Work aspirations, intellectual disability and 'cruelling out' the mark in the job club.

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Abstract

This article uses ethnographic data to explore the relationship between a job club facilitator and a job seeker with an intellectual disability, to illuminate the gulf between employment activation and the multifaceted everyday reality experienced through employment preparation activities, at a job club established for people with intellectual disabilities who are in receipt of social care. The focus of this article is the micro-interactions apparent within the job club that aligns with Goffman's 'cooling the mark' framework, which is unpacked and extended. The strategies at play here refute the broader, individualised 'welfare-to-work' neoliberal rhetoric of employment being available to anyone who works hard enough to attain it. Instead, job seekers are reoriented to accept volunteering roles or dubious unpaid work which are presented as employment-like alternatives. Yet, Goffman's concept is not static as he envisaged: it fluctuates. For, within this reorientation process, strategies are deployed onto individuals to ensure they are kept interested enough to both accept a lowered employment status, while simultaneously still encouraged to strive for paid work *one day*. As such, this article teases out the tension and paradox between the clusters of promises attached to work as 'the good life' together with everyday disabling experiences of cruel optimism by encouraging job seekers to accept non-normative forms of employment.

Introduction

A changing relationship with the state

People with intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience a whole range of adverse health disparities linked to inequality (McMahon & Hatton, 2021) and are often excluded from everyday life, disabled by mainstream society (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2015). For people with intellectual disabilities who are users of social care, there has been a range of measures over the last decade to 'personalise' service delivery aimed at combating a lack of choice, autonomy and social participation (Malli et al., 2018). While this approach has resulted in positive experiences for some who have thrived on the opportunities of newfound control, not everyone has seen the benefit (Power et al., 2016). Social care provision was inflexible yet the alternative shift towards personalised services has weakened collective sites of social encounters and, in times of austerity, strengthened service reduction (Power et al., 2016).

One way to capture the complex, nuanced contemporary exclusion and marginalisation experienced here is to sharpen the lens on the employment landscape. For, with this dismantling of collectively and withdrawal of the state, comes 'greater expectations for former service users to take up valued lives in the community and occupy positions in the open labour market' (Power & Hall 2018, p. 305). This position is echoed more widely through a citizenship discourse fixated on economic self-sustainability as a route to increase social inclusion – a person's value is now measured by their labour-power,which is inherently ableist (Hughes, 2019), and the desire to work is 'nourished by neoliberal-ableism' (Bates et al., 2017, p. 163). Moreover, with limited exceptions (Bates et al., 2017; Hall, 2004; Ineson, 2015), there is limited sociological engagement and an

absence of questioning the normative assumptions associated with employment for people with intellectual disabilities and, arguably more important, a lack of engagement with the nuanced and complex perspectives provided by the people with intellectual disabilities themselves. This contribution, then, responds to the call for 'recognising disability as of central importance for the sociological imaginary' by linking personal troubles to public issues (Thomas, 2021, p. 454).

This article will first sketch out the features of employment policy in the context of disability. Then, data collected from an ethnographic study at one 'employability hub' set up to cater for individuals who are excluded from specialist employment support and would once have attended a traditional day centre setting, will be aligned to Goffman's much neglected theoretical 'cooling the mark' (1952) contribution. In short, this sees people cooled out of their employment aspirations and their lack of paid work individualised, as another form of 'personal failure' enacted against disabled people, who, as consequence, continue to be 'locked out' of everyday citizen practices of (non)belonging (Wiseman, 2019, p. 802). Further, this article then connects the analysis offered by Goffman's theoretical tool with broader tensions associated with the promise of the good life, inherently associated with employment as a status of ability and productivity. Here, 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) is the realisation that employment optimism is *im*possible.

Locating employment activation and its intersections with (intellectual) Disability

Active labour market policy is widely cited as the 'best' way to achieve citizenship and social inclusion throughout Western Europe and North America, delivered through a range of policies focused on increasing the supply side of labour (Van Berkel & Van Der Aa, 2014). In the UK, policies that require work engagement are not new, yet, since 2008, what has shifted is the expectation that those who previously received Incapacity Benefit (IB) are now included in activation policies. This transfer from IB to Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is one example of the shift in policy expectations (Wiggan, 2015). ESA was initially broadly welcomed by disability organisations, with the premise of proactive, tailored employment support. Yet, it has come under intense criticism, with an extensive body of work contesting such an approach to work assessment, whereby the individual is held responsible for their life situation, without due regard to disability and broader structural causes of unemployment and exclusion (Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Richardson & Benstead, 2017; Whitworth, 2016). Mainstream employment support often prioritises those closest to the labour market at the expense of those deemed unlikely to generate a payment outcome through the outsourced payment-by-results welfare-to-work system. While this leaves those further from the labour market 'parked' in their quest to seek work, there is a body of research that contests the notion of this being an unintended consequence of policy – rather, it is a deliberate act to ensure implicit *undesirable* activation does not occur (Carter & Whitworth, 2014; Wiggan, 2015). For, along with other marginalised groups, disabled people have been underrepresented in the core labour force and, consequently, overrepresented within the secondary labour market as the reserve, stagnant army of workers, competing for low wage jobs (Carter & Whitworth, 2014). As such, people who are excluded from the system of work are not excluded because of faults within it, rather, because the system *is* working exactly as intended within a free market ideology (Russell, 2002). Further, meritocratic ideology deems personal shortcomings to be the reason when individuals fail. This individualism, where we can become anything we want if we endure, is often unrelated to the individual effort and motivation exerted, and instead, capitalist labour market structures are the absolute barrier (Russell, 2002). The *make work pay* mantra, then, shifts focus away from the government and instead onto the individual, who must grab all opportunities offered to them, for underpinning these policies is the premise that jobs are available if only the workless were prepared to take them (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2015). People with intellectual disabilities face a particularly challenging and complex situation regarding

employment support. Low expectations, poor education and an aversion from many employers have seen very few people here enter paid work – with fewer than 6% in any form of employment (Hatton, 2017). This is particularly problematic with the framing of employment being central to *normal* life (Hall & McGarrol, 2012) and paid work 'unambiguously promoted as the normal and superior state to which everyone should aspire' (Frayne, 2015, p. 105). Employment policy, here, is a site of contradiction and paradox. People are included as an 'exclude-able type', whereby they are only made to matter through a marginalised context (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 519). Like the shift from IB to ESA, the employment support landscape for people with intellectual disabilities has altered significantly over the last decade. From the flagship disability employment programme WORKSTEP, which predominantly supported people into sheltered workshops, to Work Choice, contracting with prime providers (Melling et al., 2011) and the 'welfare-to-work' Work Programme that ceased in 2017, those with complex, interdependent support needs are now being directed towards programmes specialising in supporting those at risk from long-term employment exclusion. Yet, I argue, like the endemic payments-by-results model that prioritises those closest to the labour market in mainstream support, people with intellectual disabilities are still being 'parked' and underserved within specialist services. For these programmes are dominated (and funded) for people who are under 25, who have core literacy and numeracy skills, and can work more than a few hours per week, thus decreasing their long-term welfare dependency. The results of this see individuals with intellectual disabilities who fall out of the bounds of this criteria, yet wish to explore work, being excluded from the programmes set up to support them. In response, care providers, operating under the premise of employment activation, are developing 'employability hubs' for people who would have once attended a traditional day centre (Dearing, 2021). Yet, there is little opportunity offered here to support people into meaningful paid work, and instead, their aspirations are cooled into accepting unpaid work as a substitute.

'Cruelling' out aspiration

Known for his observational work on the social arrangements of institutions (1961), self (1959) and stigma (1963), Goffman's earlier work, 'On cooling the mark out' (1952), has received limited attention, yet it has enduring relevance as a theoretical tool. Goffman used an analogy of the 'mark' being a victim (or potential victim) of fraudulent activity, with a 'cooler' used to pacify the 'mark' and convince them not to involve the police. In this context, the mark is the 'sucker' (1952, p. 451) taken in, while the con is the person making direct contact with the mark, winning their confidence, and offering a new opportunity. The cooler, then, cools the mark into accepting their loss by maintaining the feeling that they will be able to invest more, differently, avoiding a loss of status. As Goffman notes, 'the cooler has the job of handling persons who have been caught out on a limb – persons whose expectations and self-conceptions have been built up and then shattered' (p. 452). In each case, a person is 'involuntarily deprived' of their position or involvement, with the cooler's primary function to provide 'proof of incapacity'. In return, the mark is offered 'something that is considered a lesser thing to be' (p. 454). Goffman's theory has had limited (and mainly dated) academic use, with some recent exceptions, including how mothers interpret their child's diagnosis of Down's syndrome (Thomas, 2014), and how teaching assistants perceive their work in the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (Lehane, 2016). Earlier work framed by Goffman's 'cooling out' metaphor includes career progression (Becker & Strauss, 1956), open-door education admission policies in the US (Clark, 1960) and managing the disappointment of job termination (Miller & Robinson, 1994). In this article, I extend Goffman's analytical framework to consider how some people with intellectual disabilities experience employment preparation support, whereby their expectation for paid employment is lowered to, instead, accept unpaid work in a contemporary specialised employment hub in the UK. To do this, I consider how people with intellectual disabilities can be *cooled out* through strategies deployed of creating alternative achievements, getting tough, and using a proxy, to instead offer work-like alternatives as a

substitute for paid employment. For in this framework, while some may succeed, 'for large numbers, failure is inevitable and structured' (Clark, 1960, p. 571). Yet, while drawing on Goffman's tool to account for such strategies, the framework falls short contextually by not considering why people continue on a treadmilling path of employment seeking. As such, the experiences offered here will demonstrate how work has become so ingrained within a legitimate citizenship discourse that employment optimism is, instead, an impossible fallacy associated with cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). Here, such promises are offered as 'ableist fiction' (Goodley, 2017, p. 64) whereby 'one fails to match up to the labour . . . demands of late capitalism' (Goodley et al., 2018, p.209). The fantasy of 'the good life' (Berlant, 2011, p. 2) sees work seekers hold on to the 'mistaken desire' (p. 13) that personal fulfilment can be achieved through working. When this fantasy is unfulfilled, Berlant (2011) describes:

> The compulsion to repeat optimism . . . is a condition of possibility that also risks having to survive, once again, disappointment . . . all that work, for what? (pp. 121–122)

It is the 'all that work, for what?' here that resonates. Social norms are deeply embedded and taken as being natural (Goffman, 1959) to the extent that employment is considered the pinnacle of ideological acceptance. Thus, job seekers will accept this lowered status on offer through non-paid work. First, however, the job club and my role therein will be contextualised.

Methods

Based in the rural English midlands, Green Meadow[1] was organised and managed by Sally. Twelve job seekers regularly attended the club – three males and nine females, all aged between 30 and 55. Nine of the job seekers had diagnosed intellectual disabilities, three of whom lived independently with support, while six lived in registered care homes. Support workers accompanying job seekers to the club were commonplace, and user-friendly, inclusive materials were used during sessions. 'Privileged' (Drake, 2010) access was secured through my career contacts, from working in the third sector with a similar organisation. While securing access, I was asked to actively participate in the naturally occurring field and adopted a researcher/volunteer position. My role included facilitating small group work activity sessions, helping with CVs, and employment-orientated worksheets. While formal ethical approval was granted by my university to conduct the ethnographic work, there were multiple 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) to attend to. Written informed consent was gained by all participants using user-friendly plain language consent and information sheets that had been specifically designed to be jargon-free with pictorial references. Further, each time a new attendee was present (which regularly included different support workers), I would explain my research, and to reaffirm my intentions, I would purposely draw attention and exaggerate setting up the recording device. All participants had the right to decline/withdraw from the research, without detriment to their involvement with the club; however all participants welcomed my presence. The study had an overarching theme of 'exploring the consequences of employment policy' as part of my PhD research undertaken between 2017 and 2020. Ethnographic research with people who have intellectual disabilities has had limited use within the social sciences, yet this approach allows for 'closeness to the action in situ' (Dicks, 2014, p. 663) and shares an 'intersubjective' (p. 668) space with participants, in a naturally occurring field. Although a small sample, this use of methodology reminds us that there are 'lives that exist behind the label' (Goodley, 1996, p. 334) and offers the opportunity to observe what people do, how they do it, and why, as a way to understanding participant actions based on their experiences of the world (Atkinson, 2015).

Job club was initially set up to offer a three-month programme, with a frequent turnaround of 'job ready' work seekers. However, over the 15 months of ethnography work, only two moved on to

any form of paid employment (see analysis). While the project was funded based on intellectual disability employment provision, Robin and Jackie both joined the group early on; Robin had schizophrenia and self-referred, while Jackie was signposted by the local job centre. The analysis of job club readily lends itself to Goffman's concept, which, when applied, situates Sally (work manager) as perpetrating an (un)intentional 'con'. This unwitting approach was in response to the structural barriers of employment inclusion. While this article draws upon the experiences of multiple job seekers, Sophie is the focal point within a case study approach. Three strategies of 'cooling the mark' will now be presented, each is considered in turn and there is an emphasis on the first strategy. Within the analysis, there is a risk that individuals are positioned as passively accepting the position offered to them, which strips agency from already marginalised individuals. While this threat is evident, the strength of Sophie's agency throughout the case study aims to illuminate resistance, rather than framing her as passively accepting her position. As such, the broader aim is to highlight systematic injustice.

Cooling the mark strategies

Create an alternative achievement: lower expectations and increase hurdles

Clark (1960) draws on 'cooling the mark' to analyse *latent terminal students* continuing on an educational path, when, in reality, their education had been terminated and replaced by a 'reorienting process' (p. 572). This process encourages underperforming students to accept a 'lower status in both the college and society in general' (p. 572), with various tactics employed to edge low-ability students towards terminating their programme. These tactics include steering students to realise their own shortcomings by 'laying out the facts of life' (p. 572) and assisting students to evaluate their ability and capacity. Similarly, Scott (1969), in his seminal analysis of adult socialisation, drew on the experiences of blind men, to highlight more broadly how acts such as this subtly reaffirm and reinforce the limitations of individuals who need to 'face the facts' (p. 73) of the label applied to them. As such, one is then offered an *alternative achievement* instead, with substitute paths. At the job club, the process follows a similar path; paid work is an often impossible aspiration. With the promise of paid work a con, job seekers are instead encouraged to redefine their expectations, to accept *more* volunteering and work experience. While the club was set up to support their quest for paid work, the benefits of volunteering – framed as a pleasant, 'feel-good' alternative – are instead prioritised. For example, Sophie asks whether there was any paid work available locally. Sally informed her that there is not, yet there was a local voluntary project:

> Sally: Would you be interested?
> Sophie: Yes, please.
> Sally: [T]hat would be fantastic. It's not a paid job, it's voluntary, so it's not paid work.
> Sophie: Could I get a paid job as well?
> Sally: [Y]ou could try, but if you wanted, it might be nice to think about it as it'll be a bit different.
> Sally, then, presented the opportunity of volunteering as engaging with different experiences.
> This direction of conversation continued over several weeks:
> Sally: There's a couple of voluntary jobs . . . I'm hoping that in the summer you might want to do some work there.
> Sophie: What about getting paid still?
> Sally: That's true, isn't it . . . we need to think about how we are going to move

> you on to work don't we really. [Name] was just telling me earlier about
> a place in [city] where they do . . . like a training place . . . they take
> people on, but they don't pay you there . . . I'm not making any promises
> . . . [but] it sounds very suitable.
> Sophie: I've worked on a till before anyway . . . but I want to really find a paid
> job.
> Sally: I think, whatever it is, you need to move on . . . don't you? You spent 3
> years, sitting there folding the napkins . . . just going to [city] is good,
> going somewhere different, meeting some new people.

Now, not only did Sally offer a voluntary opportunity as a chance to try something different and meet new people, as a work-like alternative, but she moved the boundaries of Sophie's self-perception. Sally was 'not making any promises' that this work placement would come to fruition. Moreover, she pointed out, 'even getting a job as a volunteer and you're not getting paid is quite a challenge actually'. This statement followed similar contours stressing the impossibility of paid work. Goffman (1952) discusses this process of how the 'con' alters the self-conception of the 'mark' through supporting someone to surrender their claim, and, instead, commit themselves to an altered self, which a new role offers them to have. Naomi and Verity were job seekers who had one-to-one support workers with them and lived in residential care homes. Both accepted the lower status on offer and the cooling process was somewhat easily instilled. Naomi was offered accumulated evidence specifically through the scrutiny of any potential workplace: 'the type of noise and whether you can cope with that . . . noisy is not a good place for you . . . maybe somewhere quieter . . . behind the scenes?' In response, Naomi accepted her loss, disentangled her involvement with paid work, and focused on volunteering. Similarly, Verity wanted to attain cafe work. Verity and Sally spent some time visiting local cafes to see if they would be a suitable workplace. Unfortunately for Verity, each was either too dark, too small, too noisy, or had too many stairs, and therefore was unsuitable (even with no vacancies available). For both Naomi and Verity, these situations acted as a buffer to further weaken their position as marks. Sally, as the con, offered a 'new framework in which to see [herself] and judge [herself]' (Goffman, 1952, p. 456). Here, then, Sally presented a 'de-courting' (Goffman, 1952, p. 456) situation that was continually at play whereby she aided the separation of the construction job seekers had made of themselves to find paid work, which could not be sustained.

Yet, for Sophie, this 'hurdle' (Clark, 1960, p. 573) in contemplating her work options required Sally to become more tactical in her approach, as she was 'not quite prepared to accept [her] loss . . . to say and do nothing about [her] venture' (Goffman, 1952, p. 451). Instead, she resisted the cooling-out process and this agency, evoked by Sophie, led to weekly tension at the job club as she repeatedly sought out paid opportunities independently. Spending time in the local village, Sophie would regularly ask businesses if there were vacancies, sometimes returning with an application form. These vacancies included positions of a carer, multiple shop roles, pub work and cleaning. Sally worked hard to pacify Sophie's intention to apply for any of these positions, pointing out that the local chip shop was not an *ideal* working environment due to evening work. Neither was the role of cleaner at a local public house, because, as Sally commented:

> Cleaners are well paid so there are high expectations . . . and when you do cleaning jobs,
> you've got to think about the kinds of places you are cleaning . . . somewhere like [name],
> do you think it's quite a dirty place? . . . dirty shoes, spilling beer.

Moreover, in addition to creating these barriers, the desire for a non-existent *ideal* job also saw Sophie's lack of technology skills, personal abilities, and age, brought to bear when she informed Sally that she would like to take her CV around local supermarkets:

> They won't accept CVs, you need to apply online . . . it's quite hard to do it online actually
> . . . they are quite demanding jobs, supermarkets . . . very physical. Much more physical
> than other shops. I'm not trying to put you off, just be realistic . . . they'll want you to do
> a whole range of things . . . it's good you are looking . . . you turn up, you've got good
> skills, however, you're a bit of a dreamer aren't you? You want to do jobs that aren't suited
> to you and you need to think about that, you're not 20 anymore! I've had these
> conversations with you before, haven't I? As you get older, you have to find places that
> suit you really. We wouldn't be doing our job if we let you carry on trying to get jobs that
> are not suited. It's not that I am trying to tell you what to do, we are just trying to help you
> . . . Sophie, you keep harking back to your youth . . . you need to be a bit more honest
> about where you are and what jobs you can do . . . Now, this is something I am going to
> put very tactfully. I think, when you are looking for a job, because Sophie, you very quickly
> say, I want to work 16 hours . . . but actually, as we go through life, we change, some of
> these jobs are quite hard . . . it's not about disability necessarily, it's about us all getting
> older.

Sophie, then, was presented with the notion that the barrier to employment was not only her intellectual disability, but that other barriers mean she could not attain paid work. Still, convinced that paid work was the answer, she asked if she could secure a leaflet distribution round like a fellow job seeker. Again, this was instantly curbed: 'you have to be pretty fit, quite a lot of streets to walk'. Sophie replied, 'yes, yes, please . . . I don't mind walking . . . I like my walking I do'. Sally concluded, 'ok, well, erm, well, who is interested in some cafe projects over the summer then?' instantly appeasing Sophie, who clung to this cafe idea and left the leaflet round (for that moment). Moreover, Sally continually worked to highlight the non-financial rewards of volunteering, presented as an opportunity for Sophie to still become a 'something or a somebody' (Goffman, 1952, p.457):

> It's not as simple as just earning money. Money is important, of course it is, but if that's the only
> reason . . . wherever you make an effort to do something, its work isn't it . . . satisfaction, you've achieved something . . . because that's what work is . . . a sense of achievement . . . you keep your mind occupied.

This reframing distorts Sophie's understanding of work equating to financial reward, yet Sophie would not accept that she had to 'make the best of it' (Goffman, 1952, p. 461) in accepting solely volunteer work. For Sophie revealed that she found it hard to manage financially each week: 'my money is going down all of the time, I need to get a job . . . I used to get my £10 and I don't get that anymore'. For three years, Sophie worked at a cafe where she folded napkins for two days per week. She was paid £10 per month. It is the loss of this job, that falls out of the bounds of work experience or volunteering, that is the route of frustration, and it is this type of work that she would like to re-engage with. Unregulated roles such as these are historically considered to be of a therapeutic nature (Reaume, 2004), yet my research explores how these positions are still prevalent (Dearing, 2020, 2021). Moreover, Scott (1969) explored how vocational services were used as a filtering mechanism to determine who was best placed to enter sheltered work programmes and who could meet the demands of competitive employment. As such, performing functions of work with little pay, recognition or reward lays bare an absence of 'work' in any formal sense for people unable to cope with open employment. Yet, rather than explore how therapeutic-type roles were not the same as open employment, Sally instead continued to tell Sophie that, 'it really is hard to get a job. It's hard for everyone and I'll tell ya, as you get older it gets harder . . . if you were a little fitter . . . you have to get yourself a little fitter though Sophie'.

Sophie had an ongoing medical problem with her leg that was unlikely to improve for some time. This focus on health, however, acted as a mechanism to maintain Sophie's interest in finding work. For, she then had hope – once her leg got better. This function was an important aspect of the employment programme cycle, which differs from Goffman's (1952) static interpretation. Instead, in this context, the *cooling of the mark* must fluctuate to ensure Sophie and her peers remained just interested enough to continue being present at the job club. This necessity was to ensure that the project remained viable by documenting the need for employment preparation in the local community. Yet, Sophie became increasingly frustrated at the lack of work available to her, and in turn, Sally appeared irritated at Sophie's agency, therefore deploying a second function of *cooling the mark* – getting tough.

Get tough

Over time, Sally grew to foster a 'talking tough' (Clark, 1960, p. 573) approach, directed at Sophie, in front of the group. She explained *impersonally*, 'the facts of life for the over-ambitious . . . [for] talking tough to the whole group is part of the process' (p. 573). When a local shopkeeper advised Sophie to take her CV in for consideration, Sally replied, 'everybody would say that. He's being polite. I'm sorry but they do.' Sophie was undeterred: 'he said to bring it in after Wednesday, my CV'. Sophie was arguably in 'objective denial' (p. 575), yet she pointed out how much she would like to attain paid work. Sally replied, in front of the whole group:

> To be fair, you've always said that Sophie. One of the things I'm always trying to get across to people is if people pay you, they have much higher expectations and that's why I'm telling you about the rules . . . If a boss is going to pay you, he is going to want you to work in a certain way.

Moreover, Sally then drew upon other job seekers to enact the support of her performance of this function. Making sure that Sophie was listening, Sally said the following to another job seeker, drawing on their comparison to Sophie:

> It gives me confidence Jackie, that you've stuck with it. One of the problems I have is that people often say 'oh I want a job' but they've got no commitment . . . One of the things you are going to struggle with Sophie is commitment. You need to show commitment. You see what Jackie is doing, is showing somebody that she is committed. Because it's not easy to work there [an unpaid work trial at a hotel] but she is committed.

Yet, this comparison was pitched against Jackie, a job seeker who did not have intellectual disabilities. Sophie replied to the whole group: 'I focus on what I'm doing – when I was at [cafe] I focused on my job'. However, for Sophie and Sally, the situation was to become untenable. Sophie returned to see a local pub manager about the cleaning vacancy. She'd left her CV, returning there a few days later. Sophie explained, 'I said, have you got my CV and he said yeah, but I've decided you are not qualified to work in [pub] . . . he said I'm not qualified . . . he really is quite rude he is. I was thinking about working up there I was.' Sally went further than before with her response this time:

> He's entitled to say it. Perhaps he hasn't said it the right way . . . but it's his decision. Maybe he has got people's CV with much more experience . . . think carefully. Not every job suits you. It's very easy to say I want a paid job and I want to do cleaning . . . Sophie, go to [city] but remember, you are 47 years old. You're not 27 anymore, be honest, say what you're good and not so good at.

Sally had now suggested that Sophie should seriously consider a move to a different job club, in a city 10 miles from the village and actively encouraged her to pursue this. Cumulatively, this led to the final functional performance of *agents of consolation* within the 'cooling of the mark' framework (Clark, 1960). Sally performed the never-ending task of enacting patience with 'the over-ambitious' (p. 575). As the 'cooler', she offered a status that somewhat differs from the one that has failed, but it is presented in such a way that it allows space and hope for Sophie to at least become 'something or somebody' (Goffman, 1952, p. 457). This position was further reinforced by both individual and group sessions at the job club where participants worked on different employment inclusion activities, such as work profiles and self-appraising worksheets. These documents were used by participants to identify their skills and weaknesses, aimed at increasing employability by engaging with various workshops provided at the job club. Yet, these activities were also tools to ensure participants were 'repeatedly confronted by the accumulating evidence' (Clark, 1960, p. 573) of realistic expectations. Here, the procedure is intended to 'heighten self-awareness of capacity in relation to choice' with counsellors urged to 'be alert to the problem of unrealistic vocational goals' and to help people to 'accept their limitations and strive for success in other worthwhile objectives that are within their grasp' (Clark, 1960, p. 574).
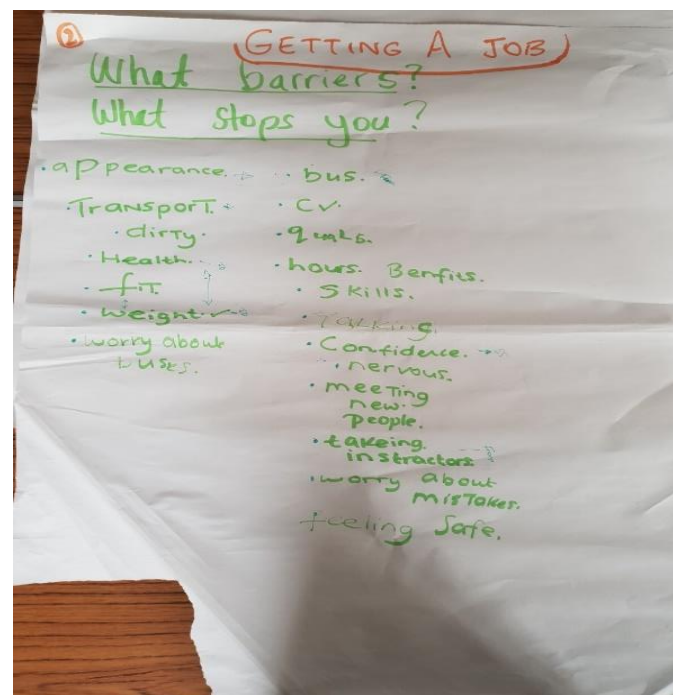

Figure 1. A group activity highlighting the barriers to employment.

Figure 1 highlights the personalised limitations of job exclusion, compiled during a group activity. The figure presents the body of self-cumulative evidence that job seekers were simply too far from paid work. It includes appearance, weight, taking instructions and not feeling safe as individualised barriers which were collated as a problem with agency, rather than the structure of the job market. Yet what has also emerged, from this focus on *getting tough*, is the important function of using other job seekers to support Sally's claims and lower the self-perception of the individual. That is the use of a proxy.

The role of a proxy: a source of aspirational envy

The final strategy for discussion was the role of a proxy. While distant from the labour market, neither Robin nor Jackie had diagnosed intellectual disabilities. Tara does have an intellectual disability, and receives social care, living in a residential home. However, her paid work was not gained through competitive employment. Rather, a local employer purposely sought out an employee from this demographic for their own altruistic motivations. As such, Tara worked for two hours per week at a factory, where she was paid the national minimum wage. Tara was only present during the first few sessions of the job club while waiting for her factory induction, yet she was an essential feature in the role of the proxy. For, Tara was the ideal aspiration – as well as having intellectual disabilities, she also had two other *jobs*: working at the cafe Sophie previously worked at, for two days per week (earning £10 per month) and working at a private hotel. Here, for 17 years, Tara worked in the kitchen for two days per week, yet she was never paid. This morally ambiguous work is explored elsewhere (Dearing, 2021). Here, however, Tara was regarded as the *amazing* 'utopian model' of the ideal worker (Scott, 1969, p. 84). Yet, for Sophie, Tara's focal point of attaining work was a site for tension and envy: 'wish I could get two jobs . . . wish I could get two jobs like Tara'. However, instead of reassuring the job seekers that Tara's work was not secured through open employment, Sally replied:

> Fantastic isn't it. There we are it can be done. There are jobs out there, but it did take Tara a longtime to get that job didn't it and she has really stuck at it.

Again, this kept Sophie interested in future possibilities, *just like Tara*, and maintained her commitment to job seeking. Yet, with use of the proxy, cooling of the mark creeps towards 'cruelling' the mark, particularly when the proxy was close to home. Robin was Sophie's fiancé. He was a chartered accountant for many years, and, while extraordinarily different, Sally regularly compared Robin's situation to Sophie's, to add another layer of strength to her case, that Sophie, was most definitely overambitious in her job seeking:

> I mean, it's like Robin, you've been very honest. I'm sure when you were 30 years younger, I'm sure he done jobs that were far more demanding.

Robin replied that he had held demanding tax jobs and Sally steered conversation to ensure Sophie knew that Robin would now be receptive to unpaid work, as a route to 'retain his status' (Goffman, 1952, p. 457), because, as Robin said, 'the expectations are much higher when you have a paid job . . . to be more proficient'. So, for his health, Robin accepted what was on offer:

> If I don't do anything, I get panic attacks. When I'm busy, I don't . . . when I'm at a loose end, and I've not much to do, I get panic attacks about 2 or 3 times a week. But if I've got a busy day, I don't get them.

Robin, then, had resigned himself to seeking voluntary work, not for the additional experience to then return to waged work, but to act as a filler to his unstructured days. Yet, for Sophie, the real tension was not from comparing her situation with Robin: it was with Jackie's role as the proxy. Sophie and Jackie were both interested in similar working roles in the small village. Frustratingly for Sophie, each time she shared the news of the latest vacancy she had found out about, by physically frequenting shops and businesses, Sally listened to the potential vacancy and then directed her attention towards Jackie, encouraging her to apply for the post. When a new local business was under development, Sophie shared with the group that she had been in to speak with them. The manager advised Sophie to take an application form and according to Sophie, this meant that 'they said they would be interested in me working there'. Sally asked her what jobs were available. Sophie replied that there will be a pizza bar and a coffee shop. Yet, Sally stopped engaging with Sophie, and instead talked exclusively to Jackie, maintaining eye contact, 'draft out a letter,

we could do that today which I can type up for you next week'. Sophie was oblivious to the situation that had emerged and continued explaining how she would like to waitress and serve drinks, yet, no one was listening – as the 'uncooperative client', her priority was now low (Scott, 1969, p. 79). Moreover, Sally informed me (off the record) that the local businesses were 'fed up' with Sophie continually asking for work. By this point, Sophie's participation at the job club was unsustainable and within two weeks, she had been enrolled in the club 10 miles away. Importantly here, then, is according to Goffman's concept, the movement of 'those who fail is one we never see . . . person[s] [that] have been rejected . . . are there by virtue of failure' (p. 463). For Sophie, this failure had meant further exclusion not just from her local labour market, but from the networks of support she had established with her peers and community.

Discussion

This article has risked portraying Sally as a villain: she was not. Sally had a dual role fraught with emotional labour, cushioning disappointment while simultaneously reinforcing the notion they could be successful *one day*. Similarly, my fieldnotes documented how I too, was complicit in the role of a 'con'. Until the ideas presented within the framework emerged from my data, and I was able to explore the connections with a lens focused on Goffman's offerings, I would have also engaged with these strategies. For example, early on, when Sophie was eager to secure paid work, I would share Sally's appeasement approach of suggesting that volunteering was a route to paid work – 'that would be great one day, Sophie, but for now, why don't you think about volunteering at the new cafe?' However, once I had made the connections with Goffman, I would stay silent during such discussions. Today, I still reflexively grapple with the consequence of my silence and reflect whether sharing these insights would have altered the narrative of unpaid work being an acceptable substitution.

Further, this neoliberal framing of work success as equating to individualised effort means, in this lens, Sally too was being cooled. Cooled by the structure and construct of active market policies offering work as available to anyone who keeps striving. For, as Sennett (2012) discusses, the rise in community-based 'job clubs' results in an 'increasingly difficult task of matching applicants to scant available jobs' (p. 226). This, in turn, requires the professional to lower the expectations of job seekers. Yet, as he notes, the professional also has to become skilled in handling disappointment, while at the same time, stay engaged with the tasks in hand, 'even if one feels rotten inside' (p. 226). Moreover, this nuanced engagement with Goffman is only one theme derived from the data collected over a prolonged engagement in the field. For, while Sally's position has been sealed as a con when it came to employment activation, at other times, the job club was a site for sharing non-work-related discussion, mutual peer support, and a space to develop friendships.

Yet, drawing on Goffman's framework theoretically accounts for how people systematically have their expectations of paid work lowered, and replaced by volunteering and dubious unpaid work, which is considered a 'lesser' status within the UK's narrow conceptualisation of citizenship, based on financial worth. By extending the research of this framework, Goffman's account has also been extended, by considering how the deployed strategies are not static, as he envisaged, rather they fluctuate, dependent upon contextual circumstance. For, on one hand, Sally ignited the imagination and optimism of job seekers that if they worked hard enough, they could secure work like Tara and Jackie, yet this held tension with the alternative of recognising individual dis(ability) and realistic job prospects in a supply-side labour market. The result of which sketches out '*cruelling the mark*'.

More broadly, this article enters the debate on how this trajectory is set to continue, based upon the continual shift towards employment activation and measures of austerity, poised at pressuring people to move from unemployment to financial contributors, when in reality unemployment is an intended consequence of employment activation. Threaded throughout the individual narratives of this project were the unfulfilled promises and expectations. This context aims to place people in 'ordinary' jobs, where cultural norms continue to perpetuate the position that people with intellectual disabilities should aspire to a non-disabled status, striving for economic activity and financial independence, without question. Instead, this article supports Bates et al. (2017) in their quest to *work the spaces* of neoliberalism by calling for non-normative responses to austerity and the binary categorisation of the work/no work dichotomy. For, what do hope, inclusion, community participation and cohesion look like, for people who have experienced a reduction in social care provision, who have in response, entered the structures of employment activation only to then be unlikely to succeed in their quest? These 'residual spaces' (Power et al., 2016, p. 190) question the nature of work when people gravitate towards them to fill the social collectivism void, which is bound to the continual reinforcement of dis/ability under the premise of employment activation.

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Note
1. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article for individuals and establishments alike.

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