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Captive in Cycles of Invisibility? Prisoners' Work for the Private Sector.
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Abstract

This article critiques a case of modern prison-labour by exploring prisoners' attitudes towards the prison-work they undertake while incarcerated. The study is based at a privatised male prison in the UK, assigned the pseudonym 'Bridgeville'. Bridgeville contracts with private-sector firms in providing market-focused prison-work – so-called *real* work – for inmates in some of its workshops. In exploring prisoners' perceptions of this privatised prison-work, it is found that it mainly comprises mundane, low-skilled activities typical of informalised, poor-quality jobs that are socially, legally and economically devalued and categorised as forms of 'invisible work'. At Bridgeville, such privatised prison-work largely fails in engaging or upskilling inmates, leaving them pessimistic about its value as preparation for employment post-release. Its rehabilitative credentials are therefore questioned. The article contributes to the debate around invisible work more generally by problematising this example of excluded work and the cycle of disadvantage that underpins it.

Key Words:

Ethnography

Invisible Work

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Introduction

This article critiques prison-work's rehabilitative potential in a male prison in the UK, Bridgeville, in a context where British prisons are increasingly overcrowded, tense, violent environments and rates of recidivism are high (Ministry of Justice, 2016: 3, 40). The task of providing prisoners with a positive means of re-entry into society is pressing (Ministry of Justice 2013:3). In this respect campaigners, scholars and policy-makers generally concur that the design of in-prison work is crucial. Ideally, its role is to reframe prisoners' relationship *with* and perceptions *of* the possibilities of paid employment to assist their reintegration into society. Thus prison-work should comprise activity in support of attitudinal restructuring to counteract the 'complicated and generally negative relationship with legitimate employment' that all too often characterises [prisoners'] pre- and post-prison experiences (Green, 2008: 6; Ministry of Justice, 2013; Shea, 2007). It is generally accepted that in this endeavour, the more closely prison-work resembles real employment outside the prison walls – *real work*, so called – the greater its rehabilitative potential (Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010; Silva and Saraiva, 2016; Visher and Travis, 2003; Wakefield and Uggen, 2010).

Real work implies the mutuality of market exchange, for paid labour. In the prison setting, however, there are contentious ethical issues around prisoners' position as unfree workers who, under the terms of most national institutional frameworks, are forbidden the status of employees as the 'penal context is portrayed as inhospitable to contract' (Zatz, 2008: 885). The dilemma is addressed in international law whereby it is held that prison-work's rehabilitative role legitimates and distinguishes it from economic work or unfree labour (Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR). Prison-work's *purpose* is thus crucial for the State's relationship with working prisoners. In the UK, it is formalised in the Human Rights Act (2000) (see, for example, Prison Reform Trust, 2014). It follows that prison-work is designated *noneconomic*, nonmarket work, that is work undertaken for purposes other than economic gain – namely, with rehabilitative intent (see Hatton, 2017: 339; Zatz, 2008).

Noneconomic work is more broadly *devalued* in society and such devaluation underpins the concept of invisible work (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2015; Zatz, 2008). While originally applied to women's unpaid labour (Daniels, 1987), the definition of invisible work has come to encompass a wide range of devalued, noneconomic, informalised, casualised work in the current labour market (Hatton, 2015, 2017; see also Visser, 2017; Zatz and Boris, 2014). Accordingly, Hatton (2017: 346) has identified and theorised the 'sociological mechanisms' of social, economic, cultural, legal and spatial disadvantage that underpin such forms of work. Prison-labour is subject to a particularly comprehensive intersection of Hatton's (2017) 'mechanisms of disadvantage', being spatially segregated, legally excluded from the classification of employment and culturally, socially and economically devalued; thus, on multiple axes, it is a prime example of invisible, noneconomic work (see Zatz, 2008). This article explores prisoners' perceptions of their prison-work's rehabilitative potential in a context where a one-sided market exchange is present and their noneconomic, invisible but

nevertheless productive labour at Bridgeville delivers pecuniary benefit for the institution and commercial firms.

The article comprises five main sections. First, prison-work's status as noneconomic, invisible work is reviewed and is placed in its wider context with reference to Hatton's (2017: 336) framework of mechanisms of invisibility. The second section outlines the research methods employed and the third presents the study's findings. The majority of Bridgeville respondents did not perceive their prison-work as an introduction to a way to "progress in life" in a way that is legitimized by society' (Silva and Saraiva, 2016: 371, see also Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010; Visher and Travis, 2003, Wakefield and Uggem, 2010). Rather, it seemed that their prison-work reinforced for them the undesirability of mundane, low-paid jobs. The significance of prisoners' negative perceptions of their work is discussed in the fourth section of the article, along with associated insights into the impact of invisible work more generally.

The article's empirical contribution lies in the insight it affords to prisoners' response to private-sector prison-work and their perceptions of its rehabilitative potential. It is concluded that Bridgeville's private-sector prison work does little to change inmates' pre-existing perceptions of work and the cyclical 'logic of exclusion' associated with criminality (Silva and Saraiva, 2016: 375). Theoretically and more broadly, in tandem with consideration of the findings through the lens of rehabilitation (for example, Shea, 2007; Silva and Saraiva, 2016; Wakefield and Uggem, 2010; Visher and Travis, 2003), the article problematises '[and] make[s] visible a domain of excluded work' (Zatz and Boris, 2014: 96; also Hatton, 2015, 2017: 346; Zatz, 2008). In so doing, the broader implications of invisible work in the wider labour market are operationalised and exposed to scrutiny, highlighting its deleterious impact on those who labour without meaningful recognition for their efforts, be that dignity in their

labour or prospects of economic and social betterment (Hatton, 2015; Standing, 2011; Visser, 2017).

Invisible work, perceptions of rehabilitation and the prisoner

The profile of the typical prison population reveals an undeniable ‘strong social gradient in imprisonment, with people of lower class, income and education much more likely to be sent to prison than people higher up the social scale’ (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 148–149). In this respect, the typical prisoner’s experience of socio-economic inequality reflects Hatton’s (2017) mechanisms of invisibility which intersect in various settings to ‘obscure the fact that work is being performed’ (Hatton (2017: 345). It follows that invisible work is variously,

‘physically out of sight ... ignored or overlooked ... socially marginalized ... economically and/or culturally devalued ... legally unprotected and unregulated ... or some combination thereof.’ (Hatton, 2017: 337; see also Daniels, 1987; Zatz, 2008).

As Daniels (1987: 404) observed, being a worker implies ‘a clue to a person’s worth ... recognition of an activity as *work* gives it a moral force and dignity – something of importance in a society’ (emphasis added). In contrast, despite ‘the embedding of informal labour markets and economic activity within the formal economy’ under the influence of neoliberal economic restructuring (Visser, 2017: 785; Standing, 2011), those who undertake invisible work go unrecognised and may very possibly be stigmatised as ‘the wrong kinds of people living the wrong kinds of lives ... to merit recognition as workers’ (Zatz and Boris, 2014: 104). This judgement is given added poignancy when applied to inmates imprisoned for illicit activity. Typically, by the time they enter prison, they will already have fallen foul of the

‘stratifying institutions that sort people into more or less advantaged social categories ... such as the ...educational system ... and the formal labour market ... [which] ...reflect and create inequality by differentially conferring access and opportunity across social groups’ (Wakefield and Uggen, 2010: 388; Hatton, 2017; see also Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

Whether in response to the typical experience of socio-economic exclusion or as their primary option in life, Bridgeville inmates had pursued economic gain through forms of illicit activity. Thus, their lives were further marked by mechanisms of disadvantage underpinning negative cycles of invisibility associated with criminality, with some 60% of respondents being repeat offenders. Inside prison, the cycle of exclusion persists; as noted, no formal employment relationship can exist between a prisoner and the prison, or indeed an external employer (Zatz, 2008: 885; see also, Shea, 2007).

While rehabilitation is thus central to the prisoner’s relationship with the penal institution and the State, its design and implementation is likely to be a resource intensive, costly endeavour (Shea 2007: 169; see also Crook, 2007). Post-release, statistics on recidivism suggest that ex-offenders will find it extremely difficult to escape the vicious cycle of disadvantage without a changed relationship with employment and a comprehensive system of support (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Such change needs to begin inside the prison, reframing inmates’ perceptions, expectations and relationships with paid work through strategies that *minimise* the ‘social vulnerability of individuals’ (Silva and Saraiva, 2016: 369) rather than compounding it. Rehabilitative potential is maximised by non-exploitative, well-designed programmes of work for real employers, where prisoners are paid a meaningful wage, learn social responsibility, perhaps pay reparations to victims, and are encouraged to develop a sense of self-worth and reframe their relationship with employment (for example, Crook, 2007; Shea, 2007). Thus the *meaning* prisoners’ attribute to their prison-work has attendant implications

for their successful reintegration into society (Silva and Saraiva, 2016, see also Visher and Travis, 2003).

It follows that if an inmate is given concrete experiences that underpin their imagining of a passage between ‘priso[n] and the economic world’ (Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010: 43; see also, Crook, 2007; Green, 2008; Shea, 2007) it may allow them to envision work beyond prison as a mechanism of redemption (Silva and Saraiva, 2016: 371). A prisoner’s perception of their own ability and belief in their self-efficacy is also essential (Maruna, 2001) and it is important for prison-work to give the inmate to sense that they are ‘capable of achieving *something*’ (Crook, 2007: 304, emphasis added) and to feel that it is more than simply a way of filling ‘gaping time’ (Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010: 42). If, however, prison-work simply reflects and reinforces prisoners’ pre-existing negative experiences and attitudes to work (see Silva and Saraiva, 2016; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 148–149) and fails to provide a vision of new, realistic possibilities, it may be little more than an adjunct to the mechanisms that ‘produce and reproduce disadvantage for workers’ (see Hatton, 2017: 336). In this case, it may serve only to ‘reinforce negative attitudes’ (Crook, 2007: 305; Silva and Saraiva, 2016).

In this context, the present article asks how private-sector prison-work functions for the prison inmate and how they perceive it as a rehabilitative tool. Is it simply a means of ‘killing time’ on the inside (Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010: 52–53) or does it provide an alternative vision of reintegration into society? The following section explains the methods employed in the study.

Research Methods

Bridgeville is a male category B/C private prison in the UK and was assigned its pseudonym in the interests of anonymity, as were all participants in the study. The fieldwork was

undertaken by a single researcherⁱ over a ten-month period in 2012–2013. Bridgeville was initially approached for access because of its status as a private-sector prison which contracts with commercial firms in the provision of in-prison-work for inmates. It is designated a *working* prison, whereby the provision of work for prisoners is a *central* element of its contract with the state. Negotiating access was a lengthy and complex process which took over a year to agree. During this period there was a need to establish trust with the prison management acting as gatekeeper, while accommodating the ‘perpetual risk of rejection’ (Pettica-Harris et al, 2016: 377). Once agreed, access to the institution was extensive and the researcher was even provided with her own set of prison keys.

Bridgeville provided inmates with a range of ‘traditional’ prison-work in laundries and kitchens – the sort of work that Zatz (2008: 870) has termed ‘prison- housework’. In the prison industries department, however, five workshops contracted prison labour to seven local commercial firms. As the research objective was to understand prisoners’ perceptions of their market-focused prison-work, fieldwork was conducted in the ‘private-sector’ workshops, shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here.

Workshops 1–4 were identical in structure, each comprising thirty-five prisoners supervised by two instructors. Here, there was a relatively high ratio of prisoners to instructors, at 17:1. Workshop 5, Waste Management, also had two instructors but was much smaller, comprising twelve prisoners, all of whom held enhanced status, meaning that they had qualified for certain privileges due to consistent good behaviour. Here, the prisoner to instructor ratio was

6:1. Each workshop offered basic National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1 and 2 in aspects of recycling, waste management, manual handling and manufacturing operations. The jobs prisoners undertook in Workshops 1–4 were monotonous, very low skilled and subject to fluctuating demand. In Workshop 5, while the work was *relatively* low skilled, involved handling all manner of prison waste and was ‘dirty’, it was more varied than that available in Workshops 1–4, generally allowed prisoners a little more responsibility and autonomy and there was stable demand.

An ethnographic approach was adopted, with the aim of developing depth and detail of understanding. The focus on a single institution was driven by the need to accommodate the transient nature of prison populations. It was intended that by studying one site in depth, resources and time could be better focused in gaining detailed understanding of the regime and speaking to as many prisoners as possible. This approach was in keeping with ethnographic studies of prison life where ‘depth of analysis and richness of detail take precedent over breadth’ (Crewe, 2009: 3).

The research began with a six-month period of observing prisoners in the workshops, using a daily research diary. Some of the observation was unambiguously non-participant but there were also times when the researcher undertook some of the prison-work activities alongside prisoners. Even when participating in workshop activity, it is recognised that as a female in a male environment who was free to come and go, this did not constitute participant observation but was rather interaction that promoted rapport with respondents and also facilitated greater understanding of their prison-work. Informal, unstructured interaction with prison instructors and prisoners took place during this initial six-month phase of research and

was important in allowing the researcher to be immersed in the nuances of workshop life before interviews with prisoners began.

In total, forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with inmates working in Workshops 1–5. Thirty-four respondents worked in Workshops 1–4 while six came from Workshop 5. It was explained to prisoners that their participation was voluntary, though the ethical complexity of ensuring voluntary participation when interviewing a particularly vulnerable group is recognised. Most inmates were enthusiastic interviewees, often explaining that they were grateful for the opportunity to escape from the workshops. Such positive engagement has been noted in other prison studies, where inmates are welcoming of an external observer being interested in *them* (Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010: 45). At Bridgeville, only a small number of prisoners exercised their right to decline participation. All interviews were digitally recorded and ranged from twenty to ninety minutes in length.

Inmate interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 56 years of age and were serving sentences from one to eight years. The opportunity to observe and interview prisoners while imprisoned allowed for the documentation of their perceptions of prison-work in real time, while their experience was current. Interviews were also undertaken with prison workshop instructors, representatives of Bridgeville prison management and two firms contracting prison-work to Bridgeville. Interview data and field notes were inductively coded and analysed after being broken down into identifiable, themed subsets (Creswell, 1998). As Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasise, data analysis such as this is not linear and involves reflection and repetition, as many of the emerging themes were interrelated.

It is recognised that in a male prison, the willingness of some prisoners to engage with the research may have been influenced by the opportunity to interact with a woman. Inevitably, the research process raised issues of gender and identity. A full debate of such issues lies beyond the scope of the present article. Suffice it to note that the researcher was acutely aware of her position as a woman in an exclusively male setting. The researcher's personal safety was regularly reviewed and Pettica-Harris et al's (2016: 378, 382) description of the negotiation of access as an 'ongoing and fluid process' is apt in this context. The lead researcher consulted regularly with her co-authors, reflecting on her status vis-à-vis the prisoner respondents (as well as in the reading and interpretation of the data) and 're-strategizing' (Pettica-Harris et al, 2016: 392) took place at numerous stages throughout the fieldwork. For example, two respondents needed to be excluded from interviews after making comments such as 'does this mean that we get to be alone in a room?' to the researcher. Fortunately, such problems were rare and the ten-month period of fieldwork allowed strong relationships to evolve. Ethnographic approaches facilitate such flexibility and the overwhelming majority of inmates were respectful and appeared comfortable with the researcher's presence in the workshop, though it was particularly important to manage boundaries of formality, trust and informality with skill. To this end, the main (and effective) strategy employed in relating to prisoners as respondents was to behave towards them with respect and courtesy, eschewing informal familiarity.

Respondents were subject to varying degrees of vulnerability and the issue of informed consent demands attention. Writing of *covert* participation, Roulet et al (2017: 488) highlight potential ethical issues and deceptions relating to 'conducting research without participants'

fully informed consent'. They analyse the complexity of consent along two dimensions, first the breadth of consent – *who* knows the researcher's purpose – and second, the depth of consent, that is *what* is known of the research purpose and the extent to which it is fully understood by participants (Roulet et al, 2017: 498). At Bridgeville, care was taken to explain the study as an investigation of the nature of privatised prison-work, yet it is possible that the managers who granted access may have assumed (perhaps based on the researcher's business school credentials) that she was less concerned with sociological enquiry than she was with prison-work as a process of value-creation within and for the institution. Similarly, while prisoners knew the researcher quite well by the end of the study, they may not have fully appreciated the weight being given to their perceptions of prison-work for their prospects of re-entry into society. Thus, while the researcher was open with all participants about the terms of the study, it is acknowledged that, based on Roulet et al's (2017) framework, respondents' *depth* of consent may have been less well founded.

It is recognised that as a single case the Bridgeville study cannot make claims to generalisability, nevertheless it is contended that it illuminates and is relatable to the 'totality that shapes it' (Burawoy, 1985: 18) when viewed in its wider societal context. Thus, perceptions of prison-work at Bridgeville were compared with results from other prison studies (for example, Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010; Shea, 2007; Silva and Saraiva, 2016; Visher and Travis, 2003), while also engaging with wider labour market controversies around the boundaries of economic work and structures of social disadvantage (Hatton, 2015, 2017; Zatz, 2008; Zatz and Boris, 2014).

The following section presents the research findings in five sub-sections. First, Bridgeville's approach to prison-work is explained and prisoners' employment histories are briefly described. The following sub-sections detail inmates' perceptions of prison-work in Workshops 1–5 in their own words, beginning with the generally negative perceptions of those working in Workshops 1–4. Here, prison-work was regarded primarily as a coping mechanism to fill time and socialise, while in Workshop 5, Waste Management, inmates were more positive and *could* envision a route into employment through their prison-work. The final two sub-sections expand on the frustration prisoners in Workshops 1–4 expressed towards prison-work they regarded as 'kid's work' and their aspiration for more challenging activities.

Cycles of Invisibility: The Prisoner and Prison-Work in the Private Prison.

The Prison, its Prisoners and the Economic Context for Prison-Work

As an institution, Bridgeville claimed that rehabilitation through prison-work was a key priority. Its website stated that

‘our vision is to provide prisoners with a well-balanced range of employment and training opportunities that will help improve their chance of securing employment upon release and therefore reduce the likelihood of re-offending.’

In providing 'well-balanced' opportunities for training and employment, the prison's Deputy Director explained that its contracts with commercial firms were not only a means of providing inmates in Workshops 1–5 with 'real' work but were also essential to the profitability of Bridgeville as an institution.ⁱⁱ Thus, prisoners' productive labour is fundamental to the prison's economic viability and a market exchange exists between

contracting organisations, from which inmates are excluded. As Zatz (2008: 922) observes, ‘multiple social frameworks can motivate and structure economic exchange’ and it is possible to envision a place for such private sector prison-work in the rehabilitative process. However, arguably the *necessity* of such an exchange to the institution adds a layer of complexity to the relationship between the market and rehabilitation at Bridgeville (see for example, Zatz and Boris, 2014).

Despite the institution’s avowal of rehabilitative intent, little bespoke work design of private-sector prison-work with rehabilitation in mind was in evidence at Bridgeville. The type of work undertaken in Workshops 1–4 was typical of the increasingly devalued low paid, repetitive and precarious work in the external labour market, as described by Visser (2017). Indeed, Bridgeville’s Prison Industries Director claimed that the commercial firms involved had been unable to recruit a viable workforce from the external labour market, citing the difficulty of finding people “outside prison to conduct such monotonous work”. This was somewhat contradicted by a senior representative of one of the firms, who said that rather than being a solution to recruitment issues *per se*, his prime incentive for contracting work to Bridgeville was “...Costs. We can all have this attitude that we’re helping prisoners but in reality, it’s about costs.” This would suggest that labour *could* have been found in the external labour market but (unless somehow forced) it would have been at a higher price than prisoners’ wages, which ranged from around £15–£25 per week – considerably lower than the National Minimum Wage.

Prior to entering Bridgeville, around half of the inmates in Workshops 1–5 had been unemployed, reflecting the trend for inmates to be far more prone to worklessness than the general population (Shea, 2007: 126). Of those who *had* been employed (at any time in the

past) all but three research participants ⁱⁱⁱ had worked in unskilled occupations, mostly in construction and manual labouring. None had held highly-skilled or well-paid lawful employment, a finding reflecting their socio-cultural disadvantage and generally low levels of educational attainment (see Hatton, 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Few research participants had recognized or accredited qualifications beyond minimum school leaving age. In this context, the prison-work assigned to inmates in Workshops 1–4 gave them little new experience of skills development or aspiration through work. For the majority, it seemed to function as coping mechanism, as a way of killing time and socializing.

Killing Time: Prison-work as a Coping Strategy in Workshops 1–4

Of the thirty-four prisoners interviewed from Workshops 1–4, the majority voiced little enthusiasm for the intrinsic, rehabilitative or extrinsic rewards of their prison-work. Nineteen of these participants (56% of participants from Workshops 1–4), said that their main motivation for working was to “pass the time” and have some social interaction with other prisoners, largely because it was better than being “stuck in the cell”. The response of Bridgeville prisoners Kane, Ethan and Ben was typical,

“I just want to get out of my cell, that’s the only thing I’m doing it for ... otherwise you’d end up going nuts ... on your own all day or with your [cell] mate ... it’s easier to get out and work ...” (Kane, aged 22, Workshop 2).

“[the workshop] ...just makes the time go quicker... I’d rather be down here to keep myself occupied” (Ethan, aged 19, Workshop 1).

“It’s boring ... but it’s better than being stuck in your cell all day” (Ben, aged 27, Workshop 4).

Along with many other respondents, Ben found his work boring but considered it better than doing nothing at all. However, eight respondents from Workshops 1–4 said that they felt forced to work. They explained, for example, that they had requested alternative activities in vocational training classes – specifically carpentry – but had been denied as places in such workshops were few and there were long waiting lists. Inmates were thus routinely placed in Workshops 1–4 as a first resort and though work was notionally voluntary, *refusal* of such assigned work could result in punishment, such as being downgraded to ‘basic’ prisoner status, involving restricted access to television, assignment of prison garb, reduced visits from friends and family, less gym-time, and less (or no) income. In this context the issue of coercion and the exercise of choice by the inmate was, ultimately, nuanced. While the work in Workshops 1–4 was mundane and many resented it, the workshop environment nevertheless provided prisoners with a place to go, a small income stream and perhaps some illusion of normality. This is in line with the findings of Guilbaud and Jacobs (2010: 55) whose respondents in French prisons complained of their prison-work as ‘degrading, dull and poorly paid’ yet valued it as an essential ‘spatial and temporal release’.

The opportunity to socialise was a fundamental aspect of such ‘release’ and was enormously important as part of inmates’ coping strategies, as suggested by the comments of prisoners Nathan and Jonesy,

“... it’s just having a laugh with the boys and that, talking with your friends and that, that’s the only reason you come out of your cell” (Nathan, aged 26, Workshop 1).

“Yeah ... [having the other boys around] ... that’s the biggest part really, you’ve got to have a laugh” (Jonesy, 24, Workshop 3).

Thus, workshop-life offered some form of social cohesion, perhaps a sense of inclusion and belonging, among inmates otherwise excluded from other aspects of normal life. It is

therefore not surprising that once settled in to the workshop routine, inmates became reluctant to move on when the opportunity presented itself, even for jobs that might have been more attractive. Prisoner Kyle explained,

I have been offered to go up the staff canteen [the most sought-after prison job] and a change would be nice but ...I am settled coming here, it's a routine now for me I think, and I think that routine when you're in one, it does go quicker. As soon as I'm settled I just want to stay where I am, it's not the best place but I cope with it (Kyle, aged 26, Workshop 3).

Among respondents from Workshops 1–4 the role of prison-work in keeping themselves busy, passing the time and socialising dominated their interview responses. There was very little reference here to a new relationship with paid employment. Indeed, some felt coerced and resentful. Prior to exploring the reasons for their negativity in more detail, it is instructive to consider the opinions expressed by inmates in Workshop 5, who were far more positive about their prison-work's potential.

[Getting Dirty: Positive Perceptions of Prison-work in Workshop 5.](#)

A clear distinction emerged between inmates from Workshops 1–4 and those in Workshop 5, Waste Management. Here, all six respondents commented positively on the rehabilitative potential of their work and could envision it as a bridge to post-release employment. As enhanced prisoners, one of their privileges *was* the opportunity to work in Waste Management, although inmates undertook 'dirty' work managing prison waste and were required to work outside in all weathers. It is conceivable that enhanced status was indicative of these inmates' more positive attitudes towards work in general (see Hunter and Boyce, 2009). However, their positivity may also have been related to awareness of growing opportunities in the external labour market (Harvey, 2013). They were far more likely to link

their prison-work to future job prospects, be explicit about their ambitions post-release and refer positively to the training they were receiving. They also valued the interaction they had with their prison-instructors and the potential to develop mutual trust and respect. In summary, Workshop 5 respondents perceived their work as having purpose, not only for the here and now, but also for the abstract future and as a basis of aspiration. The following comments from prisoners Lewis, Jack and Anthony reflect typical attitudes among the Workshop 5, Waste Management group.

“... I like it actually, it’s given me a bit of an incentive that I can go out there and get a job in recycling. Yeah, that’s where the money is. There’s not many jobs out there now, and this recycling thing, it’s a big business so I’m hoping I can go into it ...
(Lewis, aged 48)

“... it’s not just that you get to be outside, it’s good work experience as well. You’re more likely to get a job doing that on the out because, it’s getting bigger isn’t it, whereas lots of other jobs are going ...” (Jack, aged 28)

“...it’s what I’m going to try to do when I go home ... I’ve done my qualifications in here, I’m going to try and use it to my advantage ... it’s worthwhile for me because I haven’t had nothing before (Anthony, aged 25).

The positive perceptions of prisoners working in the Waste Management workshop were thus explicitly related to the prospect of entry into legal economic activity and the deployment of new-found skills. This contrasted sharply with the frustration expressed by inmates in Workshops 1–4, where the majority inmates worked and to which the discussion now returns.

[‘This is kids work’ in Workshops 1–4: Perceptions of Prison Work as Preparation for Entry to Economic Work on the Outside](#)

Inmates in Workshops 1–4 were generally dismissive about their prison-work’s potential as preparation for employment on the outside. The following comments from prisoners Jonesy, Matt and Gurdeep were typical.

“... I don’t [think that doing this work will get me a job] ... It’s just putting stickers on stuff and sending it out isn’t it? ... It’s just to make my time go quicker (Jonesy, aged 24, Workshop 3).

Asked what his work was helping him to learn, prisoner Matt said,

“... [it teaches me about] working for a small wage, that’s probably it ...” (Matt, aged 20, Workshop 2).

In answer to whether he would seek out the same sort of work post-release, prisoner Gurdeep replied, laughing,

“... *No* ... I’d avoid it 100 per cent. Because we’re in prison we have to do it, we’ve got no choice and if you don’t do it, you’re going to sit in your room all day and do nothing ... I’m one of those people that, when I’m somewhere, I like to progress and learn different things. I wouldn’t do something like this on the out ... but because it’s prison work you’ve got to get your head down and do it. There’s nothing in it that you can improve on or benefit from.” (Gurdeep, aged 26, Workshop 3).

Gurdeep’s expression of frustration was typical of other respondents from Workshops 1–4, who did not disguise their feelings of alienation and exclusion. Prisoner Jermaine for example, spoke indignantly and with anger,

... this job down here, I detest it, I hate it. They ... [the instructors] ... they will tell you, they will attest to this, I don’t like [coming here] at all... I’m not lazy but [these jobs] don’t engage my brain, they don’t make me feel like I’ve fulfilled something in

the day ... What am I doing? Clipping wires? Smashing Computers ...? (Jermaine, aged 18, Workshop 1).

Jermaine had begun his sentence in a youth prison, where he had been studying for a qualification as a gym instructor. When moved to adult prison at Bridgeville, he was told he would be able to continue his studies. That promise had not been kept and his personal despair at work he detested, was acute. When asked to explain what he disliked about the Workshop, he responded,

It's the work, the workplace, the environment, I would have done something irrational if Ethan and Sid wasn't here ... serious...I want to do something around the sports field, study sport science ... this [type of work in Workshop 1] just gets to me ... I'm not even in that mind frame where I want to learn anymore ...

When asked whether his current work experience was something he'd follow up on the outside, Jermaine laughed,

... Clipping wires? ... Can I ask you the same question and hear your response please? ...this would not encourage me to do work at all ... [in] what I was doing before [crime] I was earning more money than what I'm doing now, so why would I ever want to go 'legit' [for this] ...?

The image that crime might be 'more exciting and [pay] better' (Crook, 2007: 305) is exactly what campaigners argue that prison-work should be designed to counteract. Yet it wasn't only younger prisoners like Jermaine who expressed such sentiments, Bobby, a forty-eight-year-old prisoner from Workshop 3, spoke angrily about his work experience:

This is like *kids' work*. It doesn't really give you any knowledge and experience for going outside to get a job... you can do factory work [in here] and ...you'll just be

packing bags, tagging boxes, checking things ... that is nothing ... [In the carpentry workshop] at least they are learning to build something on their own so that even when they get on the outside and they want to do that work for themselves ... at least they will have a skill. The people in our workshop, we don't learn anything, we just do basic work that even a two-year-old could do ... put a sticker on something, put it in a box, then put it in a bigger box and send it out ... that's nothing ... I wish I was doing something to gain more skill ... [In the carpentry workshop] there are like six or seven people ... in my workshop, there are thirty-five people ... the difference is because they have less people learning in the prison and more people working for the prison to make money.

Bobby makes a clear distinction between the workshops that impart new skills and those which do not, citing economic gain accruing to the institution as the prison's motive and the purpose of *his* prison-work, comparing it unfavourably with resource intensive vocational training for inmates. Along with Bobby and Jermaine, inmates in Workshops 1–4 expressed similar frustrations and were generally eager for more meaningful activity – a challenge.

Up for a challenge? Frustrated Aspiration in Workshops 1–4

Across all the Workshops, 1–5, respondents spoke of aspirations to learn what they recognized as skill. While those in Workshop 5 appeared to perceive their prison-work as developmental, those in Workshops 1–4 were generally desperate for more challenging activities, as evidenced by the consistent over-subscription of places in the vocational training workshops. Thus, interaction with prisoners suggested that they had ambition which was not being nurtured in their prison-work. Even within the most *unskilled* work they were assigned they identified and expressed preferences for relatively more complex tasks. For example, prisoner Carl, aged 51, from Workshop 4, said,

“I prefer the Flushco [workshop] ... it challenges you more than the packing ... you’re doing different parts at different times and it is more interesting.

Within workshops 1–4, alongside such pleas for more variety, however small or seemingly insignificant, there was also considerable competition for roles of responsibility. Here, there were Quality Controller (QC) and Technician roles, which carried more responsibility and offered a marginally higher wage (maximum £25 per week). The QCs interviewed said the higher wage was less important to them than the added demands of the job, explaining, for example, that they enjoyed the challenge of completing paperwork to the commercial firms’ standards of excellence. The comments of Rhys, aged 28 from Workshop 4, reflected the attitudes of inmates who aspired to such roles.

“... I think it’s a good idea [having the QC and technician jobs in the workshop] because you’re inspiring people to want to achieve something. I say to the boys ‘get enhanced, you’ve got a chance to get Technician. Stay enhanced, you’ve got a chance to be QC ...’.

Such comments illustrate at least some potential for a new relationship with paid work. However, it was very marked that prison instructors’ views did not generally support or validate prisoners’ aspirations. Prison-instructors in Workshops 1–4 judged prisoners on the basis of their past record of educational attainment and work experience suggesting, particularly during informal interaction with the researcher during the pre-interview phase, that inmates were incapable of learning more complex tasks. Structures of societal disadvantage were thus perpetuated behind bars: the prison-work assigned to most respondents, along with the expectations of those charged with guiding them towards a different future, largely excluded positive perceptions of new possibilities. The significance of these findings is discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The rehabilitative intent of prison-work is key to this article, as it defines the boundary between noneconomic, invisible work inside prison and market-work on the outside. The research findings provide contrasting results from different workshops undertaking private-sector work at Bridgeville. The majority of respondents in Workshops 1–4 did not perceive their prison-work for commercial firms as a rehabilitative bridge to social and economic inclusion. Arguably, their prison-work reflected the contemporary ‘fragmented landscape of work’ (Hatton, 2015: 1008) which they had already rejected in favour of more lucrative, perhaps more exciting, illicit activity (see Crook, 2007). In this context, their vision of an alternative future was not sparked by prison-work that spoke only of the low pay, poor training and insecurity of marginalized, invisible work (Visser, 2017: 783; see also Wakefield and Uggen, 2010: 387). Although prison-work alone can be no panacea for wider social problems (Silva and Saraiva, 2016: 375), the work assigned to inmates in Workshops 1–4 failed to bridge the boundary between legal noneconomic work inside prison and an imagining of lawful economic work post-release. Rather, these inmates saw their prison-work as temporary respite from the cell, a coping mechanism, but little more (see Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010). In Workshops 1–4, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that prison-work reinforced inmates’ negative histories of socio-economic disadvantage (Crook, 2007; Hatton, 2017; Silva and Saraiva, 2016).

Contrastingly, inmates from Workshop 5 displayed awareness of a growing external labour market in recycling and waste management (Harvey, 2013) which, alongside work that they found more skilled and intrinsically rewarding, facilitated positive perceptions of a changed relationship with work. The words of prisoner Anthony are instructive here, in that he said he’d had ‘nothing’ in his previous life, testifying to a history of exclusion and social

disadvantage. His work experience in Workshop 5 gave him the sense that he could do *something* (see Crook, 2007). It would be stretching the analysis to see the inmate responses discussed in this article as a broader indication of acceptance of the economic benefits of market work or neoliberal values but it does perhaps say something about the beneficial effects of skills development and self-esteem in Workshop 5 inmates. It is possible that through such self-affirmation they glimpsed the possibilities of change in their lives, of attaining the respect afforded to ‘a working kind of person’ in wider society (Zatz and Boris, 2014: 102; see also Maruna, 2001; Silva and Saraiva, 2016).

In broader terms, through the words of Bridgeville prisoners, intersecting debates over the nature and meaning of *work* and the purpose of *prison-work* become apparent. As Zatz (2008: 884) notes, where work is undertaken at the boundaries of the market, as in this case, there is potential to illuminate ‘the continuity between controversies previously regarded as distinct’. Scholarship on noneconomic work (Zatz, 2008) and consideration of mechanisms of invisibility (Hatton, 2015, 2017) thus strengthens the insights that emerge from the rehabilitation literature (for example, Crook, 2007; Guilbaud and Jacobs, 2010; Shea, 2009; Silva and Saraiva, 2016; Visher and Travis, 2003). In particular, the multiple layers of disadvantage and exclusion experienced by prisoners are brought into sharp relief.

It is somewhat contradictory, perhaps, that the exclusion of prisoners is perpetuated by the ‘rehabilitative rather than pecuniary’ interests (Zatz, 2008: 889) that define its noneconomic status (Hatton, 2017: 339; Zatz, 2008). It follows that in socio-legal terms, prisoners’ work activities are ‘not classified as “jobs” at all’ (Hatton, 2017: 346), even where undertaken for private sector employers, as at Bridgeville. With this exclusion in mind, reference to Hatton’s (2017: 339) mechanisms of disadvantage illuminate the social, spatial and economic

exclusion Bridgeville inmates experience as part of their life's pattern. Their experience of employment outside prison was subject to mechanisms of social, economic and cultural disadvantage that consigned them to marginalized, devalued work or their chosen alternative of illicit activity – each no more than a variation of invisibility related to mechanisms of disadvantage (Hatton, 2017: 339; see also Visser, 2017; Zatz, 2008). Such personal histories then become highly influential for invisible work *inside* prison, colouring workshop instructors' expectations of inmates' potential and consigning the majority to highly repetitive, low skilled, low paid activity. The cycle of exclusion is thus perpetuated. In this respect, reference to Hatton's mechanisms of invisibility (2017: 339), highlights the negative cycle that captures Bridgeville inmates as they transition from one manifestation of invisibility to another – either from marginalised invisible work or 'illicit' invisible activity to 'noneconomic' invisible prison work. Once released, the cycle will, for many, begin again as there seemed to be little in the majority of inmates' experiences of prison-work that changed their perceptions of the possible.

More broadly, the deleterious effects of prison-work that fails to provide an image of future economic and social inclusion through work has implications beyond the prison walls, precisely because the work subcontracted to Bridgeville was *real work* being done, no doubt, by similarly invisible workers hidden within the labour market. Such a realisation highlights the fact that the designation of *work* implies 'dignity and respect but also signals the possibility of subordination and exploitation' (Zatz and Boris, 2014: 96). In the external labour market being recognised as a 'worker' implies an *exchange* of benefits encompassing social status and economic inclusion (Zatz and Boris, 2014). However, for stigmatised pools of labour subject to multiple mechanisms of disadvantage the market exchange may be grossly unfavourable (Visser, 2017: 787). In the words of Bridgeville prisoners it is possible

to see, in detail, the deleterious implications of performing invisible work, albeit lawfully, at the margins of the market.

Conclusion

This article asked the question of how prisoners experience prison-work as a rehabilitative tool. Its contribution is two-fold, in that it provides empirical data on prisoners' concrete experience and emotional response to their prison-labour, while also affording theoretical insights into cycles of disadvantage associated with the prison-work boundary and the devalued status of invisible work in society more generally. In terms of prison-work's purpose, the study of Bridgeville highlights the crucial importance of work design for its rehabilitative potential. Where prisoners were assigned tasks which developed some level of skill and self-belief, as in Workshop 5, inmates could envision a future of work that promised some form of economic and social inclusion. In contrast, where work was so degraded that such a vision was absent, as in Bridgeville Workshops 1–4, the lack of opportunity for social and economic betterment through work means that the subordination and exploitation of devalued, noneconomic work is stripped bare. Here, the cycle of exclusion rolls on. In broader terms, such insights highlight the failures of work for invisible workers who labour for meagre rewards, without status, rights or respect, not only within but beyond the prison walls.

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ⁱ The lead author of this article.

ⁱⁱ Public funds allowed the prison to break-even but prison-work contracted with private-sector firms was the institution’s “main earner”, she said.

ⁱⁱⁱ One had worked in an estate agent’s office, one had worked in a care home and one as a waiter – all minimum wage employment.

Table 1: Bridgeville Prison Workshops 1–5: Activities and Patterns of Work

Prison-Workshop	Commercial Firm(s) Sub-contracting Work to Bridgeville	Typical Work Tasks and Activities for Prisoners

1	CrashCo	Breaking up electrical items for recycling.
	ElectroWire	Packing rubber coated electrical wires.
2	Booksmart	Packing and shrink-wrapping books, applying stickers to parcels, quality checking.
3	Partpro and Pullem	Wrapping straps through a plastic case, rolling and packing them. Repackaging small car parts and applying stickers to them.
4	Flushco	Assembling and repackaging different components of household plumbing, such as lavatory flushes.
5	Waste Management	Collecting bins throughout the prison, separating the waste into recyclable groups and using an industrial baling machine.