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### Choice agendas in disability policy and practice: An analysis through the lenses of professional actors

*The cases of England and Lombardy in comparison*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **The journey of my engagement with ‘choice agendas’**

‘Choice agendas’ is the formula I will use throughout this work to refer to the new emphasis ‘choice’ has gained in the specific context of public policy and public services in the last twenty years or so. Personally, I first came across choice agendas while working as a ‘support officer’ and then ‘brokerage support officer’ for a charity in London. This was between 2011 and 2013. As a ‘support officer’, my job was to support a small number of individuals with learning disabilities to live independently in their community. I both delivered practical support – for example, with daily living activities such as shopping, cooking, house chores, and access to the community – and managed their care packages. This involved writing or updating needs assessments, risks assessments, daily and monthly reports and individual, person-centred-support plans. In hindsight, I would say that this job put me at the heart of the transformations choice agendas have brought about in the context of social care services for disabled people in England. At that time, however, I was not aware of this. Neither my academic background nor my professional one were related to social care, disability or social policy matters. Moreover, I was quite new to England, having only recently moved to London. I remember, from that time, a mix of feelings surrounding my job and the context in which I carried it out. On the one hand, I was amazed at the opportunities those people with learning disabilities I was working with had in terms of independent living. Most of them lived independently in council houses or sheltered accommodations and they supported themselves through a mix of housing benefits and different income support measures. In addition, they attended day services or other day opportunities and received a tailored number of hours of outreach support – such as the ones I was providing as part of my job – for the kind of activities they struggled with. In my view, to my unexperienced eyes at that time, this was the clear sign of a real and functioning welfare state. And I remember wondering whether in my home country, Italy, similar opportunities would be available for people with learning disabilities seeking to live independently in a house of their own. On the other hand, however, I also remember feelings of uneasiness in relation to my role. For instance, my first months in the job coincided with the closure of all directly provided outreach services in the local authority where I was working. Indeed, the charity I worked for had secured a contract for the externalised provision of such services and, as an unqualified and newly employed worker, I recall the awkwardness with which I shadowed a series of workers who were soon to lose their employment contracts and from whom I would take over. Other uncomformable aspects of my job regarded the idea of choice more directly. ‘Choice and control’ was the slogan dominating the social care sector in that period. While agreeing with the ethos of such a slogan as well as its links to the concepts of person-centred care and tailor-made support solutions, I felt some

tension and contradictions in the way it was equated to another popular concept at that time, that of 'self-directed-support'. I felt that the kind of choice offered by self-directed-support approaches was not always desired or appreciated by people using public services, and sometimes even perceived as a burden. I also felt there was excessive emphasis on users' responsibilities in the rhetoric of choice, such as when I was told by my managers not to worry too much if "my clients" did not engage with me and the support I was providing, seeing as, "at the end of the day, it is their choice if they decide not to be compliant with our services".

More mixed feelings emerged as I took on the job of 'brokerage support officer' when the same charity I was working for won a contract to deliver brokerage services. And again, in hindsight, I would say those were the heydays of brokerage in England, when the idea of having independent support planners gained momentum and many local authorities across the country responded by opening bidding opportunities for charities to provide brokerage support. My role in that period was supporting young people with disabilities in their transition into adulthood. This transition often coincided with young people's leaving school, and my job mainly involving helping them to decide how they wanted to spend the 'personal budget' they were allocated by social services as part of their 'transition'. This role not only brought me into the heart of choice agendas; it also demanded I engage deeply with its tools: direct payments, personal budgets and person-centred-plans. Again, both amazement and bewilderment characterised my experience as a broker. Amazement at the rich and wide array of opportunities young people with disabilities were entitled to access as part of their transition into adulthood, from special-needs colleges to training opportunities, day opportunities, overnight stays, short holidays and, in a few cases, work experience as well. Simultaneously, however, the tensions and contradictions I had already experienced in regards to 'choice' grew more and more intense. On the one hand, I felt there were aspects of 'choice' which were far more rhetorical than they were concrete. For instance, I remember being asked to draft person-centred-plans in the first person even without having necessarily involved the young people in their writing, simply by translating professionals' lead assessments from the third person into the nominative "I". And, as part of this process, to adjust phrases and sentences to make them more "young people-like". On the other hand, I remember struggling to support some young people with very complex needs in putting packages in place. For instance, in the case of day services – one of the most frequently requested services, in my experience – the wide and rich variety of opportunities mentioned above was mainly composed of private services lacking any type of contract with or accreditation by local authorities. Indeed, 'spot purchasing' led local authorities to dismiss many of their contracted-out services as clients became able to access them directly using their own personal budgets, hence, by means of their 'choice'. I felt a great sense of frustration every time I saw such services closing their doors to people who were deemed "too complex" to support because they

were “too risky for other users” or it was “too expensive for local authorities to finance their packages”.

The more experience I gained in my job, the more I was overcome by the conviction that the ‘choice and control’ slogan was tokenistic. At the same time, however, I felt I could refute neither the ethos of this slogan nor its associations with positive outcomes. Beginning with this time working as a broker, therefore, I embarked on a journey that brought me closer and closer to choice, choice agendas and choice debates. I moved on to work for a local authority in London, coordinating a social care team at a time when personalisation through personal budgets was being institutionalised across English public services. During the same period, I also enrolled in a MSc in Social Policy at the *London School of Economics and Political Science* where my courses included Julian Le Grand’s class on ‘choice and competition’ as the new recipe for public service delivery and a course by Sonia Exley that focused on education policy in an effort to critically interrogate this same recipe. Through this master’s degree programme, I realised that choice was a dominant trope in politics, policy and academia as well. It became clear that the ‘choice and control’ slogan I had associated up to that point with disabled people’s needs and social service efforts to meet them had both deeper origins and wider applications.

It was through this personal journey that this project gradually came about: the journey of my engagement with the topic of ‘choice’ and my contrasting feelings regarding it. What follows is an attempt to gain some clarity about this this tangle of policy tropes and personal misgivings, answer some burning questions about the effects of choice agendas and share my reflections on these matters with a wider public.

### **Beyond my personal experience: the popularity of ‘choice’**

Making choices is so common in our everyday lives that, most of the time, we take it for granted that choice represents a good, positive phenomenon. Western (individualistic) societies teach the importance of personal choice to their members in relation to nearly every area of their lives (Iyengar, 2010), from education, careers and relationships to matters of religion, spirituality and identity. Making choices about all these aspects is considered essential for achieving autonomy, freedom and control over one’s own life. Philosophers have problematised such assumptions, however. In his book *Development as Freedom* (2001), Amartya Sen recognises freedom as essential to choice. In fact, “unfreedom” – whether arising from the denial of political and civil rights or poverty and social deprivation – leaves people with very little opportunity to choose. This does not mean, however, that having more choice automatically enhances freedom. Many years before Sen, Isaiah Berlin opened a similar debate by distinguishing between ‘negative’ and

‘positive’ freedom or liberty (Berlin, 1959). Negative liberty is “freedom from” – freedom from want, constraints and coercion – while positive liberty is “freedom to” – the ability to act on and realise one’s choices. Negative liberty (freedom from) is essential for positive liberty (freedom to), but increasing opportunities for people to choose does not necessarily help to remove constraints or “unfreedom” from their lives.

Nevertheless, in the contemporary context choice is too often valued in itself, regardless of the conditions under which and basis on which it is exercised. What is more, in the past twenty to thirty years, the celebration of personal choice has also rapidly spread from the private sphere of everyday life to the less-private context of public services. There are many examples of this trend, especially in Western societies: from workers choosing their own pension plans and sometime even working arrangements, to parents choosing the school their children will attend, individuals choosing their doctors, health insurance or the hospital where they will receive treatment. In addition to choosing doctors, hospitals and schools, it is also becoming increasingly popular to choose what doctors, hospitals or schools should do in terms of treatment, care plans and curriculum. In his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why more is less* (2009), Schwartz provides an entertaining example of how going to the doctor in America feels more and more like going to the hairdresser, where it is the wishes of the client (patient) that determine the professional’s actions.

Is this what we want from public services? Tailor-made solutions for all needs and wants? And are all these choices – such as the ones outlined in the examples above – really fundamental rights? And does choice always mirror the presence of an empowering and fair welfare system, as opposed to a paternalistic and unequal one?

My argument is that, too often, it is taken for granted that the answer to such questions is “yes”. I suggest instead that the popularity of choice in public services and policy needs to be questioned, as it is actually much more multifaceted than it might seem from the apparently simple, positive way it is commonly depicted. And this is not so much because, as Schwartz (*Ibidem*) contends, too much choice risks overloading and overwhelming us, debilitating rather than liberating our prospects. Rather, it is because what is at stake with choice in the context of public services are the interests and agendas of the many different actors calling for more choice in the public field.

### **Three reasons to question the popularity of choice in public policy and services**

My first reason for questioning the popularity of choice in public policy and services has then to do with the fact that different actors have historically advocated for choice for diverse and often

contrasting purposes. On the one hand, social welfare movements, users' organisations and pressure groups (Annetts et al., 2009) have demanded 'more choice' in the context of welfare services as a means to combat the discrimination and marginalisation of excluded and vulnerable groups, and to promote their participation and empowerment. Choice, in this context, has been seen as a means for giving voice to and empowering individuals with little or no say in the welfare arrangements theoretically designed for them. The disabled people's movement represents a powerful example, with their 'choice and control' slogan aimed at revindicating their active role as citizen in charge of their own lives and in opposition to dominant visions framing them as nothing more than vulnerable people in need of care (Campbell, 2008). Choice has been a key claim of other social movements too; from the pro-choice movement fighting for women's right to legal abortion to movements pursuing politics of identity (Lister, 2010). What all these examples have in common is an understanding of choice as a synonym of, or means of achieving, agency, independence and participation. On the other hand, however, choice has also been advocated for by politicians, economists and policy-makers in the name of more efficient and responsive welfare services and, as such, often paired with competition, privatisation and marketisation objectives (Propper 2012).

At a policy level, all these different uses for and aims surrounding choice are often portrayed in unison, as if pursuing one objective means the others are met almost automatically. I would argue that this is often not the case. On the contrary, far from being a 'happy marriage', the union of different purposes surrounding choice is usually problematic, as the convergence of different actors with divergent interests around the unified object of 'choice' may hide power imbalances. Tom Shakespeare, a leading disability activist and theorist, makes this point clear in relation to the 'choice and competition' mantra (Le Grand, 2009) which has informed the Labour strategy in the UK under the Blair government. Indeed, he warns that many disabled people might not be able to enjoy the "freedom to choose and compete" promoted by this strategy in that such freedom is not available to all in equal measure (Shakespeare, 2005). Insisting that choice is a "great equalizer" can be dangerous, especially in the context of unequal societies where the illusion of choice can lead to, reinforce or mask oppressive practices (Iyengar, 2010).

The second reason why I believe the popularity of choice in public policy and services should be questioned is that choice has not entered public policy on its own. Specific tools have been associated with its entry in welfare services, and my contention is that these tools are neither purely technical nor neutral. Some examples are open enrolment for pupils and school performance tables in education (Adnett and Davies 2003; Ball 2006); decommissioning and spot purchasing in healthcare services (Le Grand 2007); cash-for-care (Glasby and Littlechild, 2016) and voucher style reforms (Graziano 2009) in social care; and cash transfer schemes in all the above-mentioned services. All of these measures could be defined as 'demand-side financing' tools and they have

been promoted with the declared aim of facilitating choice on the part of patients, pupils, disabled people, the elderly, parents, carers and public service users more generally. My argument is that these tools, far from neutrally delivering on this objective, actually influence the conceptual frameworks of the specific policy fields in which they are introduced. In so doing, they also condition the direction of the daily practices and routines of the different actors operating in the field. Understanding how this takes place is of paramount importance.

Finally, my third reason for questioning the popularity of choice in welfare services and public policy has to do with the wider effects of choice agendas and the way in which they have been studied to date. Having been operationalised through specific policy tools, choice agendas have often been analysed as policy programmes and, as such, evaluated based on their outcomes. What constitutes an outcome is often a contested issue, however (Stame, 2016). For instance, measuring the extent to which choice has improved the experiences of citizens using public services – an outcome on which an extensive body of literature studying the effects of choice agendas has focused (Hatton & Waters, 2013; Hatton & Waters, 2011; Waters & Hatton, 2014) – is a particularly contested objective. Especially when adopting evidence-based approaches, indeed, studies risk measuring what is measurable (i.e. the take up of cash-for-care, the average satisfaction of users with their services, users' performance or outcomes on given indicators) rather than analysing the implications and wider effects of choice agendas. This is particularly true in the case of research commissioned by governmental and institutional bodies. One of the outcomes of this situation is the proliferation of guidelines and policy-oriented recommendations aimed at making choice tools work more effectively, for instance, rather than critically analysing the consequences of their introduction.

### **The object, aim and focus of this research**

Having provided the background on which this work is based – from both personal and theoretical perspectives – I will now introduce its object, aims and focus.

This work aims to better understand the effects of choice agendas – and their tools – at the point in which these agendas make their way into public services; and it does so through the lenses of the professional actors in charge of translating them from policy into practice. Drawing on street-level-bureaucracy, policy practice and network theories, I argue that professionals working in (or with) public services represent key actors of policy delivery and influence. Through the actions, interpretations and activities they carry out as part of their job routines, professionals come to play a front-line and pivotal role of policy translation, one through which they can shape policies and

influence the way these policies are received by public service-using citizens. Furthermore, I argue that – in relation to the specific case of choice agendas – professionals do not disappear from the scene when public service users are promised more choice. On the contrary, they continue to exercise a fundamental role in translating policy ideas into practice. Understanding how this occurs is a necessary step to grasp the wider effects of choice agendas. My core research questions are therefore: *how are choice agendas translated into practice by professional actors? And with what effects in terms of choice as offered to public service users?* More specifically, and to account for the different ways in which different professional actors interact with, make sense of and rework choice agendas, I also address two, more specific sub-questions: *how do different professional actors translate choice agendas into practice? And, how do they all contribute to influencing choice as it is offered to users of public services?*

Choice agendas and choice tools have been applied in a variety of different ways in different fields, services and countries. My focus in this work is their application in the context of care services for disabled people as developed in England and the Italian region of Lombardy. I explain the reasons behind my decision to focus on these contexts in the methodological section of this work. For now, I would simply stress that disability services offer a paradigmatic field for the study of choice agendas. They are paradigmatic not only because the historical convergence of many different actors and interests calling for ‘more choice’ in this field makes disability a particularly fertile terrain for the study of choice agendas, but also and especially because the agency of disabled people themselves – rather than, for instance, that of their parents or carers, as in the case of education or care services for elderly people – makes issues of personal choice even more relevant in the disability field. Again, however, I will expand further on the rationale behind my research design in the following chapters.

At this point, having briefly presented my research topic and overall research questions, I will now conclude this introduction by providing a brief, chapter-by-chapter overview of my thesis.

## **Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is organised in nine chapters and a summary of each chapter (except for this introductory one) is set out here below.

### Chapter 2:

This chapter outlines the historical background of ‘choice agendas’. In particular, the grounds on which choice agendas have emerged and developed is presented through a two-fold perspective.

One is the perspective of disabled people and their associations and movements. Indeed, ‘choice’ is first and foremost an object that disability activists have claimed in the name of their right to ‘choose’, hence to make decisions about their lives in the same way as non-disabled people do. On the other hand, however, choice agendas can also be read through the lenses of a social policy perspective, that is, a perspective focused on how and why politicians and policy-makers have begun to shape their responses to specific social problems around the concept of ‘choice’.

### Chapter 3:

In this chapter, I present the research questions guiding this thesis and the theoretical framework underpinning them. A new lens for the study of choice agendas, one centred on the role of professionals as ‘policy actors’, is laid out in this chapter. The chapter provides both an overview of how the ‘policy actors’ lens has developed in sociological literature and an indication of how I use this particular lens for the purposes of my research; it also highlights those theories and authors that have most influenced the development of my theoretical framework.

### Chapter 4:

This chapter offers a detailed description of the methodology employed to answer my research questions and the rationales underpinning it. More specifically, I first set out my research design strategy, that is, my reasons for selecting social care services for disabled people as provided in England and the Lombardy region as suitable contexts for studying choice agendas. I then present the specific methods I used to explore choice agendas in these contexts: in-depth, semi-structured interviews and ‘network ethnography’.

### Chapter 5:

This chapter offers, in order and in regards to both England and Lombardy: 1) an overview of the welfare traditions in which choice agendas have developed; 2) an overview of the politics of choice agendas; 3) an overview of the current debate on the topic; and, finally, 4) some data regarding the magnitude of the impact of choice agendas in the specific field of disability policy. As such, the chapter can be considered as covering a set-up function for the reading of my research findings.

### Chapter 6:

In this chapter, I begin to present my findings, starting with the results that emerged from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with social workers in the English context and then moving on to the findings from the Lombardy case. In both cases, the collected data have been organised so as to provide: 1) a detailed description of current social work practice in the disability field; 2) a more detailed portrait of such practice in relation to choice agendas and through the lenses

of street-level-bureaucracy; 3) an analysis of the way contextual factors influence social work practice and, finally, 4) an initial set of conclusions.

#### Chapter 7:

In this second findings chapter, I instead present the outcomes of the network ethnography conducted in both England and Lombardy. The presentation of these findings in relation to the two contexts follows a similar structure, specifically: 1) a snapshot of network activity and network actors in relation to choice agendas; 2) an in-depth analysis of those specific networks of actors that play a key role in translating choice agendas into practice; 3) a description of how such network and their actors operate and, to wrap up, 4) a second set of conclusions.

#### Chapter 8:

The discussion of my key findings is offered in this chapter. In particular, the discussion maps connections between the descriptions and analyses sketched in Chapters 6 and 7 and both the previously presented theoretical framework and the available literature on choice agendas. I address the ‘social work’ context and the context of ‘other network actors’ separately, comparing – within each of these respective contexts – the English and Lombardian translation of choice agendas’ into practice. I then explore the implications of this translation in terms of choice as offered by professional actors to disabled people, accounting for contextual differences.

#### Chapter 9:

In this final chapter I return to my core research questions and, in view of both among-context and within-context comparisons, offer some concluding comments. To start with, I comment on the different roles that various actors play in influencing choice agendas’ effects and, in so doing, in affecting disabled people’s opportunities to choose. I then reflect on some of the ‘lessons’ learnt – and their implications for policy and practice – provided by the comparison of England and Lombardy, each used as a mirroring lens for the other.