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"I'm Not Worthless, I Do Help Society": Exploring the Lived Experience of Community Placement in Activation Schemes

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Abstract

Activation schemes are widely criticised, with the negative experiences of 'the activated' featuring prominently in the literature. This article presents the findings of a constructivist grounded theory study concerning the lived experience of long-term unemployment, welfare recipiency and community placement in activation schemes in Ireland, with a focus on the positive effects that participating in such schemes had on participants' subjective well-being. For the participants in this research, community placement signified change, respite, and recovery that improved their subjective well-being by creating an experience that counteracted the draining experience of long-term unemployment and welfare recipiency. This study brings new elements to the discussion on the role of activation in promoting/diminishing the subjective well-being of the long-term unemployed.

Keywords: Activation; Ireland; unemployment; well-being; welfare

Introduction

The literature on unemployment has focused on the harmful effects of unemployment on well-being and the promotion of work as an individually and socially beneficial solution to these effects (Cole, 2007; Paul and Moser, 2009; Sage, 2013, 2015, 2019; Frayne, 2019). Thus, underpinned by the centrality of paid work, social constructions of the unemployed centre around the stigmatised experience of welfare recipiency and its deleterious effects on subjective well-being (Patrick, 2012, 2016, 2017; Baumberg, 2016; Sage, 2018; Peterie *et al.*, 2019; Boland *et al.*, 2022). Activation policies and welfare conditionality concerned with promptly moving the unemployed from welfare to work have developed strategies to keep the unemployed engaged in activities to enhance their employability and pave their way back to work. Relatedly, literature on the lived experience of conditional welfare has described it as problematic, with research depicting activation requirements that undermine welfare recipients' well-being and produce little or no improvement in their employment status and living conditions (Patrick, 2014, 2017; Fletcher and Wright, 2018; Dwyer, 2019).

This article presents findings from a constructivist grounded theory study that explored the lived experience of activation of sixteen men and fourteen women who had been long-term unemployed and, at the time of the research, were participating in activation (community employment) schemes in Ireland. While the findings concerning the research participants' experience of unemployment and welfare recipiency align with the extant literature in showing

these as experiences of loss and deterioration of well-being, the findings also provided significant insight into the positive effect that community placement schemes had on participants' subjective well-being. This article discusses the participants' subjective experience of the activation measure (placement in a not-for-profit community organisation) as a counterpoint to the eroding experiences of long-term unemployment.

Context

Addressing the criticism about welfare dependency and the calls for personal responsibility and self-reliance, activation welfare reforms have combined 'carrots and sticks' to incentivise and compel the unemployed to move from welfare to work (Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Dingeldey, 2007; Paz-Fuchs, 2008, 2011; Lødemel and Moreira, 2014). As the literature has discussed, the notion of 'activation' rests on the understanding of unemployment as mainly an individual problem caused by individual shortcomings – rather than social forces – that justifies strategies to improve personal deficits (e.g. employability, motivation, work ethic) and instil self-reliance through paid work (Dean, 1995; Mead, 1997; Peck and Theodore, 2000; Serrano Pascual, 2004; Paz-Fuchs, 2011). Accordingly, activation strategies rely on welfare conditionality to stir behavioural change and enhance work readiness, making welfare benefits conditional on the engagement of welfare recipients in job-search, training, and work-related activities (Friedli and Stearn, 2015; Dwyer, 2019). The literature has critiqued this rationale that implies the unemployed are responsible for their situation and reflects a morally charged construction of the weak agency of the welfare recipient that justifies the enforcement of conditionality and work requirements (Dean, 1995; Crespo Suarez and Serrano Pascual, 2007; Wright, 2012, 2016; Fletcher, 2015). Research on the lived experience of these measures has critically signalled the impacts of conditionality on the well-being and living conditions of welfare recipients (Boland and Griffin, 2015a; Patrick, 2016, 2017; WelCond, 2018; Finn, 2021; Whelan, 2022). These measures are depicted as imposing standard rules and requirements on welfare recipients as a homogeneous category, ignoring specific needs and disadvantages (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017; Dwyer et al., 2020).

In addition to improving employability, activation policies seek to address the negative consequences of unemployment on health and subjective well-being that further erode the chances of re-entering the labour market (Strandh, 2001; Paul and Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012; Strandh et al., 2014; Sage, 2018). Work-like schemes offer a type of strategy that targets these concerns. Informed by the deprivation model that identifies paid work providing psychosocial functions for the benefit of individuals and society (Jahoda, 1982; Cole, 2007), work-like schemes seek to reverse the cumulative impact of unemployment by offering a setting that mirrors paid work and where the long-term welfare recipient reconnects with some of its 'functions', such as purposeful doing, social interactions, and routine (Sage, 2019). Accordingly, work-like schemes construe participation in a work-like environment as a process that lessens the negative effects of unemployment and enhances work readiness (Sage, 2013, 2015, 2018; Carter and Whitworth, 2017).

Workfare volunteerism, as coined by Kampen et al. (2013), refers to schemes that ask unemployed welfare recipients to engage in work-like activities in voluntary organisations as a condition for receiving benefits (Kampen et al., 2013; Kampen, 2020). The literature has discussed these schemes being premised upon reciprocity and a normative *quid pro quo* rationale that replaces the passivity of welfare benefits with the 'doing something in return' motto that requires welfare recipients to contribute to society, thereby enacting the notion of duty to work as a prerequisite to receive rights (Warburton and Smith, 2003; Newman and Tokens, 2011; Veldboer et al., 2015; Paz-Fuchs and Eleveld, 2016; Kampen, 2020; Paz-Fuchs, 2020). Similar schemes are found under the name of 'something-for-something' schemes (Veldboer et al., 2015), 'mandatory reciprocity', or 'reciprocity policies' (van der Veen et al., 2012). From a liberal welfare state

perspective, reciprocity as mutual obligation embodies the rationale that upholds self-reliance and justifies welfare recipients' work as fair civic duty, well exemplified in the pioneering Australian Work-for-the-Dole scheme (Warburton and Smith, 2003; Kampen, 2020). Paz-Fuchs and Eleveld (2016) identified the notions of reciprocity across European welfare-to-work policies particularly in mandatory work programmes and workfare volunteering schemes stipulating the community as the main beneficiary of such reciprocity performed by welfare recipients. This contractual view of reciprocity has been criticised, in reference to conditionality, for contravening the nature of reciprocity, with Parsell and Clarke (2020) arguing that social bonds and active citizenship are based on trust and cannot be forced. From the perspective of policymakers and the public, the notion of 'doing something in return' has proved appealing and the reception of these schemes has been favourable (Veldboer *et al.*, 2015; Kampen, 2020).

Research into the lived experience of workfare volunteerism has reported improved subjective well-being and 'soft gains', that is, relational and affective dimensions, as the most relevant for participants. Studies have reported lessening the effects of unemployment on well-being and employability by providing participants with opportunities for social interaction, access to self-respect, feeling appreciated, and displaying skills (Kampen *et al.*, 2013; Slootjes and Kampen, 2017; De Waele and Hustinx, 2019; Kampen and Tonkens, 2019; Penny and Finnegan, 2019; Kampen, 2020). Nevertheless, research has shown that participants feel misrecognised for doing unpaid work (Kampen *et al.*, 2019) while their regained self-respect can be short-lived and threatened by the limits of their obligatory tasks (Kampen *et al.*, 2013). Progression into employment from these schemes tends to be weak. Studies reveal that participants seldom find employment at the end, and employers do not recognise the experience and skills gained through schemes (Kampen *et al.*, 2013; Slootjes and Kampen, 2017; Allan, 2019).

This available evidence suggests that these schemes enable a degree of improved subjective well-being, but little 'tangible' gain in employability. Work-like schemes have been criticised as niches of invisible and unpaid labour that make long-term unemployed less likely to exit welfare recipiency, and, at their worst, can be exploitative and worsen disadvantages (Peck, 2001; Krinsky, 2008; Grover, 2009). Relatedly, scholars have questioned the type of jobs created in the intersection with activation policies and the low-paid jobs awaiting people at the other end of these policies (Murphy, 2017; Collins and Murphy, 2021; McGann, 2021).

Research has provided insights into the detrimental impact of conditional activation on people's sense of agency and subjectivity. Qualitative evidence has demonstrated how welfare conditionality deteriorates the self-image of individuals who are affected by the 'spoiled identity' of the welfare recipient deprived of the status, identity, and recognition that come from contributing through paid work (Wright, 2012; Patrick, 2014, 2016; Dwyer, 2019; Gaffney and Millar, 2020; Peterie *et al.,* 2019). In the case of Ireland, research has highlighted the stigmatising effect of conditional measures, arguing that stigma has become intrinsic to welfare activation (Boland *et al.*, 2022; Bolton *et al.*, 2022). Correspondingly, while the unemployed are stigmatised, paid work provides the status of the active citizen contributing to society (Whelan, 2021). Hence, the elements of 'work likeness' and contributing to the community constitute components of these schemes that could potentially counteract the negative effects of welfare recipiency and unemployment.

Activation in Ireland

In Ireland, welfare reforms materialised in the 2011 *Pathways to Work* labour market activation strategy (Department of Social Protection, 2012, 2016). Irish activation has been placed within the workfarist and work-first approach that prioritises the rapid transit from welfare to paid employment through conditionality and exerting pressure upon welfare recipients through obligations, sanctions, and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes (Boland and Griffin, 2015a, 2015b; Murphy, 2016; Whelan, 2021, 2022). This approach is also exemplified in the merging of

employment and income supports and the strict monitoring of compulsory job search programmes delivered by private contractors (Gaffney and Millar, 2020; Finn, 2021; McGann and Murphy, 2021; Murphy and McGann, 2022). Nonetheless, a human capital/employability approach focused on training and reskilling opportunities coexists with this model, which can be – to some extent – observed in the content of the community placement schemes.

The community placement schemes operating in Ireland, the setting for this research, can be regarded as a form of workfare volunteering that requires welfare recipients (long-term unemployed) to engage in work-related activities for nineteen point five hours per week in host community not-for-profit organisations in exchange for welfare payment. Typical placement positions are groundskeeping (maintenance and gardening), childcare and care of older people, cleaning, reception and administration tasks, and charity shop work. These community placement schemes are better understood in the context underlying their emergence and the Irish path to welfare reforms.

Before the Great Recession, the Irish welfare system was characterised as an 'outlier' with soft conditionality and distant from the work-first approach (Martin, 2014). In 1994, the first community placement scheme (the CE scheme) was established to deal with high unemployment, offering the long-term unemployed part-time and temporary work experience in the voluntary sector (Boyle, 2005). At about the same time, Australia started its Work-for-the-Dole scheme following a similar format of long-term unemployed working in community initiatives. Nonetheless, both schemes differed significantly. While the Australian scheme is considered exemplary of a mutual obligation scheme from a work-first approach, the Irish scheme sought to deal with high unemployment from a perspective that would support the voluntary sector without imposing conditions on participants. Years later, however, the impact of the recession was a catalyst for a rapid activation turn to align Ireland with the broader neoliberal reforms and welfare retrenchment (Dukelow and Considine, 2014; Dukelow, 2015). The CE scheme was popular and survived, becoming part of *Pathways to Work*. A second scheme (Tús) was created in 2011, resembling the CE physiognomy but offering shorter placement periods and embedding obligatory participation. The policy shift kept reciprocity and community at the centre, with community organisations 'recruited to host "workfare" type employment placements, where welfare allowances were a substitute for real wages' (Meade, 2018:235). The schemes are locally implemented by not-for-profit multi-sectoral agencies – that usually deliver other social programmes – and are overseen by the Department of Social Protection. The agencies are responsible for building relationships with host organisations (sponsors), assuring the quality of placements and placing and supervising referred participants. This type of governance seems outside the logic of 'double activation' and marketisation that has permitted private actors to deliver employment services (McGann, 2021; Murphy and McGann, 2022). These schemes could be regarded as a softer form of workfare volunteering than those implemented in other liberal systems, such as Australia or the UK. A reason for this softer trait could be the less harsh imposition of conditionality and sanctions. While scheme participants face potential sanctions if refusing a referral to a scheme without a plausible reason (Department of Social Protection, 2018), sanctions in the Irish welfare system are considered light compared to other liberal regimes, such as the UK (Cousins, 2019). Additionally, the Community Employment (CE) scheme advertises vacancies and permits a limited quota of eligible welfare recipients to apply, allowing a margin for choice.

The schemes have retained their appeal due to their local presence and the robust association with the community and voluntary sector that depend on scheme participants' unpaid work. Since its first appearance in 1994, the community and voluntary sector became the means for placements to deliver services for the long-term unemployed and the community (Boyle, 2005). In 2017, differentiated placements were introduced as either activation or social inclusion (intended for older and vulnerable participants). Introduced during the economic recovery, this measure sought to guarantee community organisations a minimum of participants despite the reduction in referrals derived from the decline of unemployment figures.

CE and Tús schemes were assessed as good at providing work experience but unsuccessful in helping people back to work (National Economic and Social Council, 2018), similar to the 2015 evaluation of CE that reported it successful in delivering community services but poor as a medium of progression towards employment (DSP, 2015). A recent report (McGuinness *et al.*, 2022: 31) found that participation in a community employment scheme reduces the probability of exiting unemployment by more than ten percentage points and increases among those aged over fifty-five.

The researched schemes embrace the workfare volunteering notions of contribution and reciprocity, making welfare recipients' (unpaid) work conduit for delivering services to communities as a fair exchange for welfare benefits. Accordingly, the host community organisations play a strategic role. Official documents praise the contribution of these organisations and their role in delivering services for vulnerable people (Department of Social Protection, 2015; Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2020). The former Minister for Social Protection (Doherty, 2019: 25) stated that placements 'support local services which are vital to many communities (. . .) many of the local elderly and home care services throughout the county depend on people trained and provided by the scheme', adding that such services depended on the schemes 'to thrive and in many cases to survive'.

Overall, as a form of workfare volunteering, the Irish community placement schemes present traits that somewhat set them apart from how these schemes are usually deployed in other liberal welfare regimes. Among these traits, as detailed earlier, are the lesser presence of punitive conditionality and the strong link with organisations sponsoring placements that offer a work-like environment and opportunities for training. In turn, the community nature of placements mobilises reciprocity, contribution, and benefit to the local community.

Workfare volunteering schemes hold appeal not only for policymakers but for welfare recipients who can access a work-like experience that could reshape their sense of self as a worker-like person. Foregrounded on the lived experience of participants of community placements schemes in Ireland, this study paid attention to the meaning-making, agency, and reflexivity of participants. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), as the next section will outline, offered the ideal method for investigating these experiences.

Methods

This article presents data from a study that explored the lived experience and meaning-making processes concerning long-term unemployment, welfare recipiency, and activation through placement in community organisations in post-recession Ireland. The Irish context of post-recession and recovery (2013 onwards) was signified by participants as a time of changes that was intertwined with their personal circumstances. The research participants were therefore well-suited to account for a period of contextual changes that impacted them severely and made them feel 'left behind'.

Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Social Work and Social Policy Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin. Considering that research into the lived experience of community placement in Ireland is scarce, initial purposive sampling was aimed at men and women of different ages, diverse employment backgrounds, and at different stages of placement in the two community schemes operating in Ireland (CE and Tús). Sixteen men and fourteen women (age twenty-eight to sixty-four) were recruited via gatekeepers from four agencies implementing the schemes locally across thirteen localities in two counties in Ireland. These agencies are not-for-profit multi-sectoral partnerships which receive referrals from welfare offices and are responsible for placing and supervising participants and engaging with host organisations. Table 1 outlines the composition of the sample.

Data were generated through interviews with thirty participants, memos, and fieldwork observations conducted between 2018 and 2019. From a constructivist viewpoint, the interviewer

Table 1. Details of research participants

	Male (n = 16)	Female (n = 14)
Age		
Under 30 years	0	3
30–39 years	2	4
40–49 years	4	2
50–59 years	4	4
60+	6	1
Placement position		
Caretaker/grounds person	8	0
Secretary/clerical assistant	1	5
Cleaner	0	3
Sales assistant (charity shop)	0	2
Care assistant	2	0
Heritage worker	2	0
Befriending service older people	0	2
Youth worker	0	1
Reception	1	0
Environmental instructor	1	0
Community artist	1	0
Community website manager	0	1
Length of unemployment prior to placement		
1–2 years	5	5
3–4 years	5	4
5–6 years	5	2
7–8 years	1	0
More than 9 years	0	3

and interviewee actively produce and co-produce knowledge and understanding through the relational, contextual, and narrative process of questions and answers (Charmaz, 2006; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Open-ended, follow-up questions and probes were important to elicit participants' reflexivity and promote a less asymmetrical relationship that allowed interviewees to raise topics.

Following the constructivist grounded theory method, data collection and analysis proceeded in tandem, opening avenues for emergent concepts and gradually narrowing, focusing, and advancing towards the theoretical refinement of central categories (Timonen *et al.*, 2018). Engaging theoretical sampling, data that could contribute to the progress of the theoretical constructs proposed by the earlier analysis were sought through interviews and additional participants. Follow-up interviews were conducted with nine of the initial twenty-four participants on the basis of theoretical sampling (to fill out constructs that were emergent in their initial interviews), and six interviews with new participants were conducted in pursuit of further interrogating the concepts that had emerged in the course of the interviews with the initial group of twenty-four participants.

The study acknowledges limitations deriving from the use of gatekeepers. Although necessary, given the difficulties of reaching participants through other channels, the use of gatekeepers always creates potential selection effects. Nevertheless, we followed a strict protocol to reassure the participants of their voluntary participation and confidentiality. A few participants declined to participate despite being reassured of its voluntary nature and the absence of negative consequences in the case of not engaging. Relatedly, it is possible that the limited number of agencies involved (four across thirteen localities) could represent cases where supervisors were better equipped and drawn to a personalised approach (this approach will be discussed in the next sections), although all agencies adhere to a community approach. Together with acknowledging these limitations, we also highlight the commitment of the study to constructivist grounded theory method and the notions of reflexivity and the active role of research participants in the co-production of knowledge about their experience. Efforts were made to conduct the interviews from a stance that would facilitate participants' reflexivity, considering their prior experiences in interview settings pertaining to their subordinate role as welfare recipients.

Following the constructivist grounded theory method, core categories grounded in the meaning-making process of participants were identified in the interview data. These core processes encapsulated participants' agency and reflexivity as they worked on their subjectivities and considered the possibilities they encountered.

In the sections that follow, we will outline these processes. We will first present the process of 'changing by losing' arising from the experiences of unemployment, welfare recipiency, and failed job search prior to joining the scheme, followed by 'changing by regaining' as the core process that captured the internal changes prompted by their experience of placement. Names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity. The quotes hereafter include participants' pseudonyms and ages in brackets.

Changing by losing

This section focuses on the participants' recollections of their experience of unemployment, conditional welfare recipiency, and unsuccessful job search prior to joining the scheme, which is encapsulated by the category of 'changing by losing'.

Research participants made sense of their experience of long-term unemployment prior to placement as one of cumulative loss that evolved towards gradual deterioration of well-being. The unsuccessful job search had eroded participants' self-esteem and confidence. Participants consistently spoke of the experience of 'not getting responses' (to job applications) as 'draining', 'upsetting', and 'diminishing', most acutely experienced by participants over forty-five and those with longer unemployment histories.

Facing their unsuccessful job search, participants asked themselves: "Why can I not get a job?" "Am I the problem?" Overall, participants assumed that the reason for their persistent failure was that they were 'too old', lacked the qualifications or experience required by employers, or lacked 'something' they did not understand. As participants turned inward, asking what was wrong with them, the loss of confidence and frustration deepened. In the end, participants such as Celia (forty-seven) felt that they were not worth a reply:

> What's wrong? Is it me? Am I missing something? What did I miss in life? You know, I didn't have any, I went to school, I've done my leaving cert (upper secondary school diploma), and I've done my secretarial course (. . .) I did think it was me, my age, my qualifications . . . What was it? You don't know, you'll never know! [agitated] because you don't get replies! . . . I felt "I can't do this", I'm useless, I'm worthless.

Feeling unwanted fostered internal tensions in the participants' sense of self, prompting disappointment and diminished expectations about themselves and their future. Simultaneously,

participants reported being affected by the negative stereotypes of welfare recipients they did not identify with (e.g. taking from taxpayers and abusing the system). Most participants were adversely affected by the situation where they needed the income from welfare, yet they felt undeserving and ashamed. Claudia's (thirty-seven) words illustrated these feelings:

> I didn't really wanna be around the family, and maybe extended family [when unemployed] because you're not in the same position as them, it's like their tax money is paying for you, and you just feel like a fraud (. . .) it's just how you feel, like, you're getting something that you don't deserve.

Experiencing the devalued identity of the unemployed/failed job seeker/welfare recipient and the perceived inertia of their situation meant going through an evolving process of internal questioning and recalibration that was transversally signified as 'losing aspects of oneself'. Participants recalled reaching a point at which they felt a strangeness about themselves, communicated through phrases such as "I could not recognise myself". At this point in participants' trajectories, joining the scheme introduced a change that would eventually counterbalance the sense of loss and foster a process of regaining well-being.

Changing by regaining

This section explains the core process of 'changing by regaining' that emerged from the experience of placement in a community organisation and the internal changes this enabled. Notably, this process was underpinned by three intertwined processes: co-producing the placement position, regaining meaningful doing, and helping others.

When told by welfare officers – or by an official letter – that they had to join the scheme in order to retain their benefits, participants recalled feeling that they were in a 'yes or yes position' and fearing they would be 'working for free' or 'doing menial work'. Nonetheless, since their first interactions with the local agencies' supervisors, participants assessed a difference from their prior interactions with welfare officers. Here, the experience of co-producing the placement position emerged. Through what materialised as a personalised approach, scheme supervisors persuaded participants to willingly subscribe to the scheme and invited them to co-produce their positions according to their interests and preferences. Violet (forty-seven) spoke of her selection process:

> [Supervisor] came up with a few solutions, if I wanted to work in a crèche, I said no, and with people who had brain injuries, but I didn't think that would've been for me (. . .) the charity shop in [nearby town] and I said yes, but then it wouldn't have worked out, I would have to do two or three days until four o'clock, so then she said that for the extra money that you're getting you're going to be spending that on bus fares, so she asked me would I work in the [community organisation] here, and that was nice, so she went and spoke to the chairperson.

Co-producing meant for participants 'being asked and heard', 'expressing preferences and off-limits options', and 'letting themselves be convinced', as these codes from the data analysis identified. Certainly, options depended on the positions available, which were restricted to a few areas; however, being able to say no or yes was a game-changer that led participants to own their position, commonly worded as 'I chose'. These findings parallel research that identified activation workers coaching and motivating participants to prompt hope, optimism, and emotional empowerment (Arts and Van Den Berg, 2019). Similarly, well-being, agency, and self-worth effects were found in schemes that utilise a personalised approach prioritising participants' self-assessed needs (Dean, 2003; Kampen and Tonkens, 2019).

Secondly, placement gave participants back what many phrased as 'something to do' (coded as 'doing'). However, not 'any' doing would improve participants' subjective well-being, but doing

connected to their trajectories, needs, and interests. Hence, regaining meaningful doing reconnected participants with a sense of continuity or challenge. For instance, older men wanted to regain continuity and felt content doing what they knew and had provided them with an identity as breadwinners and doers. These men were typically placed as caretakers or groundkeepers, as in the case of Alan (sixty):

> I didn't go to college or any of that like other people, very brainy, you know, I'm not brain, but I'm not too bad (. . .) I love cutting grass, I don't know why [chuckles]. I love working outside, you meet people, you're cutting grass and keeping the place clean and talking to other people, 'How're you getting on', 'great', 'oh, you have the place looking well', you know, keeping the place nice and clean.

Middle-aged men with a miscellaneous employment trajectory and undecided future paths, were open to new tasks but negotiated areas that would benefit their interests, such as a potential business idea in the case of Bob (forty-three):

> I'm using this to learn the ropes, see the gaps and create that idea that works for me, you know . . . I've had so many jobs, you name it . . . I'm not that age anymore, I want to be my own boss, no more pressure.

Women in the sample displayed an adaptable attitude and were motivated to introduce change to their lives; thus, they liked taking challenging positions that demanded responsibility or developing new skills. For example, Andrea (thirty-nine), whose background was secretarial work, wanted to 'work with people' and explore a possible career change, so she chose a placement providing companionship to older people. Carol (sixty-four) had a background in administrative work, she wanted to 're-invent' herself and took placement as a website administrator in a community initiative involving independent learning and training that made her feel proud of herself. Participants who had mental and physical health issues wanted the position to match their circumstances and signified placement as a safe space to recover. Lucy (fifty-five), Anne (fifty-seven), and Geraldine (fifty-six) had mental health issues as well as chronic illnesses that made them feel 'unready' for a real work environment that would not be fit for their specific needs.

Co-producing and regaining meaningful doing would not be enough to sustain the positive experience of placement emphasised by participants. The experience of helping others and doing something for the community offered participants a new source of meaning and viewpoint from which to be seen, and to see themselves from. Placements took place in community, volunteer, and local organisations that enjoyed high esteem in the community and provided locally needed support. Accordingly, doing community work emerged as giving back and fair exchange, as Steven (forty-two) expressed:

> It's community work, which is good for the community you live in, it gives something back. I believe you should do something to get your social welfare payment.

Participants tuned into the organisation's ethos and mission and explained enthusiastically how their tasks contributed to it. They saw themselves doing something of value that created benefits for the community they could also enjoy. Adam (forty-five) connected his placement with the long-term benefits that helping the community could have for his family:

> I can see now the changes and what's happening, and I can see the long-term benefits because I have children who will be growing up here as well, so I can see that drive to make a better place, and that interests me.

Participants expressed an emotional connection to the 'good feeling' of helping others which, as illustrated in Gwen's (fifty) words, also brought a sense of personal reward:

> It's very rewarding to go home at the end of the day and say: 'Oh, maybe I did help somebody today', even if they only bought something for three euros, I helped to brighten up their day by, you know, helping them to pick that, or saying 'you know what, I have the perfect thing for you here, I think you'd like this' And knowing that you helped somebody is very, very rewarding.

Helping others was highly influential in counteracting the stigma of welfare recipiency. It led participants to recalibrate their welfare recipient's identity into a volunteer-like person who contributed, was appreciated in the community and was seen in a positive light. Giving back through helping others allowed participants not to feel that they were 'taking from taxpayers' but reciprocating through their work, giving them a sense of resonance with how they saw themselves. Celia's (forty-seven) reflection portrayed this dynamic:

> I want to be able to work, please God, for the next twenty years and be happy in what I'm working. But when I retire, I'll know I gave back what society gave to me, and the scheme gave me the chance to get back and feel confident about myself and feel that I'm worth something, that I'm not worthless, that I do help society no matter how big, small it's, I do help.

The experience of helping others was meaningful and helped participants to access a positive self-image and public identity – the volunteer-like person. This experience echoes the notion of self-concept-repair proposed in Garrett-Peters' (2009) study with unemployed men who attended support groups and found in the experience of supporting others a way to regain a sense of self-efficacy and health. In Gwen's words, knowing that 'you helped someone today' had a strong appeal and the potential to mirror a different self.

Co-producing the placement position, regaining a meaningful doing and helping others, these three intertwined processes triggered the empowering experience of 'changing by regaining'. Participants gave their placement the liminal quality of an exceptional time, a 'break' from the inertia of their situation. Activation essentially took the form of a mental break that enabled emotional relief and recharge and supported the process of regaining aspects of oneself, or, as Claudia (thirty-seven) expressed it, 'going back to myself'. Participants, and women among them in more eloquent ways, engaged in a narrative that turned placement into an event of self-change and spoke of the 'old' and the 'new' me, illustrated in Gwen's (fifty) account of her personal transformation:

> It's me finding my way back to things, and it's getting me happier in myself, it's just great . . . I can, I got my confidence back, that's what it's (. . .) I'm nearly one hundred per cent the confidence level that I used to be. Even my parents have said it, like, 'I can't believe the difference'. My son is looking at me like 'Are you my mum?' and I go 'yes' [assenting with her head] (. . .) Even my friends say 'God, we got the old Gwen back'.

Regaining that 'something' of themselves that had been missing counterbalanced the experience of changing by losing (during long-term unemployment) that had diminished participants' well-being. Returning to a work-like environment and, most importantly, feeling valued and challenged, helped participants regain subjective well-being. Andrea (thirty-nine) exemplified part of these feelings:

> You forget that you're actually able to do things. And once I started, after a few hours, I realised, I remembered what it feels like, I remembered that feeling of somebody actually valuing your opinion.

Participants with health issues expressed a sense of change through feeling better and stronger, as Lucy (fifty-five) expressed:

> I get so much from this, my mental health has improved so much since, and my self-confidence, because I lost my confidence and my belief in myself, so this is really helping me to get some of that back (. . .) I can feel it, people can see it around me, they say I'm brighter. I'm happier than I've been in a long time.

Regaining self-esteem and confidence by seeing oneself as more capable than during unemployment was highlighted by women, who spoke of having lost confidence in their performance and abilities. Tamara (twenty-eight), whose placement was as an administrator for a local project, had been unemployed for three years. She dwelled on her personal transformation from being a shy person suffering from anxiety to one that was able to succeed in a new role. Tamara re-emerged as 'the face of the business':

> I kind of feel more important in a way, because . . . as I said, I'm kind of the face of this business because everyone is approaching me, I'm dealing with everything, and I do have to bring it to other people, you know, queries that come up, but everything, everyone approaches me. Whereas before, I hated talking on the phone, I hated talking face to face with people, whereas now I feel I can talk to anyone in a way, so I've grown a bit as a person.

While 'changing by regaining' was the core process in the data, grounded in the accounts of nearly all participants, it is important to acknowledge that this theoretical construct is not put forward as a generalisation that could apply to all activation programme participants, even under broadly supportive conditions. The sample did contain four individuals who struggled to gain from their experience of community placement and were critical of the financial reward, the quality of training available and the lack of concrete employment opportunities at the end of their placement. These few participants, nonetheless, did express having a positive experience in their placements but wished the schemes were better equipped to provide routes back to employment. Thus, the fact that there were such experiences does not detract from the main finding here, namely that placement in a community organisation gave participants a transient place where they were able to establish different relationships with others and with themselves. Through their co-produced positions and helping the community, participants narrated a renewed sense of self that accounted for improved subjective well-being.

Conclusion

This article explained placement in an activation community scheme in Ireland as a momentous experience that prompted changes in participants' lives at a crucial point in their unemployment trajectories, improving their subjective well-being. Change was a pervasive component of participants' accounts that referred to two internal processes. Changing by losing gave voice to the losses from unemployment, welfare recipiency, and the unsuccessful, yet compulsory, job search. Such losses referred primarily to subjective well-being and diminished expectations.

Changing by regaining counterbalanced the losses and gave voice to recovering an improved sense of self underpinned by being able to co-produce the placement position, regaining meaningful doing and helping others. Co-producing gave participants a sense of control they needed. Although framed by conditionality, scheme supervisors' style of co-production was not psychologically or emotionally detrimental, as conditionality has been reported to be (Dwyer, 2019). This suggests that engagement in activation programmes can be fostered through less disciplinary means and a perspective that appeals to the participant's whole identity – personal interests and singularity – and not merely the narrow and subordinate welfare recipient identity.

Helping others and adopting a volunteer-like identity was remarkably influential in the process of enhanced subjective well-being by transforming the devalued identity of participants. Helping meant experiencing recognition, reward, and a sense of contributing. Placement in a community organisation gave participants access to experiences with the potential to mirror a different self and powered meanings that enabled a positive public self – the volunteer-like person. The requirement to engage in community work symbolically fulfils society's demand for welfare recipients to demonstrate appreciation, character and will to work (Paz-Fuchs and Eleveld, 2016; De Waele and Hustinx, 2019). The stigma haunting welfare recipients and underlying the social meanings about deservingness are contrasted by the form of reciprocity the schemes enable. This process must be read in light of a society and welfare system that valorise paid work and the good worker while stigmatising the unemployed (Whelan, 2021; Boland et al., 2022; Bolton et al., 2022). Doing something for the community and accessing a volunteer-like identity sustained much of the process of change that participants experienced.

Placement was an experience of significance for participants because it helped them move from the emotional place of losing and enthused them to work on the (re)building and repair of their sense of self. Placement, thus, emerged as a time and place of internal work – 'the self at work'. This multi-layered process happened as this internal work and experience of change that contributed to well-being unfolded through actions and interactions with self and others that created possibilities that were not there before (e.g. experience of new activities, skills, and relationships) and repaired things that were damaged or broken (e.g. repairing the spoiled welfare recipient identity through the volunteer-like person, repairing the broken bond of contributing to society through helping others). Similarly, the process showed how the interplay between work/unemployment/welfare recipiency, and the participants' subjectivities develops in contextual and structural circumstances that drive individuals to redefine themselves through the fulfilment/loss they gain from those identities (Archer, 2007).

We argue that community placement activation schemes – as a form of workfare volunteerism – can be transformational spaces that potentially provide a less directive and standardised experience of activation that, in turn, counterbalances the detrimental effects of unemployment and conditional welfare recipiency and improves subjective well-being. This, in turn, suggests the need for policymakers to envision these schemes from the perspective of participants, by considering the extent to which allowing participants to express agency and singularity can foster well-being, and how these schemes can be further personalised to expand their potential. These findings are in correspondence with the literature on co-production and personalisation approaches in the context of activation and employability services as ways of enabling meaningful participation and empowerment of participants considering their singularity and needs (Lindsay et al., 2014; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016; Larsen and Caswell, 2022). In this same direction, the findings converse with the broader discussions problematising the nature of work and activation, and the role of social policy and welfare in enabling more empowering and fulfilling ways of participating beyond paid work (Dukelow, 2022; Larruffa et al., 2022; Stamm, 2023). In that regard, reciprocity, non-productivist forms of contributing, and a comprehensive notion of well-being are proposed as components of eco-social welfare (Murphy, 2023).

Being 'activated' through community placement is a complex and relational phenomenon that cannot be predetermined as either linear movement from welfare to work or as a problematic experience that further serves to marginalise 'the activated'. The findings presented here illustrate that labour market activation can serve multiple purposes beyond exposure to employment, and that the internal work completed by participants in these schemes can be profound and meaningful provided that activation is implemented in a participatory and empowering manner.

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