines 13-14 and 17.

01 Adv: ... has a C:V:, right?=  
02 Cli: =Yeah.  
03 (0.2)  
04 Adv<sup>4</sup>: .hhh U::m wo:uld li::ke updating,  
05 (0.2)  
06 Adv: And that's no:t updating what you have in there just  
07 updating the:: (0.4) marke[ting of it right?  
08 Cli: [I do need to change the fact  
09 that it does say (.) "currently" on me (0.9)  
10 ((co[mpany name where she worked previously])). I need to  
11 Adv: [( )  
12 Cli change it to (0.4) Feb.  
.....  
13 Adv<sup>3</sup>: (You'd) a jo:::b with (1.6) ((place name)) (0.8) need to  
14 see:: if (0.8) hours can be altered, right?  
15 Cli: Mhm.  
16 Adv: Yeah,  
..... ((continues along similar lines))  
17 Adv<sup>3</sup>: So next appointment we'll review and update CV:: (2.2)  
18 and start job searching..

Extract 5, from the JCP, illustrates a less collaborative approach to using the computer. In contrast to the two-part design used in Extract 4, the adviser in 5 produced only the first of these: she informed the client of what she would be typing into the action plan (lines 1-2 and 4-5), but did not produce a tag question. She thus did not provide an explicit slot for the client to make a contribution. And, indeed, apart from the client’s continuer at line 3 – which simply gave the adviser the go-ahead to say more (and to go ahead with typing the plan) – she

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<sup>4</sup> The intonation here suggests she is reading what she is typing.

made no vocal or non-vocal response at line 6 to the adviser's informing. In contrast to Extract 4, then, there was no evidence of the client's acceptance, at this stage, of the proposed action point. In addition, there was no opportunity for the client to suggest amendments to the plan. What followed was one-sided: apart from some indistinct speech at line 7, which was hearably directed at herself, the adviser updated the record in silence – note the gaps at lines 6, 8 and 10.

#### Extract 5 (170; subsequent NDLP, JCP)

```
01 Adv: I'm just gonna put on uh your action plan
02      th[en uh ((client name)) [that you'll attend a further
03 Cli: [Uhuh (Nods)
04 Adv: appointment so that we can give you further help
05      and suppo::rt .hhh
06      (18.8) ((adviser typing))
07 Adv: ( ) ((speaking to self)) oops ha ha
08      (10.8) ((adviser typing))
09 Adv: .tch Okay
10      (10.8)
11 Adv: Just get that off the printer for you
12      (23.0)
13 Adv: (Here again) this is just your updated action plan
14      ((client name))
15      (1.8)
16 Adv: And your updated action point is obviously you've agreed
17      to attend a furthe:r (0.4) appointment with myself oka[y?]
18 Cli: [Mhm
      ((Both sign the printed plan.))
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As lines 16-17 show, the adviser in Extract 5 did eventually use the same two-part technique evident in Extract 4. This secured an agreement at line 18. However, this was not done until the plan had been completed. Faced with a printed plan, it is far harder to suggest changes. Thus we see two differences between these extracts: the sequential placement of the tag question (before or after the plan was completed), and the degree to which the adviser engaged the client in typing up the plan. Together, these differences make the approach in Extract 5 less collaborative than that in Extract 4. It should be emphasised that this is a difference of degree. In both the EZ and JCP offices, clients had access to the adviser's screen, which was mounted on a movable arm. Moreover, for both Extracts 4 and 5, the clients had a prior opportunity to discuss the action point(s) that were subsequently entered on the system. By taking the more collaborative approach in Extract 4, however, advisers could also create slots for clients to contribute to the data entry process itself – a practical activity that was routinely required of advisers in both settings.

#### **“D’you want to give them a call while you’re here”: Being directive**

EZ advisers were generally more explicit in giving guidance to clients than their JCP counterparts, directing clients in what they needed to do to obtain (and sustain) a job. They were also more likely to use techniques to try to ensure that clients followed their guidance. An example is shown in Extract 6, illuminated by its contrasting case, Extract 7. In both, the advisers were performing the same activity: helping the clients to think through childcare provision. In both, the advisers provided relevant information. However, it was only the EZ adviser who went a step further. This is evident in two main ways in Extract 6:

1. *Use of advice-implicative interrogatives.* After providing a list of possible childminders, the adviser offered the client a chance to contact one immediately. Although couched as a question (“d’you want to...”, lines 3-4), this form of interrogative has been shown to be “advice-implicative” (Butler et al 2010) – hearable as a way to suggest that the client should do the thing being asked about. This created an immediate slot in which she was under some interactional pressure to agree to make the call. The adviser used the same technique (successfully) a little later as well (lines 14-16 and 18-19). In both instances, the adviser went beyond informing the client to seek her active engagement with the proffered information.
2. *Efforts to ensure action on the part of the client beyond the interview.* The kind of interactional ‘pressure’ described above can be resisted – as we see in lines 5-6, where the client treated the proposed call as unnecessary. However, the adviser pursued the matter further, seeking the client’s commitment to report back on the discussion set to take place with the childminder later that day (lines 10 and 12). Again, the adviser used an interrogative format to create an interactional slot in which the client’s agreement to perform the requested action was relevant next. This was forthcoming from the client (lines 11 and 13).

Extract 6 (194; subsequent LP, EZ)

01 Adv: Ri::ght let me just get into my: u::m (0.6)  
02 chi:ld care link

((The adviser searches her online system for a list of childminders, which she makes available to the client.))

03 Adv: D’you want to give them a ca:ll while you’re he:re  
04 just to find out whether they can ta:ke hi[::m  
05 Cli: [I’ve bee:n  
06 to see them this morning they’re gonna ring me::  
07 (0.1)  
08 Adv: Oh are [the:y  
09 Cli: [yea:h (0.1) later on toda::y

.....  
10 Adv: So could you call me and let me know [as soon  
11 Cli: [ye:s  
12 Adv: [as what they sa::y yea::h?  
13 Cli: [°okay°

.....  
((They discuss a childminder the client had previously used, who was reportedly very good but would not work weekends.))

14 Adv: So d’you think it might be worth giving ((name of previous  
15 childminder)) a call just to see if what vacant she’s got  
16 at the mo:ment [then (0.2) and [see if she would: be  
17 Cli: [mm mm [oka:y  
18 Adv: flexible around doing any weekends at all she mi:ght do  
19 ‘em I don’t kno::w so you can only ask ca:n’t you  
20 (0.2)  
21 Cli: Ri::ght  
22 (1.0)  
23 Cli: °Oka:y°

((After further discussion the client calls and arranges a childcare session.))

In effect, this adviser secured not only the client’s performance – there and then – of a vital ‘step towards work’, but also her commitment to report back on her efforts to accomplish this step outside the EZ office. In this sense, the adviser may be described as ‘directive’ in her

approach to supporting the client. By contrast, Extract 8 exhibits an ‘information-only’ approach, which was commonly observed in our JCP sample (Drew et al 2010). As the shaded lines make explicit, the adviser drew a distinction between the support on offer – access to information about childcare – and the responsibilities of the client to act on that information. She neither sought a report-back on the client’s success at sourcing childcare nor her agreement to do so there and then. Acting on the information was to be accomplished by the client alone.

Extract 7 (170; subsequent NDLP, JCP)

01 Adv: This card that I’ve here ((client’s name)) on the  
02 childcare option side at the bottom you’ve got a telephone  
03 numbe[r if you ring that number it puts you through to  
04 Cli: [Mm hm  
05 Adv: the er- early learning information service and what they  
06 will do is if you just explain to them that you’re  
07 interested in finding out .hhh what childcare provision  
08 there is in around the are[a where you live  
09 Cli: [Mm  
10 Adv: .hh what they will do from their database they’ll print  
11 off registered childcare provision and post it out to  
12 [yuh  
13 Cli: [Yeah  
14 Adv: .hhh But then it is down to you as a parent to ring  
15 [round and find out what the availabilities are .hhhh  
16 Cli: [to ring round and find them  
17 Adv: but you may find that when they send you out the list  
18 there’s a few more than what you maybe thou[ght  
19 Cli: [Yeah

Some of the differences evident in Extracts 6 and 7 are probably due to different institutional constraints on advisers’ practices. In our recordings we hardly ever saw clients being offered the use of facilities (like the telephone) during JCP interviews. Moreover, as the opening of Extracts 6 and 7 show, the advisers themselves had different tools at their disposal: while the EZ adviser accessed childcare opportunities directly (lines 1-2), the JCP adviser could only signpost the client to another service (lines 1-12). This was not treated as problematic; the JCP client aligned with the adviser’s position that it was up to her “to ring round” (line 14), collaboratively completing the adviser’s turn at line 16. Again, however, the key point is the difference in *the slots created* for clients’ engagement. In a parallel with the use of tag questions in Extract 4, we see the EZ adviser placing a stronger constraint on the client to engage in the given activity (producing an action plan in 4 and 5; arranging childcare in 6 and 7). Although we do not have sufficient data to draw statistically significant conclusions, our study found evidence that a more directive approach is more likely to secure a ‘next step’ towards work. For instance, we found that lone parents not yet participating in NDLP only ever signed up – during other JCP interviews – if advisers issued an explicit invitation; simply providing information about NDLP was never enough (Drew et al, 2010; Toerien et al. 2013).

**“Do up the CV first”: A proactive approach**

Closely allied to the tendency to be directive was EZ advisers’ proactive approach. By this, we mean their greater tendency to undertake the necessary steps towards work, *there and then* during the interview or to *initiate* activities to support the client. Thus the adviser’s strategies for getting the client, in Extract 6, to ring the childminder may be understood as being both proactive and directive. The same may be said of what occurs in Extract 8. Extracts 8 and 9

again show a contrast in how EZ and JCP advisers handled the same activity: the client's need for an up-to-date CV. This was one of the most marked discrepancies between the two settings, clearly reflecting different institutional constraints. It was routine practice for EZ advisers to help clients directly with developing a CV. This seldom occurred in our JCP sample. Instead, JCP advisers directed clients towards other services for such help. In Extract 8 we see an EZ adviser formulating a plan (lines 1-3), which included developing a CV. This may be described as proactive both in the sense that the adviser offered to do this herself (line 9) and in that she treated this as a first step before job searching (lines 1-3 and 12), thereby *pre-emptively* addressing a likely obstacle to the client's success.

#### Extract 8 (236; first LP, EZ)

01 Adv: So basically (0.6) in my mind what I think (.) would be a  
02 good route for you... is to do up the CV first to work on  
03 your confidence I think.  
04 (0.2)  
05 Adv: .hh[hh Um not that you don't ha:ve any confidence=I think  
06 Cli: [ (^Mhm°)  
07 Adv: [when it comes to job searching you're lacking your  
08 Cli: [HHHmh.  
09 Adv: confidence. .hhh U:m I think I need to (0.1) do up a CV  
10 to sho::w (0.5) what you have accomplished so that you can  
11 feel better about yourself.  
.....  
12 Adv: Once we've done a CV we can start job searching, (0.2) go  
13 through some training options...

By contrast, the apparent inability of (most) JCP advisers to provide direct help with CVs meant that clients sometimes stood to miss job opportunities. In Extract 9, the client had been referred to another provider for help with her CV and had been acting on this (lines 1-2 and 17-18). Nevertheless, she raised two concerns: her need of a CV to apply for a particular job (line 11) and her uncertainty regarding whether she would have one in time for the application deadline (lines 18-20). The adviser dealt with the first of these as far as he was able: by checking that she was indeed receiving help from the other centre. However, he provided no response (line 21) to her second concern, considering, instead, the vacancies she had identified.

#### Extract 9 (159; subsequent NDLP, JCP)

01 Adv: How you getting on down at to- the  
02 ((name of support centre))=alri:ght?  
03 Cli: [It's fine yeah  
04 Adv: [Yeah, everything going alri:ght.=  
05 Cli: [Yeah it is yeah.  
06 Cli: =YEAH,  
07 (0.2)  
08 Cli: Yeah it is yeah, .hhh There're some jobs:: (0.5) er  
09 actually  
10 (.)  
11 Cli: There's a::: (0.7) .tch .hhh **I need a CV for that one.**  
12 (1.7) ((client taps paper showing job vacancy))  
13 Adv: Ri::ght, >and- and- and- and- [are< they help you [(out)  
14 Cli: [(And) they: [Yea:h  
15 Adv: >Have they< [helped you w[ith that.  
16 Cla: [They- [Yea:h  
17 Cla: Well I've handed it in what I've written dow:n .hhh and  
18 they're gonna print it out for me for next wee:k. **So I**

19            **don't know whether that'll be too late to apply for that**  
20            **or not.**  
21            (8.6) ((Adviser looks through list of jobs))  
22 Adv:      That's good,  
23            (1.0)  
24 Adv:      That's good,  
25            (0.5)  
26 Adv:      [(And i-)  
27 Cli:      [And there's that one as well  
((They discuss several vacancies))

The approach in Extract 9 can be said to be less proactive than the EZ example in three ways:

1. The client was left to resolve the problem of not having a CV without help from this adviser;
2. The implicit request for help embedded in her mentioning the possibility that the CV might be produced too late was not addressed;
3. The focus was on job searching despite the fact that the barrier of the missing CV had not been addressed.

This should not be seen as an individual 'fault'. This adviser was apparently hamstrung by the constraints of his organisation. Thus far we have considered the generic risk generated by such constraints: these clients might miss job opportunities. In the next section, we consider how working collaboratively with clients on a CV can afford opportunities for additional support within the advisory interview.

#### **“What you don't wanna do is sell yourself short”: Being positive towards clients**

Advisers in both settings were positive towards clients and encouraging about their prospects. However, the ability to translate clients' past experience into positive attributes came to the fore most prominently during CV development, which, as we have noted, was a common feature of EZ but not JCP interviews. In working on clients' CVs, EZ advisers showed an aptitude for placing the 'best light' on things the client might not have thought relevant or impressive.

Extract 10 provides an example. This client had served a jail sentence and had a limited employment record. However, on the basis of the client's voluntary experience and bar work, the adviser identified a substantial range of skills, which were used to construct a CV. The initial drafting process, which took about half an hour, was given detailed attention by the adviser, with the promise of more to come next time. Like the production of the action plan in Extract 4, this activity was treated as a collaborative one. Furthermore, the adviser used the opportunity to highlight – repeatedly – the 'selling points' that the client could offer an employer. Given the length of the discussion, it is impossible to do justice to the many ways in which the adviser did this. Extract 10 has been chosen because it illustrates two significant features of her approach:

1. *The (now familiar) use of a tag question to seek the client's engagement with what was being entered on the computer.* Again, this gave the client a slot to make a more substantive contribution. Like the client in Extract 4, she suggested an amendment to what the adviser was proposing: that the bar job that the adviser described as similar

to one they had previously discussed (lines 1-2) had actually involved more responsibility (lines 3-7).

2. *The upgrading of the client's version of her abilities/experience.* The adviser evidently took the client's contribution (at lines 3-7) into account in her subsequent writing of the CV (lines 8 and 10). Moreover, she transformed this information into an upgraded job title (from bar staff to management – lines 14-15). This was a common practice that she used across the development of this CV, repeatedly putting a more positive 'spin' on what the client said.

#### Extract 10 (227; subsequent 25+, EZ)

01 Adv: And the::n we did similar things at ((name of  
02 pub)) yeah?  
03 Cli: **Yeah but there were n- (1.0) it were just me that were**  
04 **there.**  
05 (0.7) ((adviser typing))  
06 Cli: **The owner (0.4) had moved out (0.4) and just left me in**  
07 **charge tot[ally**  
08 Adv: [So you were totally responsible  
09 Cli: [yahh  
10 Adv: [for everything  
11 (1.0)  
12 Adv: Okay  
13 (1.2)  
14 Adv: **So you weren't really bar staff you were management weren't**  
15 **you**  
16 Cli: ((Nods))  
..... ((adviser typing))  
17 Adv: **.hh what you >don't wanna do< is sell yourself sho:rt y-**  
18 **because these (.) leadership skills and these management s-**  
19 **ship skills (0.2) and all this is really really gonna be**  
20 **important to the next employer**

The client's contribution at lines 3-7 is significant not only for its impact on the adviser's construction of the CV, but also for what it shows about the impact this interview had on the client. Earlier in the interaction, the client had seemed despondent about her job prospects, arguing that she was "limited in what jobs [she could] do" on account of her criminal record. Subsequently, she had downplayed the significance of her work experience. In Extract 10, however, we see her performing, for herself, the kind of upgrade (at lines 3-7) that the adviser had been modelling during the development of her CV.

This kind of shift in perspective is made explicit in the extract, below, where the EZ adviser probed to see if something was wrong (lines 1-2). On the contrary, the client claimed that this was the first time she had been told she might be capable of securing a better job (lines 3-8).

#### Extract 11 (236, first LP, EZ)

01 Adv: ... are you worried about anythi:ng, you got something-  
02 anything on your mi:nd or are [you alright,  
03 Cli: [I'm just amazed that I can  
04 **actually (0.7) do: other things apa(h)rt fr(h)om b(h)ar**  
05 **work and cleaning, ('s I) (0.7) they're not (.) like this**  
06 **at Jobcentre, they're just like "ah well (0.5) you can't**  
07 **do this and you can't do that, you can do this this and**

08            **this °and° .**  
09            (1.0)  
10 Adv:      Th[ere's lots that you can do.  
11 Cli:      [HHuh.  
12            (0.3)  
13 Cli:      (Real[ly?])  
14 Adv:      [There's lots that you have talent(s) for. .hh It's  
15            just a matter of putting it on a CV: (0.5) telling that to  
16            an employer,

As can be seen from Extract 10, there was a close association between the ways in which EZ advisers 'instructed' clients in the skills, aptitudes, and experience that they should highlight to employers, and the encouragement advisers offered through complimenting clients on their achievements. Since CV development was not typically offered in the JCP interviews we recorded, advisers did not have the same opportunities either for direct instruction or for positive talk.

### **“One per fortnight's not enough”: Challenging clients**

In addition to casting clients' achievements in a more positive light, EZ advisers often sought to get clients to work harder at finding a job. Challenging often went hand-in-hand with being positive about clients, in that advisers would encourage them to see their potential – as Extract 11 illustrates. Sometimes, however, challenging became more confrontational, as we show in this final analytic section. There was, then, also a clear link between challenging clients and being directive. This is well illustrated by comparing, again, different approaches that advisers took to formulating action plans. Compared to their EZ counterparts, JCP advisers tended to be less demanding of clients. Indeed, a phrase that they often used in developing action plans – *I'll just put down x* (see Extract 5, lines 1-5 for an example) – conveys minimal expectations regarding clients' search for employment. Not only does “just” work to minimise these, but the agreed action points tended to require less effort from JCP clients.

This is borne out in Extracts 12 and 13. Again, both advisers were engaged in agreeing an action plan with the client. In Extract 12, however, this entailed challenging the client's past performance (lines 5-6) and directing him to make more job applications than he had been doing (1-3 and 6-7). This included setting a target (line 7) and embedding some advice about sending his CV to companies speculatively (lines 7-9). When this received no verbal commitment from the client at line 10, the adviser did not leave it there. A feature of her 'challenging' approach was her repeated pursuit of such a commitment (lines 11 and 19-21). When the client responded with an account for his resistance – he had already tried the 'hidden market' with no success – the adviser continued to pursue a commitment to her original directive (lines 19-21). Indeed, having secured his strong agreement to the general point that he must be seeking work (lines 19-22), the adviser pressed on for a more specific commitment to make more applications per fortnight (lines 30-31). Note again the use of a tag question to place interactional pressure on the client to agree in the next turn, and her further pursuit (line 35) following yet more resistance from the client (line 32).

#### Extract 12 (224; subsequent 25+, EZ)

01 Adv:      What I'd also like you to do is: erm: (.) find additional  
02            vacancies stroke application forms for the next  
03            appointment with ((name)) (.) who will then (.) do-  
04            do the same .tch .hh erm: we'll try and increase  
05            it ((client name)) because one per fortnight's not

06 enough to apply for (0.8) okay you need to be doing  
07 probably six to ten per week (1.0) even if you do: what  
08 we call (.) hidden market in terms of spec-ing out your  
09 letters and your CVs  
10 (3.0)  
11 Do you get me  
12 (0.5)  
13 Cli: .tch Yes I've done- done so much of that it's very er-  
14 very des- soul destroying you hardly get any replies and  
15 er  
16 Adv: I don't- well at the [end of the day  
17 Cli: [an- and they're usually negative  
18 even then [so it's: that's: you know  
19 Adv: [what we need to do is (0.7) within your-  
20 within your agreement on your action planning is you need  
21 to be job ser- seeking (0.5) okay  
22 Cli: Oh yeah absolutely [absolutely  
23 Adv: [.h so w- whichever (0.5) strategy we  
24 use in terms of open or hidden market (0.6)  
25 Cli: Mmm  
26 Adv: Then at least we are job seeking (0.5) yeah and we're  
27 making an effort to do so to put yourself in a better  
28 position for employment  
29 Cli: Yeah  
30 Adv: If we only have one application per fortnight we're not  
31 are we  
32 Cli: It doesn't mean we're not looking I- I  
33 Adv: It [doesn't  
34 Cli: [yeah No  
35 Adv: But however we [need to evidence that  
36 Cli: [Yeah

In Extract 13, by contrast, when the client asserted that there had been “nothing” for him among the jobs advertised in the local paper, the adviser – rather than challenging this claim – aligned with the client’s position (lines 15-17). He not only agreed with this assessment of the advertised vacancies but also explicitly claimed a shared understanding with the client (“d’you know what I mean”/ “I know what you mean”, lines 14-16) and spelt out that understanding in a way that the client further agreed with (lines 16-19). Ultimately, this adviser directed the client to contact two employers per week – far fewer than the six to ten proposed in Extract 12 (line 7).

#### Extract 13 (040, subsequent ND 25+, JCP)

01 Adv: .hh So as far as your job search goe:s I'll put  
02 down that ehm: (0.5) .t (0.6) you've been reading  
03 the papers ((names local newspapers)) yeah,  
04 Cli: Yeah ((repeats names of locals newspapers))  
05 (0.4) ((typing))  
06 Adv: Been much in them or not  
07 (1.0)  
08 Cli: Pardon  
09 (0.5)  
10 Adv: Been much in them or not ((more slowly))  
11 (0.4)  
12 PA: [((clears throat))  
13 Cli: [(Well) there's been (.) a lot of jobs but (0.6)  
14 nothing for me d'you know what I mea[n ( )

15 Adv: [Yeah I know  
16 what you mean i- on the face of it  
17 [a lot of vacancies but [nothing suitable yeah:  
18 Cli: [On the f:ace of it a [lot of vacancies but  
19 (0.2) y:es:  
20 (4.7) ((typing))

Although Extracts 12 and 13 offer a particularly stark contrast, the point holds more generally: clients in the JCP were almost never asked to commit to as demanding a job search programme as their EZ counterparts in our recordings. Indeed, one application per fortnight was sometimes agreed as a goal on JCP action plans – the very number that was challenged in Extract 12.

## Discussion

### i) An interactional explanation for the EZs' performance

As we have already noted, there is large-scale quantitative evidence that Employment Zones outperformed Jobcentre Plus in certain key outcomes (Bruttel 2005, Griffiths and Durkin 2007). However, prior to our study, little was known about what occurred on the frontline in each setting. Although advisers' accounts of their practices suggested that they used "similar tools and strategies" (Joyce and Pettigrew 2002, 21), some differences were evident in clients' reported experiences, suggesting that EZ advisers may have been more client-centred and more influential in getting the client back into work (Griffiths and Durkin 2007, Hales et al 2003). However, by design, the previous research was unable to identify what advisers might have been doing differently *in their interactions with clients*.

The present study addresses this significant gap in our knowledge. Our findings do not support the 'little difference' claim (Joyce and Pettigrew 2002). Instead, based on detailed analysis of 88 recorded interviews, we have shown systematic differences in how advisers handled their interviews in each setting. We have summarised these patterns in five key words, intended to capture our sense of a distinctive EZ advisory 'style', which tended to be more *collaborative, directive, proactive, positive* and *challenging*. These terms should be understood as a 'shorthand' for pointing to the numerous detailed differences we identified in how advisers typically handled the same activities in each setting. As we have emphasised, these differences were not absolute, but they were marked and evident across both the mandatory and voluntary interviews in our sample.

Our findings afford a window onto the ways in which EZ advisers achieved their better outcomes *at the level of the one-to-one interview*. While it was beyond the scope of this study to explore the more macro-level differences that have been identified previously (Griffiths and Durkin 2007, Hales et al 2003), the significance of what goes on in the advisory interview should not be underestimated. It is the one site in which advisers can directly affect what happens. Once the client leaves the building, all sorts of variables may determine whether or not they move towards work; but within the interview, the adviser can directly choose (within institutional limits) how to conduct the activities required of them. Our study has shown that different choices lead to significantly different slots for client engagement. These include the following:

- Typing in silence gives the client no slot to agree with, or amend, what is being typed. By contrast, actively seeking the client's approval creates such a slot.

- An information-only approach creates no slot for the client's active 'buy in'. By contrast, information provision plus some form of interrogative or request creates such a slot.
- Aligning with clients' complaints about the difficulty of finding work leaves that difficulty unaddressed. Challenging clients about their prior efforts creates further opportunity for directing, informing and seeking clients' commitment to try harder.

In short, many of the practices we identified as more common in the EZ place greater interactional 'pressure' on clients to engage with activities *during* the interview, and to agree to do so *beyond* it. We argue that this is one important mechanism through which EZs achieved their better outcomes.

We also showed two differences that appear to have been largely pre-determined by the two organisations: whether or not clients had the chance to carry out certain practical activities during the interview (e.g. calling a prospective childminder); and whether or not advisers were able, directly, to help the client develop a CV. We showed how these mattered with regard to the speed of achieving key steps towards work. We also showed how the process of developing a CV, in particular, afforded opportunities for supporting the client that went beyond the production of the CV itself (e.g. guiding the client in how to 'sell' their past experience to employers and boosting clients' morale). Again, we argue that these differences indicate some important mechanisms through which EZs achieved their better outcomes. Our study offers, then, a new piece to the puzzle of why it was that EZs outperformed (some) JCP programmes. Our study was not designed to address this puzzle at all levels. But it offers a level of analysis that is seldom pursued: the detail of what happens on the frontline.

## **ii) Implications for other back-to-work programmes**

Our analysis raises the normative question of whether other programmes ought to adopt the practices identified in our EZ sample. This is a difficult question for three main reasons. The first is *ethical*. Some of the practices we identified in the EZ are potentially contentious. Being 'challenging' and 'directive', in particular, might "be read as a case of the 'iron fist in the velvet glove' – an exercise in manipulation" (Rosenthal and Peccei 2006, 218). One might argue, then, that (some of) the EZ practices should not be used even if they might lead to better quantitative outcomes.

Whatever one's normative view on our findings, there is a clear tension built into the EZ advisory style: between 'partnership' as a cornerstone of the EZ and the tendency of advisers to 'push' their clients harder. This tension makes it more difficult to offer simple *training guidelines* – our second difficulty. For instance, although challenging a client can be done in a positive way, some challenges in our dataset amounted to 'telling off'. In one case, this led to a stalemate between adviser and client, with the adviser pressing him to apply for a job which he did not want. Although this was uncommon, it highlights how the same broad practice – challenging – might be operationalised in ways that can have opposite effects on the interaction (facilitating or blocking further collaborative progress towards work). As we have argued in another context, "this 'malleability' of interactional practices means that they cannot be taught, employed, or evaluated *mechanistically*" (Reuber et al 2014, 136, emphasis in original).

Finally, there is a *philosophical* issue at stake. Our evidence suggests that the EZ advisory style was effective with respect to a specific institutional goal: moving unemployed people further towards being readily employable. This reflects a particular view on how to handle the ‘social problem’ of unemployment – one that locates the cause in the individual (or ‘supply side’). Alternative approaches have focused on the labour market (or ‘demand-side’), arguing, as Haughton et al. (2000, 672) put it, that many benefits claimants are faced with “the poverty of opportunity not the poverty of expectations”. On such a view, the goal should be to address the lack of suitable employment rather than the individual’s employability. Our findings are, at best, irrelevant to the question of effectiveness in meeting the former aim. It is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate between these starting points. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Toerien et al. 2011), decisions about what counts as effective practice are inextricably bound up with views on what the institutional goal is or ought to be; to decide on policy regarding support for benefits claimants is, unavoidably, to take a position with respect to that goal – even when the decision is evidence-based.

### **iii) Implications for further research**

To our knowledge, this study is the first to offer an interactional explanation for the quantitative outcome data showing that EZs tended to outperform JCP. However, given the lack of research at this (micro) level, our study should be understood as exploratory, indicating important directions for future research. These should include studies designed to examine – far more directly than we were able – the relationship between specific interactional practices and their outcomes (Heritage 1999). For instance, researchers might follow the example of studies done in medical settings, which have used mixed methods to show that certain question formats are more likely to lead to patients revealing their additional concerns (Heritage et al 2007) or to report being satisfied with the interaction (2006).

Such studies were founded upon a thorough understanding of how the relevant interactions operated in real time. This is crucial because there is often a gap between what people say they do and their actual practices (Waitzkin 1985). This need not be due to deliberate deception, but rather the fact that recollections are subject to ‘reframing’ over time. Moreover, the level of detail that can be explored using recorded interactions far surpasses anything that a participant could be expected to remember or articulate. Thus, on a gross level, the advisers in Joyce and Pettigrew’s (2002) study were right – they did perform similar activities in both settings; but when placed under the conversation analytic microscope, the differences in *how* they performed these become apparent. More research is needed to identify – and evaluate – the practices that advisers, in different settings, may be using on a routine, unconscious basis, so that these can be made available for deliberate use, as appropriate.

### **Final reflections**

Our analysis indicates some systematic differences in EZ and JCP advisory practices. It is beyond the scope of our study to explain *why* these occurred. However, on the basis of our observations we can speculate that EZ advisers – perhaps motivated by the different funding structures and increased flexibility in the EZs – were better able/more willing to reconcile the duality of their role as counsellor and enforcer of the rules for claiming benefits. Inherent in the five features discussed here is a form of ‘balancing act’: between collaborative partnership and adviser-client instruction; between challenge and ‘cheerleading’. One way of understanding the EZ advisory style, then, is as a solution to the interactional problem of how to manage this role tension in practice. At least when the client is ‘on board’ with the process,

the adviser can deploy these practices to maintain a sense of “customer sovereignty” (see Korczynski and Ott 2004), while at the same time exercising various forms of “heightened control to try to shape claimants’ motivation and capacity for work” (Rosenthal and Peccei 2006, 659). It may be that EZ advisers tended to frame this ‘heightened control’ in a different way to JCP advisers: that they saw this as being more in claimants’ own interests (i.e. gaining the advantages of paid work), whereas JCP advisers saw it as being more in the interests of the state (i.e. moving claimants off benefits). This is speculative but is supported by our finding that JCP advisers tended to coach claimants in the minimum requirements for continuing to receive benefits, whereas EZ advisers typically coached claimants in what steps were needed to find a job (Drew et al. 2010; Toerien et al. 2011).

Since the time of recording, much has changed in UK public policy. Services for long-term benefits claimants have largely, under the Coalition government’s Work Programme, been contracted out to private and third sector organisations (Toerien et al 2013). In this regard the policy question underlying our study – whether private sector provision should be increased – has been mostly decided (for now). However, we would caution against taking our findings as evidence in support of this decision – as an argument in favour of private sector provision *per se*. Our findings are not best explained at the level of the individual adviser. Rather, the systematic differences we observed were evidently underpinned by significant organisational and policy differences in place at the time. Perhaps the most overt of these was the assistance provided by EZ advisers in constructing a CV with the client. JCP advisers almost never did this, but there is some evidence that this is changing (Oakley, Foley and Hillage 2013). Thus, there is no *principled* reason for such practices to be considered to ‘belong’ in the private, but not the public, sector. *All* of the interactional practices identified as characteristic of EZ interviews were also seen in the Jobcentre; they were just less prevalent and often seemed to require the adviser to ‘work around’ the system (Toerien et al. 2013). Given the right enabling conditions – and if deemed ethically and philosophically appropriate – the practices identified here could be used far more routinely in Jobcentre Plus, and beyond.

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### Appendix: Transcription Key (see Jefferson, 2004)

<b>A. Some aspects of the relative timing of utterances</b>	
[ ] square brackets	Overlapping talk
= equals sign	No discernible interval between turns
(0.5) time in parentheses	Intervals within or between talk (measured in tenths of a second)
(.) period in parentheses	Discernable interval within or between talk but too short to measure (less than 2 tenths of a second)
<b>B. Some characteristics of speech delivery</b>	
Punctuation symbols are designed to capture intonation, not grammar and are used to describe intonation at the end of a word/sound, at the end of a sentence or some other shorter unit:	
. period	Closing intonation
, comma	Slightly rising intonation (a little hitch up on the end of the word)
? question mark	Fully rising intonation
- dash	Abrupt cut off of sound
: colon	Extension of preceding sound – the more colons the greater the extension
<u>here</u> underlining	Emphasised relative to surrounding talk
hhh.	Audible outbreath (number of h's indicates length)
.hhh audible inbreath	Audible inbreath (number of h's indicates length)
>Talk<	Speeded up talk
Hah hah or huh huh etc.	Beats of laughter
(h)	Audible aspirations in speech (e.g. laughter particles)
( ) empty single brackets or words enclosed in single brackets	Transcriber unable to hear words or uncertain of hearing
((word)) words enclosed in double brackets	Transcriber's comments

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