

RESEARCH

'Not Worth the Minimum Wage?' Unpacking the Complexities of Intellectual Disability and its Intersection with Employment Structures

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As a signifier of worth and recognition, employment is presented as a route to reduce inequality. Yet, for people who have an intellectual disability (ID) and are in receipt of social care, employment policy is often a site of tension. With less than six percent of working-aged people within this demographic in any form of employment in the UK (Learning Disabilities Observatory 2016), work is offered through a marginalised context, with individuals who wish to explore work often excluded from the very programmes set up to support them. Based on ethnographic research at a job club supporting people with an ID and using a case study narrative approach, I unpack the multifaceted reality of everyday life for learning disabled people struggling to access work, its intersections with national minimum wage legislation, and how space can be crafted in response to such exclusion.

Keywords: employment policy; intellectual disability; national minimum wage; work

Introduction

During the UK 2019 election campaign, a party candidate was heckled at a constituency hustings for suggesting that people with an intellectual disability (ID) should be able to earn less than the national minimum wage (NMW), because, 'they do not understand money' and, instead of focusing on the financial gain of work, it was, 'about them being given the opportunity to work because it's to do with the happiness they have about working' (Busby 2019). This suggestion, that people with an ID should be offered lower wages as a route to increasing work opportunities, framed work as offering more than economic value alone. Further, the candidate referred to a newspaper article written some two years previously, by Monckton, whose daughter has Down's Syndrome. Monckton asked whether work is 'for the money or for a role in society and to feel we belong?' (Monckton 2017b) and questioned the legitimacy of the NMW, commenting:

To have a child with, for instance, Down's [syndrome] is an eternal blessing and joy; but it is also an invitation to a lifetime of challenges, battles with officialdom, and frustrations at lack of opportunity. Making it harder for such individuals to obtain work is a further unfairness and adds to the separation between those with learning difficulties and the rest of society (Cited by Rajan 2016).

Monckton called for a 'therapeutic exemption from the minimum wage' suggesting it 'would have a transformative effect' (Cited by Greenhill 2017). While NMW legislation is designed to protect people from exploitation and ensure a basic living standard, in this instance, Monckton perceives it to be a barrier to employment inclusion. In response, there was a frenzy of media attention claiming that an NMW exemption would disingenuously affect other marginalised groups in society, rather than focusing on the unique position of people within this ID demographic. Prior to this media attention, there had been limited discussion on whether the structure of the NMW dis-serves people with an ID with both MP Philip Davies and Lord Fraud previously suggesting that NMW legislation may make paid work harder to access for people who do have an ID. Back in 2011, Philip Davies said that the NMW:

Maybe more of a hindrance than a help [...] we need a sensible conversation. The politically correct brigade wants to close down that debate [...]. It is a scandal that only 6% of people with an ID have a job. If legislators are not prepared to accept that the minimum wage is making it harder for some vulnerable people to get on the first rung of the jobs ladder, we will never get anywhere in trying to help them into employment (Cited by Monckton 2017a).

Similarly, when Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Reform, Fraud, was asked his thoughts on helping people with an ID into successful employment, he replied that he knew that there were people not 'worth' the NMW (BBC 2014). Calls for his resignation were made, yet in a further interview, the conversation was contextualised (Kearney 2014). Here, Fraud spoke of vulnerable people with limited ability who wanted to feel valued and have an opportunity to give back to society. These requests to increase such opportunities have come from advocates feeling the absence of the workshops of yesteryear, where opportunities were offered under the principle of promoting 'equality of employment... open to everyone' (Sennett 2012: 44).

Such heated debates are the crux of this study, in considering how intellectually disabled people are excluded within the conceptualisation of work and how this manifests in everyday reality. Historically, people within this demographic were segregated from society with their welfare transferred to the state, and citizenship denied (Mental Deficiency Act 1913). Medicalisation, discrimination, and social exclusion dominated much of the ID story, until the fightback began in the 1970s, with de-institutionalisation and models of 'normalisation'. At the heart of this normalisation framework, policy shifted towards personalisation based on choice, control, and independence (Department of Health 2009). The Disability Rights Commission defined this direction as, 'having the same choice, control, and freedom as any other citizen – at home, at work, and as members of the community' (Morris 2005:4). Fundamentally then, this policy trend is about getting the right support to be included in everyday interactions, including the workplace. Yet, at its roots, normalisation infers that a person or group of people have a particular identity that holds 'restriction on their sphere of autonomy' (Honneth 2012: 87). Consequently, employment policy is a site of contradiction for people who have an ID and are in receipt of social care. For, employment continues to be framed as central to a *normal* life (Hall and McGarrol 2012), yet the employment support landscape for people with an ID has altered significantly over the last decade. With the demise of WORKSTEP,¹ third sector providers such as Remploy² and specific ID policy,³ successive governments have seen it be made harder than ever for people with an ID to find work, with a 'host of broken promises' in developing opportunities (Bates, Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2017: 172).

Aim of the Study

This study forms part of a broader PhD research programme, exploring the (un)intended consequences of employment exclusion for intellectually disabled people in England and Wales. An overarching theme weaved throughout the wider study was the intersections between ID and barriers associated with the NMW. As such, this paper intends to bring to fore some of the everyday realities of employment exclusion and how there is a lack of consideration in the theory of work and recognition for people with an ID. Overall, this study resonates with Honneth's (2012: 57) observation that 'the gap between the experiences of the social lifeworld and the topics of social-scientific study has probably never been as wide as it is today' and therefore aims to identify cross-cutting gaps in the academic framing of work, employment, recognition, and its relationship when considering policy decisions for people with an ID who are in receipt of social care.

Methods

Design

This context-sensitive study drew on a range of ethnographical methods to aid data collection. Ethnography puts emphasis on understanding participant action, based on their experiences (Burgess 1984), yet ethnographic research with people who have an ID has had limited use within the social sciences. Bates, Goodley & Runswick-Cole (2017) used ethnographic case studies as part of their wider research project focused on the 'Big Society? Disabled People with Learning Disabilities and Civil Society'. Their prolonged engagement (eighteen months) with five participants who have an ID, enabled the complexities of work engagement to be explored through 'rich qualitative snapshots of employment experiences' (p. 166). Similarly, my study shares this commitment to understand how participants perceive their position and negotiate work engagement. In essence, then, adopting this stance, we stand for those who are not represented, for those who are silenced, unfairly ignored, or marginalised, and we work '*with and for*' (Smyth and McNerney 2013: 4) participants to stimulate policy pressure and interrupt exclusion. As such, exploring patterns of inequality offers space to consider how 'human action relates to social structures' (Wright 2012: 311). In this paradigm, my reflexivity is situated as a commitment that my research is compassionate and not exploitative, with the aim of helping address the negative effects of Others (Pillow 2003).

Fieldwork

Using fundraised income and based in the rural English midlands, the job club was set up by a local care provider to offer a work preparation programme. Initially, the aim was to offer a three-month turnaround of 'job ready' work seekers, however, over 15 months of the ethnography work, only two out of ten job seekers moved on to any form of paid employment – one features in this study, while the other individual secured work delivering leaflets for a fixed £10 fee, which took her two hours to complete each fortnight.

¹ WORKSTEP had been the flagship disability employment programme for many years, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

² WORKSTEP supported people predominantly within sheltered workshops, such as those offered by Remploy (Melling, Beyer & Kilsby 2011).

³ The now disbanded Valuing Employment Now (2009) was an ID focused employment strategy.

As an active participant in a naturally occurring field, I negotiated a dual role of being an observer and a volunteer job club worker. This position offered the benefits of being free to ask questions, facilitate small work preparation sessions, and support individuals with work-related activities. Yet, this posed issues with ensuring participants were aware that I was there to undertake research. As an on-going process, I reminded participants regularly of the study, and each time a new job seeker, visitor, or support worker attended the session, I explained my research to the group. Moreover, an audio device that captured raw data was purposely turned on and left visible throughout each session. These 'ethically important moments' (Gulliemens and Gillam 2004: 262) reaffirmed my position at the job club, and such consideration is inherent with prolonged engagement in the field in an everyday sense. The PhD project was approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University.

Easy-read information sheets and consent forms were used in the study, which was supported by photographic points of reference. All participants had the capacity to accept or decline contributing to the study and their involvement in the job club was not at detriment had they declined participation. Verbatim was audio-recorded and transcribed while field notes were written immediately after each session. Additionally, artifacts such as worksheets were photographed, and documents collected. After some time, I was able to 'sift systematically' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011: 171) through my fieldwork notes and transcribed data. Here, I could identify threads that could be 'woven together' (p. 171) to offer a story about the social world that I had observed. To achieve this, I coded data analytically related to topics, categories, and phenomena (ibid). This process was fluid, with data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously (Charmaz 2001).

By avoiding snippets and fragmentation, I could document real-life conditions (Foley 2002). Moreover, utilising rich narratives, life history, naturalist inquiry, commentary, and storytelling (Atkinson 2015), invites 'understandings which are moving, ever-changing and flexible – just like the stories we hear every day' (Goodley 1996: 337). Though a small sample, this use of methodology reminds us that there are 'lives that exist behind the label' (ibid: 334) and allows for people to be represented as individuals. Further, with small scale, in-depth studies such as this, I was afforded the opportunity to focus on the authenticity and complexity of lived experience by conveying the perspectives of job seekers (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2005). As such, these narratives contain 'hard luck stories, stories of success and failure, and stories of troubles overcome' (Atkinson 2015: 95) that were then grounded in theories of work (Budd 2011), as a much taken for granted concept and recognition, social justice and social bonds (Honneth 2012).

Participants

All participants of the job club were asked if they would like to participate in the study, irrelevant of their diagnosis or needs, and as such, there were no inclusion/exclusion criteria applied. All participants were aged over 25, had a diagnosed ID, and were receiving social care. Further, all participants were categorised as being within the Support Group of Employment Support Allowance (ESA), with no formal conditionality applied to their welfare benefits. None of the participants were able to secure Supported Employment models of employment activation due to their age, ability to satisfy the entry requirements, and/or ability to commit to working over 16 hours per week (Dearing 2020). Sally, as the manager of the job club, features throughout the study. Her role was to facilitate work preparation by offering a range of task-orientated support delivered within the sessions.

Case Studies

Karen

Karen lived in her community through an independent living scheme, with one hour of support each day. This support helped her with her medication, food preparation, household tasks, and budgeting. Karen worked unpaid at a profit-making garden centre for two days each week – she had been in the role for seven years. Karen was being monitored by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) via her local job centre and she was not attending the job club out of choice, rather, by scrutiny. Her employment status was called into question bi-annually because job centre workers were unable to comprehend how she could maintain this unpaid role, while simultaneously being assessed as unfit for work through her Work Capacity Assessment (WCA). Compounding this, Karen's GP had advised on her records, 'patient not able to read, slow at tasks, not to be placed under pressure to speed up – she is likely to fall and increased risk of seizure'. Yet, her GP had ticked 'you may be fit for work with advice, amended duties, and/or workplace adaptations'. The aim of the DWP here, evidenced throughout Karen's case, was a potential transfer to the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA. Uncertainty on potential conditionality enforcement caused Karen to be confused and anxious. Initially, in response to the GP's advice, Karen was under the impression that she did not need to be actively seeking employment:

Karen: 'My nan thinks I'm not capable, my balance ain't that good'.

Sally: [reading the letter] 'That is not what the doctor is saying – actually, the opposite. It says that you are fit for work [...] we need to be clear about what is happening here. To me, that indicates that they are expecting you to get a job. This gets very complicated'.

Some weeks later, Karen disclosed she had been back to the job centre, where her nan informed representatives there that she could not get a job because of her balance. This conversation then takes place:

Sally: 'So, they are going to leave it at that are they? They aren't going to expect you to be getting a paid job at the moment?'

Karen: [unsure] 'Nan asked why I keep coming in too many times which it has been so far'.

Yet, absent from this discussion, within the fit/not-fit for work binary, was any contextualisation regarding her unpaid role. Karen does not have the same work schedule as paid counterparts, nor was she able to fulfil the range of tasks within job descriptions of similar roles. For instance, Karen was clear that she would not be able to work directly with customers – rather, she had crafted a role focused on maintaining the plant stock:

Karen: 'If I got paid, I'd have to show people, explain where the plants is'

Researcher: 'But you've got that knowledge, haven't you?'

Karen: 'Yeah, but I can't [...] I just can't'

Moreover, while the push to re-categorise Karen is concerning, there is also a lack of consideration regarding her ID and stress-induced epileptic seizures. For someone such as Karen, they can occupy a particularly precarious position when it comes to accessing the labour market and this tightrope of employment activation is evident within her experiences. Consequently, her workshop activities were intensely focused on productivity, to strengthen her position for waged work, and these efforts to 'quicken her up' were in contradiction to her GP guidance. During this intensive work to increase productivity, Karen devised a checklist of her tasks and suggested that she 'could get better at it... now I've got a checklist'. To this, Sally replied:

'So, are you saying that if you get better at work, there'd be more chance of you getting money? Getting paid? [Karen nods]. That's a very good point. So, people are only going to pay you if you can work the same as an able-bodied person [...] that's actually one of the key reasons that people with learning disabilities don't get paid. Because they are not as productive'.

Tara

Tara does not feature heavily as an individual case, however, an explanation of her position at the job club is vital to this study. Tara lived in a registered residential care home; however, she was able to go about her daily life without an accompanying support worker. Tara was only active at the job club for the first few weeks as she soon secured a paid work position at a factory where she worked for two hours per week. However, this role was not gained through open competitive employment, rather, a local employer purposely sought out an employee with an ID for their own altruistic motivations. As a consequence of her new role, Tara became the ideal aspiration. For, as well as this position, she also worked at two other establishments – a café two days per week where she had been for many years and was paid £10 per month, and a private hotel where she had been for 17 years, unpaid, as a kitchen assistant.

Verity

Verity lived in a residential care home. She usually required one-to-one support when outside, however, once a routine had been established, Verity was dropped off at the job club and collected after the session. Verity had little experience of work; however, her parents had suggested that she should consider work-preparation activities. She regularly drew on Tara's good fortune and excitedly proclaimed to the group most weeks that Tara would not be present because '...she has gone to work on the bus. The [place] factory and the hotel. Tara has jobs'.

Ideally, Verity wanted to attain café work, and she attended mathematics and English classes weekly to help improve her skills. However, this was an area of frustration, for, as she explained, 'I can't do money. Count money... I know the pounds and five and ten'. Undeterred, Verity and Sally spent time one week visiting all the local cafés to see if they would be a suitable workplace. Unfortunately, each was either, too dark, too small, too noisy, or had too many stairs, and therefore, unsuitable – even though no vacancy was available at any of the establishments and moreover, Verity could not use a hot tap, kettle, or urn safely, nor could she carry hot drinks to customers.

Verity was often confused at the purpose of the job club, finding it difficult to separate work from personal life. For example, while completing a photograph activity that included matching what people wear to work with how this could indicate their job role, Verity identified someone as 'going to the gym or out running' when an appropriate, anticipated response would have been a physical education teacher or a sports instructor. Further, Verity would become upset when she did not know the answers to the questions being asked of her, particularly when activities required her to write down answers. For example, as a group, we were thinking about 'what to do when you make a mistake' in the workplace. Verity looked as though she would cry, unable to comprehend the task. She said to me, 'I don't know, I don't know what to do... can you write it down for me?' While struggling with such abstract tasks, Verity also needed to be regularly reminded not to encroach on the personal space of customers if she were to get a café job, such as not to kiss or hug people in the workplace.

Verity did, however, secure a work experience programme some 25 miles from her home. For the first two sessions, Sally provided transport, however she was clear that this could not be on a permanent basis. The staff at her care

home could not make the necessary transport arrangements and she had to withdraw from the programme. Verity was incredibly upset, unable to comprehend why she could not continue her newly discovered role and would become confused, either thinking that she had done something wrong or that she was still working there, often referring to it in the current tense. This confusion manifested and many months after the placement had ended, she said, 'I get worried about my job, coz they keep messing me about'. Sally asked her what she meant, and Verity replied, 'well the staff told me and that's why they stopped taking me to my job'. Sally reaffirmed to Verity that, 'transport is the problem actually'. Confused, Verity did not reply. On another occasion, Verity announced to the group, 'I've got a new job, in the [place]'. Sally appeared surprised and Verity laughed at her response, saying, 'you said about it!' Sally replied, 'we went to visit it Verity, but that doesn't mean you've got a job, and we decided the transport wasn't gunna work didn't we'.

Naomi

Naomi lived in a registered residential care home. While, compared to some of the other job seekers, Naomi had an increased cognitive understanding, she had one-to-one support due to 'behaviour that is considered challenging'. Naomi would become over-familiar and very tactile – she often seeked me out during activities and took my hand, sometimes holding it for the whole two-hour session, only letting go so that I could complete a task (such as writing) before 'grabbing' it back again. While this may have been interpreted as inappropriate, I did not ask Naomi to stop using touch as a form of communication and sensory connectiveness (Jensen 2015).

Naomi was seeking paid work because, 'when I'm at home, I get bored'. She would also like to 'get paid, like my family [...] my mum always says, "if you don't work, you don't get paid and if you don't get paid, you don't get the clothes to wear"'. **Figure 1.** is a (prescribed) self-assessment by Naomi, on why she would like to work.

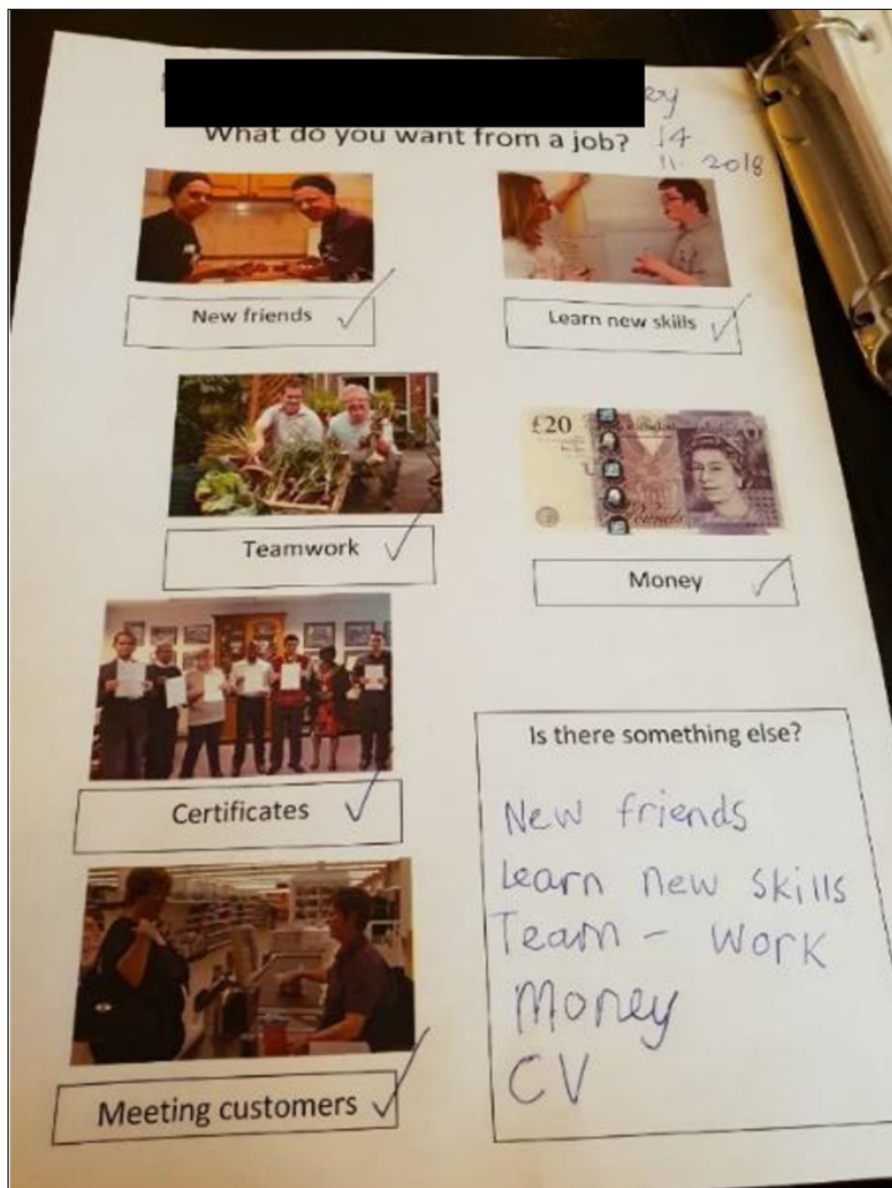


Figure 1: 'What do you want from a job?' worksheet.

Like Verity, Naomi was also keen to secure café work. She claimed that she could handle money, however, her support worker clarified, 'you're working on it aren't you, you are working on your money skills'. Naomi often worried about her ability to take instructions, were she to secure a paid position:

'Too many tasks at the same time. I can't say like, I will put things to dry up, if you ask me to do more, I can't. [...] So, like, I dry up and then he says can you put it away or on the side, I can't process it, it's too hard for me to do [...]. It's what has been said to me, I can't take instructions because [support worker] wrote it in my book'.

Moreover, when we spoke about securing work experience, Naomi became petrified at the prospect, repeatedly articulating, 'I can't do this, I can't do this'.

Sophie

Sophie lived in the community, through an independent living scheme. She received half an hour's support twice a day to help her with medication, food preparation, household tasks, and budgeting. Sophie had multiple motivations for securing paid work, 'I don't want to be bored at home doing nothing...I want to meet new people and get involved in things [...] I want to go out and earn some money'. Sophie was keen to save for her wedding and her support workers suggested on multiple occasions that she should find a job. Moreover, Sophie was the only job seeker to express a desire to secure at least 16 hours work per week, yet she worried about how this could impact on her welfare benefits:

'If I get a job I want to know if I will still get my benefits or not. Some people have said I won't. I'm on benefits at the minute and I don't know if it will interfere with my benefits'.

Sophie had paid work before, both of which were in a café environment. One where she was paid £3.75 per hour and the other where she worked 12 hours per week and was paid £10 per month, neither of which met NMW thresholds. Sophie was the only job seeker who was prepared to work with money, albeit only if it was in whole pound denominations, and was often keen to share that she had worked on a till before. However, she struggled to understand the difference between the expectations of an employer and how this expectation differs depending on the relationship formed on wages, such as the £10 per month job and how the nature of this differs from employment conditions that pay NMW. Moreover, at times, Sophie revealed her worries: 'noise distracts me' she said, and she had previously tried to self-harm, recalling, 'I got a knife and I tried to stab myself. It was a new experience where I was. I felt so frightened, so I got a knife. It was scaring me, all the other people'.

Sophie would often spend time in her local village asking employers 'is there any work going?' and sometimes she brought application forms into the job club, ranging from care work, shop work, cleaning, takeaways, and pub work. One week, Sophie had seen an advert for a cleaning vacancy, and she took her CV to the manager. After a few days, she returned to enquire about the position:

'I said, have you got my CV and he said yeah, but I've decided you are not qualified to work in The [pub]...he said I'm not qualified... he really is quite rude he is. I was thinking about working up there I was'.

Later that session, Sally revealed to me [off the record] that local businesses were 'fed up' with Sophie continually asking for work. Moreover, most weeks, when Verity had declared that Tara would not be joining the session because she was going to work, Sophie would reply with envy '...wish I could jobs... wish I could get jobs like Tara'.

Case Study – Discussion

On one hand, the imagination and optimism of work possibilities are ignited by the job club, yet this holds tension with the realistic prospects of a supply-side labour market. Karen's precarious experiences of a failure to understand the complexity of disability are not isolated, with wider research exposing a mismatch between people classified as fit for work and sufficient employment options (Roulstone 2011). Moreover, such fixation with productivity contributes to a fundamental issue stemming from the Welfare Reform Act (2007) whereby such a productivity focus becomes 'shorthand for defining entitlement, worthiness, citizenship, and inclusion... which maintains power structures and promotes the marginalisation of oppressed groups' (Soffer, Tal-Katz & Rimmerman 2011: 269). In this sense, the struggle to access waged work is conflated by societal expectations on productivity, and productivity becomes intrinsically linked to value and worth. Moreover, comparisons drawn by Sally against non-disabled people is a stark reminder that the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) infers that disabled people should be able to compete with their able-bodied counterparts (Piggott and Grover 2010). While the Act was designed to end illegal practices of employer discrimination against disabled people, many employers are still not willing to hire such people, particularly if they have an ID (Department of Health 2009; DWP & Department of Health 2017).

Carving Out Alternatives

During my time at the job club, a local community interest company that formed a village shop planned to open a coffee shop at the same site. Sally asked if the job club could supply workers for the new venture, however, the attendees were marginalised, as Sally explained to the group:

'They've got to train some other volunteers before they will move on to us. It might have potential, but it will always only be voluntary work for us. Some people there might get paid, they do pay some workers, but they have been very honest with us [...] It is surprising actually [...] even getting a job as a volunteer and you're not getting paid is quite a challenge'.

Unpacking this statement alludes towards a richer and more discursive analysis for interpretation. This discreet marginalisation and disablism that such work, 'will always only be voluntary for us' seeps throughout the empirical investigation and is spoken matter-of-factly. Similarly, when Tara took her CV into a café and spoke with the manager, she returned to inform the group:

'They won't pay us. All the other staff get paid there, but for people like us, don't get it [paid] in there'.

This construction of 'them and us', continues to be reproduced at the local level, within everyday interactions in the community. In response to such exclusion, Sally attempted to reverse the opportunities on offer, by proactively presenting the job seekers with the possibility of being a trainee at a pop-up Café over the summer of 2018. The atmosphere shifted instantly, fostering positivity and excitement, in sharp contrast to the everyday mundane negative associations of open employment job seeking. Sally pitched the pop-up café as being a 1950s themed 'simple afternoon tea in a nice gentle marquee with music playing and bunting flowing'. All job seekers applied to work at the café and the vacancies on offer were either 'front of house' or 'kitchen porter' roles, with both posts having a job description drafted. Trainees were invited to complete an application form and attend an interview. While these processes are well associated with a standard application process, in practice, the procedure differed somewhat from the expected human resource structures. For, the trainees were supported with their application forms while simultaneously being 'interviewed' as a group. During this time, Sally spoke to Sophie:

'Sophie, you're quite good at money, and not many people are. Write down 'I can do money' [a few minutes later, Sally continues]. Now, Sophie, you're interesting because you are the only person that has ticked that they can do money, because you really can give change [...] you might be our till lady'.

The dynamics profoundly shifted here. For, up until this point, Sophie had been incredibly envious of Tara's ability to secure work, albeit with only one of the roles paying NMW. Next for Sally and the trainees to attend to were 'user-friendly' tools. Menu items were formulated to whole pounds and a photograph of each item was on the menu and order sheet. Photographs were also taken of how the tables should be presented and for three consecutive weeks, each job club session became a café stage where we roll played café interactions. Verity practiced:

'Here's the menu and I'm gonna tell you, it's tea, coffee, juice, it's cake or flapjack...and I will say to you, thank you after you order. I pay you after you've finished your drinks and I say thank you'.

What we see with this inclusive approach adopted by Sally is that everyone had the opportunity to work, if they so wished, and the structures to employment can be altered to offer a truly inclusive workspace. Early on, trainees asked if they would be paid, even though wages are not generally associated with work experience opportunities, which is what this project aligned towards. Sally responded to such questions:

'So, our job will be to serve the teas and cakes and they will pay us money. And if there is any surplus money at the end of it, it will be shared out amongst all of you trainees... proportionate to hours you have worked. So, the more hours you do, the more money you will get'.

Sophie asked how much money they might make, and initial projections suggested it would be around £10 each in total, based on each person working three of the six available sessions. Sally added, 'take your friend out for a coffee or something, but I don't think its gonna be a huge amount of money if I'm honest'. Sophie is satisfied with this, and replied, 'Yeah, that'll be nice'.

The pop-up café ran once a week, for two hours each time, over six weeks. There were some operational issues, particularly around the till, calculating bills, and giving change, yet everyone met their personal objectives, and more collectively, each person had the opportunity to be part of something new and valued. During the evaluation process, the group met to give their feedback and reflect upon their experiences. Each trainee was presented with their wages

However, volunteering here is associated with philanthropic or altruistic motivations, rather than solely being a route into paid work. More nuanced accounts of volunteering are offered within the literature that connects the benefits of volunteering with a disability and other marginalised groups in society.

Volunteering is a key ingredient in community-based and cooperative models of economic exchange and volunteering activities help communities function better by increasing social capital, participating in public life, and increasing social networks and relationships (Baines and Hardill, 2008; Putnam 2000). Perceived as a central life interest, volunteering can also be so powerful that it can rival paid work by establishing individual feelings of dignity and self-esteem while simultaneously contributing to community social cohesion (Patterson and Pegg 2009). Moreover, by removing the focus of tenure and wages, the richness for an opportunity to become more equal and valued community participants can be realised and a 'space of hope' (Baines and Hardill, 2008: 315) afforded whereby marginalised individuals can at least, 'do something' (p. 313). However, job seekers that engaged with the job club specifically wanted to secure paid work and their experiences of work so far, cannot be considered to be volunteering when there is a hope or expectation, that it will lead to paid employment.

Extending the notion of work experience here adds another problematic layer to the notions of unwaged work. Commonly perceived as a mechanism for transferring from education to the world of work, work experience is characterised as a voluntary route to enhance experience and increase future employability (Owens and Stewart 2016). Yet, unless the unpaid work is undertaken as part of a government assistance programme, concerns have been raised concerning exploitation (Grover and Piggott 2013). Owens and Stewart (2016) were particularly concerned with programmes that fall outside the boundaries of structured and monitored training schemes, suggesting that those in the open market, which are not associated with any governance and do not provide 'real' training for people with ID. Instead, the authors suggest that people are lured into the experience by hopes it will lead to paid employment, when in fact, few go on to gain permanent and secure positions. With this description, what occurs at the job club is then more aligned to work experience, yet with the transaction of wages that fall short of NMW or out of bounds with official programmes, work becomes particularly morally ambiguous.

Discussion

Sophie, Tara, Verity, Naomi, and Karen are all excluded from accessing established sites of employment support due to age and/or ability restrictions. In response, sites such as the job club encourage those furthest from the workforce, to engage with the open labour market, almost expecting employers to connect with a 'socially regulated kind of capitalism' (Honneth 2012: 164).

When this became untenable, the job club shifted its approach to offer an innovative experience, warmly welcomed by the job seekers. However, this approach encroaches on the perspectives of Monckton, Fraud, and Davies who have all received a negative backlash for making such suggestions. Yet, by digging deep and offering space for the rich participant narratives, there was an opportunity to explore here how moral norms attached to the NMW call us to question how people are rewarded when workloads require modification. However it could be repackaged, an exemption to the NMW fuels debate. While it has the potential to be an effective labour market policy designed to enhance employment opportunity and facilitate integration, it can also perpetuate the cultural attachments and meanings of reduced worth and portray disability as equating to both non-productivity and dependency (Soffer, Tal-Katz & Rimmerman 2011). While an exemption to the NMW is not the solution, and caution should be applied to any such notions of simplistic policy responses, a resolution is required. A wage subsidy, for instance, could be a potential route to increase the presence of this demographic into the workforce whereby each member of society has the opportunity to contribute.

Further, fleshing out this debate would go some way to attend to the responses on the nature of work, and its relationship with pay. For, more broadly, interpretations offered within the research literature on what work means do not align to the narrowly constructed conceptualisation of work as a commodity, equating to economic value alone. Widening out the conceptualisation of work offers an account that is not simply about wages. Rather, it encompasses a broader discussion and when considered holistically, affords attention towards its tight linkage with identity and symbolic value. Work then, establishes the 'rhythms of our lives' (Budd 2011: 11) and as such, the accounts here of why work is so important to the participants at the job club provide the backdrop in which to unpack such complexities. This is in contrast to the closing of the debate when it is linked to discrimination and instead offers an understanding of how individuals are being caught in policy rhetoric and ideology.

By presenting participant narratives and connecting these accounts to the theoretical concepts of work and recognition, this study exposed how lived realities do not match up neatly with policy initiatives or rhetoric – rather, a culture of hostility and social barriers are prevalent. This is particularly problematic for a culture fixated on productivity, particularly for people who are not necessarily able to satisfy the breadth of a job description. Yet, these accounts highlight why work is so intrinsically important to people and we cannot arrive at a *just* solution through individualised notions of personal autonomy and competitive employment, when governed by restrictive mechanisms because within this narrow framework, the market appears an 'unavoidable authority for evaluating achievement' (Honneth 2012: 185).

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