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Stream: Squeezing the Middle? Inequalities at Work

Exploring the role of civil society organisations in supporting disabled people in employment.

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Abstract

This article assesses the extent to which disabled workers engage with civil society organisations. It addresses two main questions, why do disabled workers contact CSO and it considers the activity, support and characteristics framework to assess the ability of CSOs to help disabled workers. The key findings indicate that disabled people mainly use CSOs for advice about career building. Secondly, the activities of CSOs aim to engender compliance rather than using the threat of sanctions. Alliances between different CSOs and CSOs and employers were found to be important, but there were no instances of TU and CSO alliances, suggesting an indifference approach. Finally, those organisations that reflect social identity politics were best suited to support workers looking to campaign or challenge discrimination.

1. **Introduction**

It is generally acknowledged that employee representation in the UK has become increasingly complex (Bellemere, 2000; Charlwood and Terry, 2007). Studies have shown that trade unions, traditionally, represented workers interests (Bryson, 2004) but the employment relationship has become increasingly individualised and collective action has decreased (Tailby *et al.*, 2011). The proportion of employees belonging to a trade union declined from 31% to 29% between 2004 and 2011 (Van Wanrooy et al, 2014). Historically, trade unions were charged with being undemocratic and misrepresenting the interests of a large proportion of their members (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002, Williams and Adam-Smith, 2006). Collective bargaining agreements often formalised and extended tacit discrimination (Colling and Dickens, 2001). Today the situation has improved, since the 1980s unions have sought to represent the issues of minority groups, although the success and coverage has been uneven and patchy (Bacon and Hoque, 2015; Williams and Adam-Smith, 2006). Notwithstanding the attempts of unions to improve equality representation and membership levels, most workplaces remain non-union leaving a representation gap, especially pertinent for vulnerable workers.

According to Williams *et al.*, (2011a) the decline of trade unions, the decline in joint regulation of the employment relationship and changes in labour market policy caused by political forces has led researchers to turn their attention to the potential regulatory role of other bodies (see also, Heery et al., 2004). One such body is a civil society organisation (CSO). A CSO refers to a broad range of organisations such as charities, faith organisations, voluntary associations, advocacy bodies, social movement organisations and other non-governmental organisations (Williams *et al.*,

2011a). As a result of weaker unions, CSOs have moved to help and support workers who cannot support themselves (Freeman, 2005).

Therefore, this research addresses two key research questions (1) what role do civil society organisations play in the work lives of disabled workers and (2) how effective are the actions of the CSOs in addressing the disabled workers employment disadvantage? In doing so, this paper extends understanding and knowledge of employment relations actors and their significance to a minority group. This topic is pertinent given the established disadvantage of disabled people in the labour market and new forms of representation such as civil society organisations which challenge Dunlop's (1993) three party model of employment actors.

2. **The role of civil society organisations**

The article's first main aim is to consider why disabled workers contact civil society organisations. Research shows that CSOs are strong organisations that wield power at national and state levels and have considerable success at representing worker issues (Osterman, 2006; Wills and Simms, 2004). CSOs are usually interested in qualitative issues about employment, rather than quantitative aspects such as wages (Williams *et al*, 2011a); given their lack of workplace representation and direct bargaining power (see Weil, 2005 and Kolins Given 2007). Many CSOs have augmented their work in the field of employment over the last 5 years (Heery et al 2012a). Existing research focuses on workers in general and points to several reasons why workers contact civil society organisations. According to Tailby et al., (2011) usually non-unionised workers, and especially low paid workers, use CSOs for workplace support. Such workers commonly experience problems with pay,

dismissal, discrimination and working hours and are employed by small businesses (Pollert and Charlwood, 2009). CSO organising could be a reflection of social identity politics (Williams *et al.*, 2011a) which is taking over from the long established collective bargaining principle (Piore and Stafford, 2006), where many CSOs are underpinned by a social justice rationale. While extant research focuses on workers in general, there is limited existing knowledge on how disabled workers, an important minority group in the UK make use of CSOs. Given this lacuna, it is important to ascertain how disabled people make use of CSOs because one might expect disabled workers to commonly contact CSOs about workplace support given their low levels of unionisation and the continued disadvantage they face.

The second aim of this article is to evaluate the actions of the CSOs in helping disabled workers. Debate exists about the effectiveness of CSOs; Williams *et al.*, (2011b) report that civil regulation has been successful at mitigating employment discrimination, enhancing work-life balance, embedding flexible working arrangements and improving the condition of vulnerable workers. However, Freeman, (2005) calls into question CSO's ability to benefit workers directly (see also: Abbott 2004, 2006) mainly due to their operation outside the boundaries of the organisation. Drawing on the activity, support and characteristics framework (see Bacon and Hoque, 2015) the article considers the activities in which the CSOs engage, the support the CSOs receive and the characteristics which will identify the factors that are associated with the ability of CSOs to influence disabled people's lives. The analysis here draws on this ASC framework to explore how CSOs support disabled workers and their efficacy in supporting workers. The following section explores the ASC framework in more detail.

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A useful starting point is the activities in which CSOs engage. In terms of disability an array of voluntary organisations exist to support people with specific medical conditions and some provide workplace support (Foster and Fosh, 2009). The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), for example, supports legislation by issuing codes of practice and assisting individuals who make claims. Foster and Fosh (2009) found that a significant proportion of their sample of disabled workers preferred to approach a voluntary organisation rather than a union for support and advice on disability issues in the workplace. Impairment specific organisations are better placed than unions to understand the situation of disabled workers (Humphreys, 2000). However, Foster and Fosh (2009) report that voluntary, general and impairment specific organisations, often campaign on narrowly defined issues relevant to their membership and are, therefore, of less use to disabled workers and believe unions are best placed to support disabled workers.

The activities of CSOs are characterised by a bifurcated approach; advising workers and lobbying activity to influence state policy (Heery et al.,2004; 2012a) achieved through compliance or deterrence tactics. The compliance approach utilises education and persuasion while the deterrence approach relies on threats of sanctions to encourage adherence to rules (Hood *et al.*, 2001). Heery *et al.*, (2004) report that CSOs spend a significant amount of their time trying to impact employment standards by indirectly influencing public policy and government, suggesting the compliance approach is most common (see also: Heery *et al.*, 2012; Williams *et al*, 2011b). From their study, Williams *et al.*, (2011b) report that CSOs also assimilate information to highlight and raise awareness of the *'desirability of regulation'* and also take action on behalf of individuals; for example the Citizen's Advice Bureau (Abbott, 2004; Williams *et al*, 2011a: 52). This assimilation allows the

CSOs to provide expertise upon which government and employers can draw. Finally, Williams *et al.*, (2011a) reported that CSOs also disseminate information to help regulate the workplace, which raises awareness and influences key decision makers of wider concerns in the employment field. They act as a source of legitimacy when handling difficult aspects of business practice and are reluctant to improve an organisation's equality practices by challenging employers (Williams *et al.*, 2010). Hence, this article assesses whether the CSOs used by disabled workers use a compliance or deterrence approach.

A number of different types of support could affect the CSO's ability to support disabled workers. Firstly, the relationship between the CSO and other actors in the employment relationship could be important. While Priestly et al (2010) proport that relationships with academic institutions are paramount for CSOs to harness power and influence, Heery et al (2012b) have focused on the relationship between CSOs and trade unions. Abbott (2004) found that CSOs were substituting for the presence of trade unions, not the role itself. Heery et al. (2012b) found that those CSOs who do have relationships with trade unions have a complex set of relationships with trade unions that display aspects of agreement, indifference and antagonism. Therefore, the research will establish if any collaborations exist between CSOs and TU and CSOs and academia and the nature of their collaborations.

The second factor that could affect the support available to the CSOs is how the CSO responds to the political environment. Heery et al (2012a) report that when new public policy, law and government agencies are created, CSOs can be involved in their creation and then support their implementation. These political opportunities can be characterised as procedural where CSOs engage in the process of policy making or substantive where the objectives of government reflect the interest of the

CSO target group (Heery et al., 2012a). Therefore, it is important to ascertain if the political environment has led to CSO involvement in procedural or substantive activities and the ability of these activities to help disabled people.

Finally, sources of funding are often limited for CSOs where they struggle for sufficient funding to provide basic services (Priestly et al, 2010). In a bid to secure funding many CSOS engage with employers. Donations from employers enable CSOs to continue their work while simultaneously engaging employers in a moderate and cooperative manner (Williams et al., 2010). Therefore, it could be suggested that CSO's ability to engage employers and secure funding could be a factor in their ability to support disabled workers.

A number of organisational characteristics may affect the ability of civil society organisations to effectively support workers. Firstly, the extent to which the organisations are external to the workplace has caused debate in the literature. CSOs operate outside the boundaries of organisations and are not under management control (Heery 2004) which causes some to believe their scope for supporting workers is limited (see: Kolin Givens, 2007; Weil, 2005) In contrast, Osterman (2006) and Wills and Simms (2004) report CSOs wield power at national and state levels and have considerable success at representing worker issues.

The second characteristic likely to affect the ability of the CSO to support disabled workers is the amount of knowledge they have on specific issues. For example, trade union equality representatives are shown to have little knowledge on disability and this hinders their ability to support workers (Foster and Fosh, 2009). It is proposed, therefore, that if a CSO has in-depth knowledge in a particular issue it is more likely to be able to support disabled workers. External agencies, for example,

have vast specialist knowledge of getting disabled people back into work and these have been shown to be better at placing disabled people in work than the generic JobCentre Plus, on account of their specialist resources (Heenan, 2002 and Davies, 2008).

To summarise, the first aim of the article is to understand why disabled workers contact civil society organisations and the second aim of the article is to evaluate the potential relationship between the activities the CSO engages in, the support the CSO receives and the characteristics of the CSO and their ability in supporting disabled people. The analysis conducted will highlight the role CSOs play in supporting disabled workers, a subset of minority workers in the UK. Furthermore, the article addresses the call by Williams *et al.*, (2011) for research that determines the effectiveness of civil regulation and the need for research about the role and priorities of disabled people's organisations (Priestly et al. 2010).

3. **Data collection**

The data are drawn from qualitative interviews with 31 disabled workers and five civil society representatives. The data was collected between 2009 and 2011, in the immediate aftermath of a financial crisis. The data was part of a wider research project that examined the labour market experiences of disabled workers in regard to: recruitment and selection, the role of external agencies to support disabled graduates and benefits received in lieu of employment. The research used a life history method which looked at the biography of the individual to understand their lived experiences and focused on the disabled person's sense making.

A purposive opportunist sampling approach was used with advertisements placed in media channels such as 'Linked-In', impairment specific and general disability websites and the published disability press; each separate group proved very difficult to contact and engage. Initially, the disabled workers were interviewed, all of whom were graduates with a minimum of a Bachelor's degree and self-defined themselves as disabled. Several implications of the sampling process arise, such as a bias towards those who are highly educated, and a greater proportion of disabled graduates (39%) in the sample worked in the disability sector, which was unanticipated. This bias leads to a unique insight into a group of highly educated individuals with high levels of social capital.

Semi structured interviews were used to create a rich study (Mason, 2002) and eliciting personal narratives gave voice to the disabled workers. The interview took a chronological approach to aid recall when discussing past events (Mason, 2002), how the person remembers the past can be the most important part of the story they tell (Gusdorf, 1980). Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average, were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and then subject to complete coding, by hand, for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Some of the codes were drawn from the research questions and literature, while others emerged from the data. As new codes emerged, all previous transcripts were reanalysed using the new codes and finally codes were aggregated into themes. Conducting disability research involves vast ethical considerations, therefore all data was stored confidentially and anonymised, informed consent was obtained and all data handling conformed to the Data Protection Act 1998.

4. Findings

The first main aim of the paper is to consider why disabled workers contacted civil society organisations. Eighteen disabled workers reported that they had contacted general equality organisations, impairment specific organisations or general disability organisations, all of these organisations fall within the Williams *et al*, (2011a) definition of a civil society organisation. The table below shows the general trend in the type of support sought from CSOs.

Type of Support	Number of Participants
Discrimination advice	3
Benefit help	2
Careers Advice	8
General disability advice	2
Education resources	1
Lobbying	2

Table 1

The table shows that the most common reason civil society originations were contacted was for help and advice to build careers. The support to enter work from the CSOs was vital in three participants' experiences. Claire, Joe and Lisa all took part in the SCOPE graduate training scheme[1]. Joe, in particular, was very positive about the influence of the scheme on his career. He turned his placement into a permanent job and feels that without the scheme he would not have found an

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[1] This scheme takes on disabled graduates, of high calibre and sends them to host organisations for two six month placements. The graduates carry out normal graduate roles in these organisations but have additional support from SCOPE. SCOPE then also helps the employer and advises them on how to meet the needs of the graduates. The scheme is growing in popularity among graduates and employers.

employer *"to take a chance on him".* Despite not securing a permanent position Claire also had a positive experience in one of her six month placements. This placement meant that Claire could demonstrate she could hold down a job, with minimum reasonable adjustments and produce a very high standard of work. These examples show that some CSOs, especially the disability related CSOs have a direct influence to help disabled workers build careers. This work finds support for Heery *et al.,* (2012b) who reported that CSOs helped support careers and offered placement schemes and networking opportunities.

The sample included two CSO organisations which have dedicated graduate training schemes, one of which was created *"…due to research which aimed to find out the reason for blind and partially sighted people having high levels of unemployment."* In both cases the CSO interviewees reported the schemes were beneficial for disabled people in terms of giving them experience and confidence in the world of work. One of the schemes reported 70% of its participant's secured full time work. Their role is not restricted to employee support; each CSO interviewed also gives support to managers: they believe manager education is the best method to change the attitudes of employers.

The second most popular reason for contacting CSOs was for advice about how to deal with discrimination. For example, when Georgia faced discrimination, she sought help from a local law centre:

> *"the local community law centre is very good and has a disability law representative and they suggested that I would be able to take a case. They put me in touch with a lawyer... It was very helpful."*

This support was instrumental in Georgia making a successful case against her housing association. In contrast, Pam was less happy with the support she received about discrimination from the CSO, because of their lack of direct workplace influence:

> *"I contacted CSO for advice but they had said to me, that I would have to take it through grievance procedure… before they would get involved. And I thought at the time, 'I can't do that."*

This variation can be explained by the source of discrimination. In the case of Georgia she was discriminated against by a housing association, and therefore it was easier to directly take the party to court. In comparison, Pam's discrimination occurred in the workplace, where she had to follow a distinct procedure where the CSO had little or no influence.

Another general pattern in the data is that the participants were using CSOs to access advice and information that was not purely related to work; for example, Lucy and David used the same CSO for vastly different reasons. Lucy wanted help funding a training course: "*when I wanted to return to work, they are actually helping me do a fashion course... I have received part of the funding."* and David needed help to complete benefit forms:

> *"when I decided to fill in the DLA form properly, it's a NGO. They helped me by basically asking me the question and writing down the correct answer, rather than the answer I would give, re interpreting my words, so they were actually ticking the boxes that they needed to tick for the government, where as I was just saying it in an incorrect manner. They were absolutely splendid."*

Despite the vast differences in reasons for contact with the same CSO, both were equally happy with their support.

David and Lucy's cases illustrate the wide range of activities in which civil society organisations are involved. CSOs typically are not just concerned with the workaday selves of their clients. This point is possibly a strength of CSOs- they bring together a wide range of services. This strength could increase responsiveness to disabled people because they feel they do not need to 'shop around' for advice and support regarding different areas of their lives.

Given the high levels of involvement with CSOs, were CSOs helpful in supporting the participants? The interviews show only one negative experience, when Pam was not helped because the CSO had no direct workplace influence. Therefore, overall, CSOs were positive at mediating the work and wider environment. Positive experiences ranged from being granted extra benefit payments because the Disability Living Allowance form had been filled out correctly, to feeling like they were accepted in an inclusive environment, as described by Charles: *"these people are ok, it is not complicated. They are not big conversationalist; there are no jokes, or mickey taking... I am accepted here."* The positive experiences allowed a trust relationship to be built in many instances where CSOs were contacted numerous times. For example, Joe used a CSO to apply for jobs, then the same CSO provided him with a graduate training scheme position and then later helped him negotiate reasonable adjustments.

The Factors Associated with the Influence of CSOs on Disabled People – the ASC Framework

This section presents the accounts from the disabled workers and CSO representatives to identify the ability of CSOs to support disabled people. Turning first to the activities in which the CSOs engage, I can assess whether their activities reflect the compliance of deterrence approach.

The compliance arm of the bifurcated approach involves advising workers and employers through education and persuasion. The study found evidence that CSOs were not only educating employers, but also disabled people. A senior manager in a large employer focused CSO stated that they have:

> "*developed line manager guides to help disability equality commitment trickle down from the top, this work is vital because if you are disabled you need someone to cushion things for you a bit, a trouble-shooter and that should be your line manager*".

This organisation also provides an advice line for employers to call for disability related matters and Cynthia, the manager reports that the calls they currently receive "*are more complex than 10-15 years ago*". Similarly, an impairment specific organisation representative, Lilith, reported that:

> "*We want to come at it from a carrot angle, tell us what the problems are and we will give you [employers] vision training, let them see it is not as daunting as they think*".

This organisation prides itself on its ability to challenge employers' misconceptions about sensory disability through the training they provide.

Several disabled workers received education and advice from CSOS, such as Sophie who reported the Epilepsy Society's support enabled her to educate her colleagues and Georgia who received newsletters on developments in research for her particular condition. *"I am currently fairly involved with the Fibromyalgia UK, just in terms of receiving their newsletters, there is very little going on for my genetic condition and they keep my up to date."*

Within the compliance approach also sits the persuasion angle. The accounts showed examples of where the CSOs engage in persuasion to increase buy in to disability equality among organisations. For example, Cynthia reports her organisation provides benchmarking to allow organisations to see how they compete with different organisations, and illustrate *"how it [disability equality] makes sense for the business".* Similarly, a large CSO that focuses on helping disabled people into employment reported that they engage in employer partnerships *"to address the misconceptions about disability."*

The accounts did not include any examples of deterrence through the threat of sanctions but it did find that the CSOs were lobbying employers. For example, the large employment focused CSO engages in *"cold calling, we initiate contact, we go into organisations and tell them what we can do for them and how great it is to have a disabled person work for them."* Lobbying was seen on a personal level, Georgia was involved in lobbying Parliament: *"Recently I have done some direct action campaigning going to Downing Street and that sort of thing. It is exhausting but it is really interesting as well".* Georgia wishes she mad more energy to engage in these valuable tasks. The accounts, therefore, indicate that CSOs may engage in the compliance arm of the bifurcated approach and not the deterrence approach.

Turning to the support CSOs receive, the accounts show that there were no partnerships with trade unions but instead there were partnerships with other CSOs and specific employers. Gary, from a career orientated CSO reports that he refers to Remploy when necessary:

> *"I do an acid test with them [disabled client], I ask if they are able to cope with a 5 day week, if they say no, then I send them to Remploy, as they have a better support network."*

Gary also reports close links with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisors, to whom he also refers clients. In a similar vein, Inderdeep from the sensory CSO reports that her CSO has linked with another sensory CSO. "*Recently went into cohorts with Action for Blind People. Their employment officers give help and advice to anyone who is Blind or Partially Sighted and looking for work. Including 1-2-1 advice, application forms, CVs, job search skills."* Another CSO in the sample has a contract with key employers to take on clients to enable the disabled workers to become "*job ready*".

Another support issue that is likely to affect the effectiveness of CSOs is available funding. All CSO representatives that were interviewed reported that the economic downturn has negatively affected their resources. Louis reports: "*austerity measures mean there is not a lot of money to spend on candidate development*". Inderdeep also says: "*Unfortunately some funding for the scheme has been cut back, due to economic climate… we've had to shrink the scheme".* It is likely with cuts to candidate development and scheme cut backs that these CSOs are unable to help disabled workers to the same extent with limited resources.

Links with the government have been influential in the support of the employment based CSO via contracting. This CSO receives referrals direct from the JobCentre

Plus to help people "*who are the furthest away from the labour market enter work*".
Nevertheless, this link with the Government has also meant their schemes have
been subject to Government funding cuts and restrictions.

The final arm of the ASC framework is characteristics. The accounts suggest several
characteristics could be important in the ability of CSOs to support disabled workers.
Firstly, it is necessary to disaggregate the type of CSO with its ability to support
disabled workers. Those who contacted a general equality CSO found them to be
unhelpful. For example Mary found they did not listen to her*: "I don't feel that they
have support there anymore. I don't feel they are listening to me."* In contrast, the
impairment specific organisations were contacted because of their precise specialist
knowledge of the impact of an impairment, such as Sophie using Epilepsy Society
and the Dyslexia Centre. When participants wanted general support on promoting
equality, they tended not to contact impairment specific CSOs, but general disability
CSOs, such as Joe seeking advice for filling out his benefit claim form. What this
data is hinting at is when the participants seek impairment specific information they
seek impairment specific CSOs, such as the MS Society. In contrast, when they
need advice and support about improving equality in their lives, they seek the
support of general disability organisations. This suggests active and strategic choice
on the part of the participant and a specialism among the CSOs. However, the ability
of the general disability CSOs to support disabled workers was mixed, for example
Hayley found the general disability CSO she approached unhelpful*: "they weren't
able to help me because they are just an umbrella organisation and I didn't follow it
further".* In contrast, Joanna found the same CSO very helpful:

> "*when I was off sick I went into my local supermarket and there was a stand
> for X, I was obviously in a chatty mood, and this woman told me they were*

having a conference and why didn't I come along and I thought that will be interesting so I went along and I walked into a room of disabled people and for the first time in my life nobody stared at me. Do you know what I mean?"

Joanna is still involved with this CSO. What the difference hints at here is when the CSO needs to take action to intervene to address discrimination, it is less likely to be helpful than when it is used to secure information and provide general advice.

In some cases, such as Lucy, a relationship was built up between the CSO and the individual because they supported the disabled person on a range of issues. This meant that the next time the participant found themselves needing support they returned to the CSO that helped them previously. Mary, for example, had support from a mental health charity in the past and is now turning back to them to get into the labour market*: "I have been with X previously, they got me into college and onto university, now I want them to help me into a job."* Amelia also built up an important relationship with a CSO which she initially used to help her secure direct payments and now she heads up the CSO as a director.

The final characteristic shown to be important in the support of disabled people is the ease of access of the CSO. Those CSOs where a person could walk in off the street were seen to be helpful, such as Georgia who walked into her local law centre. This form of access is in contrast to those organisations where you need a referral to access their support. For example, Charles was referred to a CSO by the JobCentre: "*I was immediately referred to the Innovative Trust – Quest, for people with learning disabilities, or any disabilities".* They provided a great service for Charles and helped him secure a career in teaching but having to be referred was a barrier to accessing their support.

In summary the ASC framework has demonstrated that the activities the CSO engages in are usually compliance orientated along the information arm but importantly they provide information to both employers and disabled people. The support offered to CSOs affects their ability to provide a service to disabled people and employers, demonstrated by the cuts instigated in the wake of the recession. Finally, the characteristics of the CSO depict which type of CSO is most salient to a disabled person. Impairment specific CSOs were seen as paramount for information sharing and education, whereas general disability CSOs were useful when more general equality advocacy was needed. Those CSOs who were easy to access and with whom the participants could build a relationship were important in supporting their needs.

5. Discussion

This article had two main aims. The first aim was to consider why disabled people contacted CSOs. The second aim was to identify the activity, support and characteristics of CSOs associated with supporting disabled people.

With regard to the first aim, the accounts suggest that the majority of disabled workers contacted CSOS for advice about career building. This finding is in contrast to the studies by Pollert and Charlwood (2009) that vulnerable workers contact CSOs for advice about dismissal, pay, discrimination and working. The data, however, confirm work by Heery et al (2012a) that CSOs have a broad range of

concerns in various institutional domains such as benefits, legal advice and employment.

With regard to the second aim of the article, the accounts showed various ASC factors which could be associated with CSO ability to support disabled workers. In particular, supporting Williams et al, (2010; 2011) CSOs more commonly used the compliance approach to educate and engender equality commitment, such as providing line manager guides.

Similarly to extant literature (see Williams *et al.*, 2011a) there are no instances in the data where CSOs advised individuals to take action against employers. Again, this could be a reflection of their lack of direct workplace influence as seen in the case of Pam (see also: Kolin Givens, 2007; Weil, 2005), or a reflection of their ability to provide information that negates the need to take workplace action, as in the case of Sophie, where educating colleagues stopped them discriminating. These accounts, therefore, hint at the dominance of the compliance approach.

The study partially supports the work of Freeman, (2005) who called into question CSO ability to benefit workers directly, but there is no evidence to suggest this lack of direct influence was entirely detrimental to the CSO effectiveness. Williams *et al* (2010) report that CSOs make is possible to mediate the law from outside the workplace, this study takes this point further by showing it is not just organisational policies that can be affected but employees' knowledge of law to then challenge employers.

In wider literature, Foster and Fosh (2009) found that impairment specific CSOs had a narrow focus, which was unhelpful to workers, in contrast this study finds the CSO, including impairment specific organisations, have a broad scope, which is valued by the disabled people. The CSOs are more likely to have the specialist knowledge that the disabled person requires about the labour market and welfare rights or how to find work. This wide range of services provided by the CSO enables a relationship to be established between the disabled person and the CSO, as a result trust is created, which drives the person to return when new problems arise.

In addition, the accounts provide some support for the work of Dickens (1989) who report CSOs as mediating agents because they help draw out the significance of new law (Heery *et al*, 2012a).

The presence of an impairment accounts for some of the preference for CSOs, which reflects the idea of Williams *et al*., (2011a) and Piore and Stafford, (2006) that CSOs are reflecting a trend of identity politics. For example, many participants contacted CSOs who represented people with their specific impairment or general disabilities. As reported earlier, Joanna felt safe and Charles felt understood. Negative responses to impairments caused difficulties at work and it was these difficulties that prompted the participants to seek advice and support from external organisations with whom they were able to identify. This data, suggests, therefore, that what draws people to a CSO is the ability for them to see their identity reflected in the CSO, which a more workplace focused organisation, such as a trade union, is unable to do.

The data showed that interaction with CSOs was continuous in many of the disabled workers' experiences. Usually interaction was not on a one off basis and a

relationship was established. Secondly, the vast majority of the outcomes from interaction with CSOs were positive, not only on the primary level, but also successful at stopping the initial problem from escalating further. The ability of CSOs to transform the lives of the disabled workers was vast, with one reporting they could not have worked without the intervention of the CSO. Finally, the disabled workers saw the CSO as a legitimate source of knowledge and information, not only about legislative issues but also broader societal and medical issues.

In terms of the support the CSOs receive, relationships with other actors were deemed to be important. The accounts did not find any instances of CSO and trade union alliances, suggesting support for the indifference approach (see Heery et al., 2012b). Instead, relationships with other CSOS and employers were seen to be important. The accounts show referral links between different CSOs, which is not reported elsewhere. Heery et al (2012a) suggest links with employers are integral to CSO activity, which is demonstrated in these accounts.

The role of contracting was seen to be important as was the wider political environment, reflecting earlier work by Heery et al (2012a) and Williams et al, (2010). New legislation created opportunities for CSOs to engage in providing support for disabled workers through contracts and vast changes in legislation created situations where employers needed more advice on complex issues.

The economic downturn caused CSOs to reduce their service for disabled people. This finding fits with wider research but also indicate that disabled people are highly likely to be negatively affected in an economic downturn (see Hogarth et al. 2009).

The interviews also suggest several CSO characteristics could be associated with their ability to support disabled people. Firstly, those organisations where a referral

was not required were helpful to disabled people, whereas when a referral was needed they were helpful but less accessible.

Secondly, the nature of the CSO affected how they supported disabled workers. Impairment specific organisations were helpful for information and advice, but for campaigning on general equality issues, general disability organisations were preferred. This point suggest support for organisations characterised by identity politics supporting vulnerable workers (Piore and Safford, 2006). However, the research expands extant work by illustrating who the disabled workers to turn to in different situations.

Finally, as reported elsewhere (Heery et al, 2012a) the CSOs were characterised by involvement in many different spheres of life. However, contrary to earlier work, this study establishes the impact on disabled workers of this type of support. A trust relationship ensued where disabled workers return to seeks help over a period of time because the support is available for a range of issues.

6. Conclusion

This article has, overall, achieved a number of important objectives. The evidence presented in this paper supports a growing body of work that agrees civil society organisations are a source of influence in the employment relationship (see: Heery *et al*, 2012a, 2012ab; Heery *et al*, 2004; Kolins Given, 2007; Osterman, 2006; Williams et al, 2011a, 2011b). This study is replete with examples of CSOs intervening at the request of disabled workers and providing information and advice that either

mitigated the need to take further action or adequately equipped the disabled person to avoid a situation where discrimination occurred. Despite these advances in helping disabled workers, the data did show that because CSOs have little or no direct workplace influence (see Kolin Givens, 2007; Weil, 2005) their affect could be limited.

The research showed the main reason for contacting CSOs was about career support, not just workplace problems. The general pattern was that the participants were happy with the advice they received and built a trust relationship. The data indicates that the pattern of contact is a reflection of the expertise of the different organisations. This data showed no interaction between trade unions and CSOs and the research identified no cases of union-CSO coalitions in operation, mainly because the two types of organization work in different spheres. There were, however important relationships between different types of CSOs and CSOs and employers.

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