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ABSTRACT

This article draws on empirically derived illustrations of return to work and unemployment to critically explore how a narrow understanding of work pervades contemporary social policies and programmes. This is particularly relevant in economic and labour market transitions aligned with neoliberalism that individualise the social problem of unemployment and thus restrict occupational possibilities related to work. An overview of how work and related concepts have been conceptualised in occupational science scholarship is presented. After describing the theoretical orientation of the paper, three illustrations derived from a secondary analysis of data from projects conducted in Sweden and the United States are presented. The three empirically grounded illustrations are integrated with theory to highlight tensions between the politically informed structures that shape social policies and programmes and the individual experiences of work, unemployment, and return to work that users and providers of these programmes communicate. By asserting that success in work-related placement programmes is not synonymous with meaningful employment, we attempt to heighten awareness of the potential risks associated with a reliance on measuring work by merely being in paid formal employment.

As an extension of the 2019 Occupational Science Europe conference programme, the editors of this special issue asked authors to articulate "how occupational science can contribute to meeting the challenges and possibilities" associated with current transitions (Bergström et al., 2019). In many Western contexts, economic and labour market transitions in alignment with neoliberalism have created challenges by individualising the social problem of unemployment (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019) and restricting perceived occupational possibilities for how people inhabit various relations to work (Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Work has been conceptualised and taken up in diverse ways within occupational science scholarship and beyond. An area of concern has been potential inequities and precarities associated with work, and critical perspectives have been suggested as a way to highlight such

concerns and promote complex understandings of tensions that can emerge between neoliberal framings of work and people's interests, capacities, and potential. The aim of this paper is to contribute to concept development of work by applying a critical occupational science lens and juxtaposing social structures with inductive meanings of work in relation to processes of transitioning into or return to work as well as conditions of being out of work.

The manuscript is organised in several sections, all of which centre on concerns with the framing of work, return-to-work, and unemployment. First, we review how work, return-to-work and unemployment have been historically conceptualised in occupational science scholarship. Because the conceptualisation of work is broad, it is challenging to concisely present an exhaustive review of relevant literature, so our review focuses on ideas within occupational science and delimits the focus to a few topics. Second, we introduce the theoretical framework used in this paper, highlighting how a critical occupational perspective illuminates the situated nature of work conditions within specific contexts. Third, we present three narrative illustrations that are integrated with theory to highlight tensions between politically informed structures that shape social policies on a programme level as well as individual experiences of work, unemployment, and return to work that users and providers of these programmes communicate. Finally, we discuss what can be gained from complex, dynamic, and situated conceptualisations of people's diverse relations to work, describe the limitations of this paper and implications for further studies, and conclude by considering the wider implications of the examples presented.

Historical Conceptualisations of Work, Return-to-Work, and Unemployment

Before occupational science was established, Harvey-Krefting (1985) conducted a historical review of how the profession of occupational therapy conceptualised work at the turn of the 1900s, concluding that at that time, "work was not defined in terms of eventual employment, but as fulfilment of present needs" (p. 302). Amid the birth of new theories and models within occupational therapy, this view of work

—which defined it as a 'good' occupation that applied people's capacities—encompassed a range of occupations including leisure. However, the drive toward professionalisation, combined with the need to rehabilitate soldiers following war, pushed occupational therapy to adopt a narrower view of work in the mid-1900s that centered on employment. Harvey-Krefting speculated that occupational therapy would again need to reconceptualise work amid economic shifts in the 1980s that were expected to alienate and disconnect people from the labour force. Harvey-Krefting argued that occupational therapists would need to "address the client's definition of work" (p. 306) and "shift the emphasis of productivity away from work to other areas of human occupation" (p. 307) as a result of economic transitions.

Less than a decade later in the first volume of *Occupational Science: Australia* (later the *Journal of Occupational Science*), Jones (1993) continued the discussion that Harvey-Krefting (1985) initiated, expressing the need for new conceptualisations of work vis-à-vis economic and labour transitions. Jones' initial descriptions of work and unemployment used paid employment as a reference point, but in a subsequent article, Jones (1998) wrote about "breaking down the distinction between work (usually 'paid employment' involving a master-servant relationship) and activity (including self-directed tasks, such as repair and maintenance, often involving significant physical and mental effort)" (p. 127). Jones presented this call for reconceptualisation as a way to prevent dystopias of unemployment, wherein people filled their time with substance use and other non-sanctioned occupations (Kiepek et al., 2019). Jones (1998) argued for the need to "redefine employment or occupation to include those who work without pay, mostly at home" (p. 129); however, instead of expanding his conceptualisation of work to include leisure or unpaid work, he ultimately called for a broader societal revaluation of time use and the many occupations that might constitute a person's daily repertoire.

Soon after Jones (1993), Toulmin (1995) opened a dialogue connecting occupational understandings of employment and unemployment to broader concerns for human welfare. Like Harvey-Krefting (1985), Toulmin offered

a historical overview of the term 'job', noting that its equivalence to paid employment emerged relatively recently in human history as an effect of industrialisation. Given the economic transitions brought on by automation, Toulmin foresaw "a return to a concept of occupation, not employment—personal engagement, not a contract for labour—as the central element in any philosophical account of Work" (p. 51). Primeau (1996) touched on many of the same ideas while exploring the historical and social juxtaposition of work and leisure, suggesting the need for broader experience-based (rather than categorical) conceptualisations because "work and leisure occupations may not always be experienced as separate and dichotomous phenomena within daily life" (p. 575). Speaking to larger concerns about the adequacy of existing conceptions, Hammell (2009) argued that the continued juxtaposition of work and leisure in occupation-focused theories and research perpetuates a scholarly myopia that excludes the experiences of most people across the world.

To better capture the range of occupations that people experience as work, some occupational scientists have framed work as inclusive of informal economy engagements (Dickie, 1996) that use money as a medium of exchange but stand outside traditional employer-employee structures (Ferman, 1990). Dickie (2003) defined work as "any activity that supports the survival of oneself and one's family" (p. 251), and this broad definition encapsulates a wider range of occupations than traditional paid employment, including unpaid occupations such as domestic or household work (Cox, 1997; Primeau, 2000) and caregiving (Waring, 2017). This broad understanding of work is evident in many fields, as noted by Scanlan and Beltran (2007). Considering these diverse conceptual approaches, occupation-centered measures such as the Modified Occupational Questionnaire (Scanlan & Bundy, 2011) have come to reflect a broad conception of work by providing spaces to record occupations with "worklikeness" (p. e12). Yet, these attempts to comprehensively account for work have not always been endorsed. For example, Jonsson (2008) claimed that such expansions complicate efforts to differentiate work from other occupations, leading to both conceptual and measurement challenges.

Conceptualisations of return-to-work and unemployment have received less attention in occupational science and occupational therapy literature than the topic of work. Literature concerning return-to-work has primarily focused on a poor fit between employee abilities and the demands of work (Jakobsen, 2004, 2009; Shaw et al., 2002; Shaw & Polatajko, 2002), difficulties adapting to a (new) worker role (Soeker, 2011), expectations and conditions for return to work (Bergmark et al., 2011; Holmlund, Guidetti et al., 2018; Holmlund, Hultling, & Asaba, 2018), struggles adapting to (new) routines and travel to maintain employment (Crooks et al., 2009; Soeker, 2011), and intervention studies (Öst-Nilsson et al., 2017, 2019). Studies concerned with unemployment have largely focused on its negative consequences for people's sense of identity, well-being, and belonging (Crooks et al., 2009; Jakobsen, 2004; Stone, 2003) and the ways in which it presents a significant disruption to opportunities for achieving health through occupation (Wright Vos et al., 2019).

Very little attention has been paid to the definition of unemployment, though it appears that most occupation-focused scholarship equates unemployment to the lack of paid employment (O'Halloran et al., 2018). Both return-to-work and unemployment have primarily been elucidated from an individualistic standpoint, but scholars are increasingly attending to the social expectations and structural conditions that hinder or prohibit people's access to work (Aldrich & Laliberte Rudman, 2016; Berr et al., 2019; Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Holmlund, Hultling, & Asaba, 2018; Jakobsen, 2009; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016, 2017; Lintner & Elsen, 2018), in line with the broader uptake of critical perspectives in occupation-focused scholarship (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016).

Consistent with contemporary trends in occupational science scholarship, we define work as more than paid employment, as an occupation encompassing a broad range of day-to-day activities, and as something situated in a socio-political landscape of conditions that afford more or fewer possibilities for participation (Blank et al., 2015; O'Halloran et al., 2018; Shaw & Laliberte Rudman, 2009; Veiga Seijo et al., 2017). Likewise, our definitions of

return to work and unemployment aim to be similarly inclusive, emphasising that they are dynamic processes that include but are not restricted to only goals related to participation in the formal labour market.

Critical Perspectives on Work, Unemployment, and Return-to-Work

The integration of a critical lens in occupational science has expanded the discipline's foci of study by illustrating how occupation is embedded within contemporary policy frameworks and broader social forces (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016). A critical occupational science perspective allows a shift from focusing on individual work capacities or performance, to foregrounding work conditions and opportunities as part of the continuous reshaping of institutional policy; this makes visible the potential perpetuation of inequities, precarity, and exclusion from occupational engagement (Laliberte Rudman, 2013; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016). By foregrounding conditions and opportunities, this critical approach illuminates the 'individualisation' of work occupations (Laliberte Rudman, 2013) associated with the global spread of neoliberalism, through which governments have increasingly framed social issues such as unemployment and return-to-work as individual matters within macro structures, policies, and practices (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019; Gerlach et al., 2018). This broader critical understanding helps uncover how social forces shape possibilities in accessing and engaging in work.

In this paper, we draw on a critical occupational science perspective (Laliberte Rudman, 2013) to foreground the taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie how work is framed within research, as well as how conceptions of work are embedded within and enacted through specific socio-political factors and policies. We apply that perspective to illuminate issues of inequity and problematise how contexts and current understandings of work facilitate or hinder people's work-related experiences in European and North American contexts. We integrate concepts of occupational possibilities and occupational potential (Asaba & Wicks, 2010; Laliberte Rudman, 2005, 2010) to examine

how return-to-work and work integration programmes too narrowly promote an ideal that neglects other important factors that are imperative for socially and personally meaningful work.

Methodology and Methods

In this paper, we draw on empirical examples from two studies conducted in Sweden and one in North America to illustrate tensions related to work-related transitions in those contexts. We identified the illustrations through secondary data analysis (SDA), which involves analysing data from previously completed studies to explore new questions or using different analytic strategies that were not a part of the primary analysis, in this case focusing on data about work (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). Specifically, we examined data from our primary studies to identify potential inequities and precarities emerging from social policies and work-related services and practices, as well as tensions between the framing of work that these social policies and services promoted and people's capacities or interests. The first author had direct access to data from two studies and the second author from a third study. In discussion with each of the other authors involved in the different studies, the first author chose examples that appeared to illustrate the identified points of exploration. Then the first and last author conducted a first analysis, exploring how these examples portrayed tensions emerging across socio-economic and political contexts with the goal of presenting wide-ranging considerations. The second author followed the same process in relation to the third study. Once the illustrations were identified and given an initial framing using a critical occupational science perspective, the analysis was shared with all co-authors, who further discussed and developed each of the illustrations. The presentation of illustrations below deliberately focuses on the tension across illustrations rather than each study's methods, as methodological analyses and primary findings for these projects are reported elsewhere (Gabrielsson et al., in manuscript; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016; Páls-dóttir et al., 2018).

The primary studies received ethical approval by each study's National/Institutional Review

Board. No further ethics approval was sought for this analysis because all data were previously collected and de-identified, authors only had access to their own original data sets, the only information shared across the team were the de-identified illustrations, and no risks were foreseeable as a result of this work. This is in keeping with potential risks associated with SDA raised in the literature (e.g., Ruggiano & Perry, 2019; Tripathy, 2013), and also respects the balance between new data and burden of time in contributing to data generation.

Description of primary studies

The first example comes from a project conducted in Sweden together with adults living with spina bifida (Gabrielsson et al., in manuscript). In this project, a narrative approach (Josephsson et al., 2006) and photovoice (Asaba et al., 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997) were conducted to facilitate the sharing of experiences through stories and further discussion of those experiences and stories in a photovoice group. Although the focus of the project was initially on everyday life, work became an important and central part of the dialogue generated in the group. The data were generated together with a group of 5 adults with spina bifida who participated in a photovoice group over an 8-week period. Each week the group met once for 2 hours per session to discuss a theme that the group decided on the week prior. During each session, members of the group showed pictures that they had taken. Each person discussed what he/she had photographed, what was happening (both actually and symbolically), and how the picture related to everyday life and why this was important. Moreover, where problems (i.e., barriers to accessibility or social stigma) were identified, a discussion also followed about potential ways to address or solve the identified problems.

The second example comes from a project aiming to study how a nature-based vocational rehabilitation programme can be used to support newly arrived immigrants' integration to society and the workforce (Pálsdóttir et al., 2018). The study took place in a rehabilitation garden in southern Sweden and included 29 adults. All participants in the project had been referred from the Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES) to participate in the programme, which lasted 12 weeks with 4-hour sessions 3 times per week. The project was situated as part of the SPES 'Establishment Programme', which is intended to facilitate entrance into the labour market for newly arrived immigrants. It consisted of myriad nature-based and related occupations such as gardening and learning new farming techniques. The aim was also to provide the SPES with a work ability assessment based on participants' performance for further planning of activities that can lead to employment. Individual narrative interviews were conducted. Data used in this paper are drawn from interviews conducted with seven participants. The interviews focused on experiences of the nature-based intervention on participants' everyday occupations and health. Participants were interviewed twice, all interviews were transcribed and analysed, and the findings are reported in another paper (Ekstam et al., in manuscript).

The third example derives from an ethnographic study that used multiple methods to explore boundaries and possibilities in people's negotiation of long-term unemployment in North America (Aldrich et al., in press; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016). The 56 study participants lived in the United States and Canada and included organisational executives and managers who oversaw employment support programmes, front-line employment support service providers, and people who self-identified as being unemployed long-term. Data utilised for this illustration were generated in the United States through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with people who oversaw and provided front-line employment support services, as well as an interview with one person experiencing long-term unemployment.

It is worth noting that the research examples varied in terms of participant groups and living situations, although the framing of work related to social policy and return-to-work programmes is similar. All data presented in these illustrations utilise pseudonyms. The Swedish quotations were translated independently by two persons with language competencies in Swedish and English and compared for differences. In cases where translations differed, quotations

were reviewed, and the principle of meaning was prioritised over word-by-word accuracy.

Narrative Illustrations

We provide a brief overview of each study's context in relation to employment and work-entry policies and support programmes before describing tensions found between structurally perpetuated systems and individual work-related experiences. Tensions such as *what kind of work are people transitioning into?*, *what kind of work transition choices are being offered?*, and *the individualisation of employment service provision* are presented as exemplars of contradictory experiences of work connected to being active and a 'good' citizen while generating concurrent feelings of insecurity and a position outside the realms of social life and work.

The Swedish context

The SPES supports integration into the labour market through different initiatives such as the Job Guarantee Programme for Young People, Job and Development Guarantee Programme, and Establishment Programme. Programmes through SPES are regulated by Swedish law and intended to support diverse groups, such as people with disability and immigrants, by offering work-related activities while individuals are actively pursuing work. For persons with a disability such as spina bifida, different types of work experience placements that offer subsidies for the employer are used. Sometimes these entail training onsite and other times an employment subsidy. The employer takes on responsibility for providing relevant and sufficient support for the employee to transition into a permanent position, a sort of mentoring in some cases.

The aim of the Establishment Programme is to facilitate the settlement of certain recently arrived migrants into the labour market and society, offering activities such as language training and support in order to more quickly become self-sufficient through employment (Swedish Public Employment Service, 2020). The programme targets newcomers aged 20-64 years who have obtained a residence permit as a refugee or asylum seeker. According to the Establishment Programme, all recently arrived refugees should contact their local SPES in order to initiate a plan and benefits with a coach. This programme emerged after 2010 when the responsibility for the settlement of newly arrived refugees moved from the municipalities to the central government (SPES in this case), following findings that the integration process was generally too slow and fragmented across municipalities in comparison with other Nordic countries in which the central government exercised more control over the integration programmes.

The United States context

In the United States, employment support programmes receive funding from federal, state, and non-profit sources but are housed in and administered by a variety of local and regional organisations, including but not limited to those that are part of the National Employment Service and One-Stop Career Centres (McKenna et al., 2012). Funding for employment support programmes—including but not restricted to those for unemployment insurance recipients, dislocated workers, and young workers—increased dramatically in the United States during and following the Great Recession (Wandner, 2013) but has declined overall (Wandner, 2015) in the era of neoliberal austerity measures.

In the United States context, most employment service organisations assess their outcomes in 90-day cycles: that is, clients need to secure work or be enrolled in education or training within 90 days (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2017). During that 90-day period, clients must adhere to expectations that promote re-employment, including job seeking, upskilling, or educational activities, consistent with an individualising neoliberal activation paradigm (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). However, meeting these expectations does not guarantee successful employment and many participants in employment support programmes can do 'all the right things' by adhering to programme requirements and yet remain 'stuck' in unemployment, calling into question the utility of programmes that take a homogenising approach to diverse and complex unemployment experiences (Aldrich & Laliberte

Rudman, 2016; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016).

1. "No one cares that you should have something meaningful to do": What kind of work are people transitioning into?

People who experience unemployment are positioned as subjects who should choose and want to be involved in work-preparation and work-seeking programmes as 'good' and responsible citizens, no matter their individual needs for support. Programmes influenced by neoliberal rationality, such as new public management (NPM), leave very little room for modification of the identified activities to fit specific individual needs or situations (Brodkin, 2011). This is particularly important when people need to be integrated or return to work due to disability, since tensions between accomplishing the programme goals (e.g., increasing employment rates) and maintaining people's everyday needs (i.e., often intricately integrated with working life, identities, health management) can emerge.

For example, Leo, who had spina bifida, worked at a Swedish public office in a municipality and his work consisted of administrative office tasks. Despite framing himself as an active job seeker who followed the programme directives, Leo found himself unable to find meaning in his work or to feel part of the team. Leo shared, "*Also, the supervisors say, you have to be here a certain time as well, and then it seems like no one really cares that you should have something to do, something meaningful to spend your time.*" Leo continued to describe his day at work as follows: "*It looks very much like this at work, that several go to meetings, sometimes it takes an hour, sometimes it takes half an hour, sometimes it takes several hours. Many [others with disabilities at the same workplace] who work there often stay for several hours and have nothing to do.*" His photo from the photovoice study, and the discussion from which this quote is taken, are visually represented by a closed-door at the workplace. From the perspective of job attainment promoted by neoliberal activation and NPM approaches, Leo had 'successfully' been placed in a job, despite the lack of consideration for his interests and capacities. The implicated perspective of his employer seemed to convey a strong framing of work as something that people like Leo should be 'thankful for' or 'lucky' to be offered, even if the work experience might be meaningless. Thus, the separation of meaning from work in Leo's experience led to him feeling like he was facing a closed door in his return to work process.

This first illustration shows how the underlying aims of return to work and employment support programmes can be benevolent, in that programmes are intended to ease a person into work as well as provide space for mentoring and reflection. However, when an employer receives a subsidy for participating in the programme and the person with a disability becomes a token of diversity without any real opportunity for mentoring or capacity building, the original good intentions are nullified and instead a sense of meaninglessness begins to imbue the narrative. Participants in mainstream programmes such as the Establishment Programme must accept the type and conditions of employment that are offered. Thus, participants experience conflicting messages that work will give them 'freedom' through self-sufficiency but that they must operate within the limited conditions offered by employers. This is problematic since most of the employers offering work placements receive subsidies for supporting the 'integration' or return to work of individuals participating in the programme. Leo reflected,

> So that ... I think like, they have, after all, I am employed on something like this contribution and stuff, so it does not cost. They get the contribution to have me there as an OSA [public sheltered work] employee, or whatever it´s called, so they do not earn, or they do not lose much on having me here.

2. "They didn't ask us if we wanted to or not, but they said we should take part in this activity": What kind of return-to-work and choices are being offered?

In the case of newly arrived immigrants, SPES has actively contributed to finding new methods to support entering work, given that regular

support programmes can be insufficient for a substantial number of people in this group. One of the methods explored includes a nature-based vocational rehabilitation project, which was offered in light of the positive effects that nature-based and horticulture programmes can have on health promotion for newly arrived immigrants (Hartwig & Mason, 2016). Despite good intentions, the framing of work here again complies with neoliberal activation approaches that aim to keep people activated and 'productive', no matter what people need or want to do with their time. As David indicated, "*the Employment Service sent a mail saying that we should come here. They didn't ask us if we wanted to or not, but they said we should take part in this activity and I went there.*" In this case, SPES positioned the nature-based vocational project as an 'opportunity' to improve individuals' social inclusion and assess their work abilities through activities that did not directly respond to people's occupational preferences and needs. As such, this standardised/homogenised 'solution' risks increasing stress and job insecurity of those involved since it fails to respond to the complexity of their daily life as newcomers, such as the challenges of keeping contact with people back home, securing housing, acquiring language skills, and suffering potential discrimination, among others. Neglecting the needs of vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, who may experience stigma and discrimination that preclude them from accessing employment compared with their native-born unemployed peers (OECD, 2014), only reinforces a social disadvantage.

For some participants gardening was something that had no connection to future work and little connection to personally meaningful occupations, even though they valued being able to participate in the programme and enjoyed doing something together with the group. Regarding this point, Jazmin explained, "*I like nature, but I am not interested in gardening. I only want information. I want knowledge about flowers here but to work with gardening, that is nothing of interest*". In this case, people experiencing unemployment were engaging in a 'worklikeness' programme that did not necessarily respond to occupational preferences that

continued to exist despite their situation (i.e., newly arriving in the country). The rehabilitation garden part of the programme was intended to improve potential for future employment and not actual employment per se; this 'one-size-fits-all' approach risked building a programme that does not seem to explicitly connect to future work.

3. "We meet folks where they are" but "is our service client-centred?": Tensions surrounding the individualisation of employment service provision

In the context of neoliberalism, employment support services are "designed and implemented to convey the message that welfare status is to be avoided and that work, however poorly rewarded, is preferable to public assistance" (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. 11). The actions of front-line employment service providers, such as job counsellors, are shaped by this discourse: as street-level bureaucrats, front-line service providers utilise discretion to enact discursively shaped ideals and policy guidelines when providing support to clients (Lipsky, 1980/2010). These front-line workers' everyday decisions "can perpetuate, resist, or transform aspects of the systems in which they and their clients are embedded" (Aldrich & Laliberte Rudman, 2020, p. 139). Through their work, employment service providers negotiate the tension of trying to do what they believe is best for the client in the context of system-level constraints on the process, outcomes, and evaluation of their work; very often, this negotiation exposes them to risks of sanction or job loss if their work is not deemed to meet organisational performance metrics (Aldrich & Laliberte Rudman, 2020; Fanelli et al., 2017).

In the United States, the cultural emphasis on individualism is evident not only in the downloading of responsibility onto unemployed people but also in the ways that employment support services are named and framed (Gerlach et al., 2018). In the third study described above, most front-line service providers emphasised the importance of tailoring their services to clients' individual needs. For example, Katie, a programme manager in the United States said, "*We meet folks where they are … we assess*

them and then we help them plan out how they want to get where they want to go." Tom, a front-line service provider in an organisation that primarily served people with disabilities, echoed Katie's sentiment, stating, "*We have to, I think, go the extra mile, and be compassionate and patient, and deal with [clients] on their individual level depending on what they need and try to individualise it to the employer and make that connection. That's a challenge.*" However, Taylor, a front-line service provider at an organisation that primarily served immigrants, challenged the notion that employment services were individualised to meet clients' needs:

> *Most of the time, technically, it is not the client-centred service at all because, most of the time, it is agency-oriented service … If the client is not employable within 90 days, then what happens? … So now, what I do is, when the client comes looking for a job, I try to understand what kind of job he is looking [for], what kind of dream he has. There is no problem in keeping up a dream. But is that feasible is a very big question. So, in the process, when I'm talking to the client, I'm also constantly thinking how can I derail this client somehow from his dream goal to the realistic view and to the realistic approach, and can I deliver him to that job?*

John, a front-line service provider at yet another organisation, reflected on how he navigated the tension between providing individualised services and heeding the mandates of his organisation, stating, "*I think I put myself more in that client's place than I do what my company is thinking about things.*" Reflecting on Taylor's comments about whether or not service agencies were truly client-centred, John acknowledged that:

> *… the leadership has to meet their numbers and still – I think they can do both. I think they can still do both with their compassion, with their just trying to balance both of the agency's goals and the client's goals. It would have to start with that leadership of that agency and what kind of mindset they are.*

These tensions on the service provision side created frustration for some programme participants, such as Maria, a former engineering manager. She described her experience with employment support services as:

> *Very depressing – and [the state-run employment services] have their own system. They make you jump through … these stupid little things that you need to do. The writing test and basic math test, which is so degrading because, come on, you already see my resume. I have my master [sic] degree. I should not be doing this. And it takes hours and hours over there at the office. Then they say, 'Oh, by the way, we have this thing online. You should take all these tests.' And it takes hours and hours and hours. And I think I'm being compliant, because, okay, well, that's the government. They need it to place me in – and give me the unemployment money. So, I'm sitting with my laptop for days, filling out all these things that they ask for, and it's adding more stress.*

Maria detailed having to participate in a prescribed return-to-work process to be eligible for employment services and benefits. The homogenising aspect of this process ignored salient elements of Maria's background and challenged the kind of individualised, client-centred services that many providers said they aimed to provide.

Discussion: Alienation by "One-size-fits-none"

The illustrations provided here are from different contexts and have been co-constructed using different methods. However, all illustrations problematise the application of a one-size-fits-all approach that is common within the broader neoliberal individualising of return to work and unemployment. Moreover, although we presented the illustrations under separate headings, each illustration has something to say about all three questions that framed our analysis: *What kind of work are people transitioning into? What kind of work transition choices are being offered?*, and *What kind of*

individualisation of employment service provisions are made? These illustrations point to the impacts that narrow definitions of work, both implicit and explicit, had on service provision processes that aimed to support work entry or return to work.

It is relevant here to illuminate how the type of programmes offered to participants in these studies reflect a particular 'ideal' solution as informed by neoliberal activation and NPM approaches (Brodkin, 2011). For instance, NPM strategies promote 'worklike' programmes as an ideal solution to being out of work, regardless of the concrete potential of those programmes to provide opportunities that match people's preferences, capacities, or motivations. As such, strategies aligned with NPM can be seen as coercing compliance with mainstream/homogenous approaches that tend to neglect individuals' needs and complex situations. Successful management of unemployment and return-to-work, including work entry, is often framed in terms of 'counting' the number of people (re)employed without attention to the meaningfulness, relevance, or sustainability of employment. If the focus of employment support systems and structures remains solely on quantitatively measuring work placements, there will be tensions between work-related policies, return-to-work programmes, and the expectations of those seeking to secure employment.

Likewise, although there are pragmatic strengths in structural policies that address the needs of a large number of people in a given community, these illustrations show that there are risks to this approach if broad policies are not also combined with customised structural options that meet the needs of individual people. Within NPM, people who are unemployed or want to return to work are seen as responsible for accepting any work, regardless of its relation to their interests. This subjectivity associated with being a 'good' citizen or employment service participant subjugates people's needs in order to follow what is expected, available, and promoted as ideal/acceptable to support service programmes and employers. This paper provides illustrations of how programmes can be promoted as 'solutions' and at the same time fail to meet the needs or promote the choice

and agency of those who should benefit from the programmes; consequently, this tension results in experiences of meaninglessness, exclusion, and marginalisation for the very people that programmes and policies aim to serve. This tension can perpetuate and increase unemployed people's risk of invisibility and broader disregard for their capacities in social policies.

Questioning the 'one-size-fits-all' discourse logic of NPM can raise certain tensions for those involved in supporting work and return-to-work programmes. It can be particularly provoking for some to accept sentiments and experiences of meaningless work entry processes associated with the type of work that is being offered. Failing to critically reflect on the type of framings of work and return-to-work or work entry processes that governments take up risks reinforcing structures that obscure the complexity of occupational needs and meanings that work can bring to individuals and their communities (Aldrich et al., in press; Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2019; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016).

NPM can be seen as a governmental push for ways of being and doing that limit occupational possibilities (Laliberte Rudman, 2010), and in doing so also impact on occupational potential (Asaba & Wicks, 2010). The occupational potential that is at stake for people seeking socially and personally meaningful work constitutes a combination of likelihood or conditions, available possibilities, abilities on which to build, and a sense of power to act or to not act for change (Asaba & Wicks, 2010). The culmination of all these components in actualising personally and socially meaningful work is not a linear process and is difficult to calculate in a one-size-fits-all model. In these examples, despite on-the-ground service providers with good intentions, a real sense of power to act or not to act among recent migrants or persons with disability can be questioned. Moreover, tensions between the desire to be client-centered and the influence of homogenising system-level constraints showed that front-line service providers did not always perceive themselves as having the power to work in ways that supported clients' specific potentialities. Occupational possibilities, as well as potential and potentiality as conceptual tools, can help unpack an inherent problem with social

structures that neglect the multimodal reasoning inherently needed in supporting processes of transitioning into or return to work as well as conditions of being out of work.

Limitations and Implications for Further Studies

There are potential limitations to our approach that need to be highlighted as well as implications for future research. Because data for these illustrations were excerpted from several original studies, important details may have been lost in the process. Although this could compromise full understanding of the social, cultural, and political context in which the data were collected, the authors of this paper led or had an active role in the original studies, and have been cautious to accurately contextualise material in the analyses. Furthermore, the authors' involvement in studies may have biased their choice of illustrations. However, illustration choices were made based on a thorough understanding of the data given the authors' familiarity with the respective studies, and such positionality can be a strength for achieving in-depth analysis and exploring data from different vantage points and with different conceptual tools. Moreover, utilising this data via SDA aimed to reduce extra time and potential economic burden that might have existed if the authors had asked participants to engage in further data generation (Heaton, 2004).

Future research can utilise qualitative meta-analyses to further study how definitions of work impact processes that are designed to help people enter or re-enter work and 'work-like' roles. Future studies can also investigate how work-related interventions that target diverse groups of people can integrate values, views, and reflectiveness about work that have culminated from a nexus of multiple stakeholder experiences and contexts.

Final Remarks

A critical occupational perspective has increasingly allowed occupational scientists to attend to the structural conditions and social expectations that shape people's possibilities and potential to return to or attain work. For example, Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich (2016, 2017) have described how long-term unemployment and job seeking, as framed within neoliberal activation approaches that have reconfigured services and policy, produce 'stuckness' for people seeking work. Building on this scholarship, this paper offers empirical examples of how solutions to this 'stuckness' can foster work conditions experienced as insufficiently meaningful and engagement in work-related activities that do not fit people's interests or occupational preferences. By bringing attention to the implicit ways in which a narrow view of work informs conceptions of success in work-related programmes, this paper demonstrates that placement in paid work or 'worklike' activities can fail to support occupational potential and sustainable employment. This paper also contributes to discussions that attempt to question the contemporary framing of work within neoliberal and NPM discourses by providing examples of the tensions that emerge between the goals of the described programmes and individual interests, capacities, and potential.

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