

Article

'I feel good here': A qualitative study on the experiences of subsidised employees in a Swedish municipal labour market programme

by

Ellen Parsland
PhD candidate
School of Social Work, Lund University
Sweden
E-mail: ellen.parsland@soch.lu.se

Gabriella Scaramuzzino
Associate professor
School of Social Work, Lund University
Sweden
E-mail: gabriella.scaramuzzino@soch.lu.se

Keywords:

activation practice, subsidised employment, collective identities, community, participant experiences

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31265/jcsw.v19i2.657>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to understand how a group of subsidised employees constructed a collective identity and symbolic community, and the role the municipal labour market programme played in that process. Further, it explores whether and how a shared collective identity and symbolic community may provide an explanation for how the 'successful intervention/lock-in effect paradox' occurs when using subsidised employment as an activation intervention. The article is based on a qualitative interview study with eight social workers and 11 subsidised employees from a Swedish municipal labour market programme that offered subsidised employment as its main intervention. The interviews were analysed using the concepts of social identity and symbolic community. The article shows that subsidised employment plays a crucial role in subsidised employees constructing their identity as 'persons with a job', as distinct from the activation interventions usually associated with social assistance. The labour market programme serves as a transformative space where receiving a salary becomes a symbol of distinction, marking a significant departure from past experiences of receiving social assistance. The article also highlights the role of social workers in subsidised employees' identity processes. The social workers perceived the subsidised employees as participants with special needs, and subsidised employment as an intervention which could influence the planning and support provided during the subsidised employment. The collective identity developed by the participants fostered a sense of community, but also led to reluctance to leave the programme, driven by the fear of reverting to social assistance, and once again being excluded from the labour market. The article concludes that the subsidised employees risked getting stuck in a borderland between work exclusion and work inclusion and, therefore, that subsidised employment can potentially place participants in a state of 'marginalised inclusion' in the labour market, instead of supporting participants into regular employment.

Keywords: activation practice, subsidised employment, collective identities, community, participant experiences

Introduction

Activation interventions, intended to assist individuals who are excluded from the labour market to become included in the labour market, are widespread globally (Clasen & Mascaro, 2022). In general, activation interventions target individuals who are long-term unemployed and have complex social problems, and who are thus already in a marginalised position in the labour market (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Govender, 2023). Overall, research has been critical of activation interventions for being interwoven with eligibility for means-tested public benefits, reminiscent of the old poor relief system, and causing feelings of stigmatisation (Stambe, 2022; Fredriksson, 2022). This criticism is compounded by the fact that activation interventions have not generally had the impact on labour market inclusion that policymakers had hoped for, with examples of activation interventions that have had a positive effect on labour market inclusion being few and far between (Card et al., 2018; SBU, 2022).

One such 'positive example' is subsidised employment. Subsidised employment has been described both in research (Sianesi, 2008; Mörk et al., 2021), and in government agency evaluations (see e.g. SBU, 2022), as having a positive effect on labour market inclusion for individuals who are unemployed and not established in the labour market. The intervention entails central or/and local government organising and subsidising temporary employment for which a fixed and taxable salary is paid and, in some cases, individual support for finding regular employment is provided (cf. Card et al., 2018; Mörk et al., 2021; SBU, 2022). Subsidised employment therefore often leads to a break, even if temporary, from means-tested benefits. While subsidised employment has been highlighted for its potentially beneficial effects, research has also shown an increased risk of 'lock-in effects' as a result of subsidised employees stopping looking for regular employment during their subsidised employment (Card & Hysop, 2009; Thomsen & Williams, 2010).

These parallel and apparently paradoxical effects, which have been highlighted in previous research, also raise questions regarding the effectiveness of subsidised employment as an activation intervention for labour market inclusion. This article contributes to previous research by taking a closer look at this 'successful

intervention-lock-in effect paradox', by using a qualitative approach. The aim of the article is to understand how the subsidised employees studied constructed a collective identity and symbolic community, and what role the municipal labour market programme played in this process. Moreover, it explores whether and how a shared collective identity and symbolic community may be at the root of the 'successful intervention-lock-in effect paradox' which occurs when using subsidised employment as an activation intervention.

The article draws on an interview study of a Swedish municipal labour programme that provided subsidised employment to long-term unemployed individuals living on municipally governed and means-tested social assistance. The programme involved team-based work tasks led by social workers. The study consisted of interviews with 11 subsidised employees and two focus groups with eight social workers in the same labour market programme.

Empirical context

Sweden operates as a unitary state with centralised legislative power, but with local self-governance in 290 municipalities overseen by the national government (Jacobsson et al., 2017). Sweden places great importance on active labour market policies and work as a virtue, requiring labour participation in order to have full access to the tax-funded social insurance system (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Dahlstedt, 2013). Access to social insurance, including unemployment benefits, is thus dependent on employment, making it crucial (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007). For those who are ineligible for social insurance, locally administered social assistance involves means testing and participating in activation interventions (Govender, 2023). As such, the Swedish welfare system has a dual structure, evident in activation measures (Jacobsson et al., 2017), in which both the centrally governed Public Employment Service (PES) and the municipal authorities are key players. The PES primarily targets established unemployed individuals, whereas municipal activation measures are directed at those who are not yet established in the labour market. Collaborations between municipalities and the PES also occur, for instance, when it comes to subsidised employment, as demonstrated in this article.

The PES has been implementing various schemes for subsidised employment since the 1980s, engaging various group, including refugees and the long-term unemployed (Forslund, 2018). These initiatives, involving both private and public employers, have supported about 130,000 individuals annually since 2010 (Engdahl & Forslund, 2019). Municipalities also use subsidised employment as an activation intervention, particularly for social assistance recipients, although exact participation figures are unavailable. These efforts often involve PES subsidies facilitating employment within the municipality, of which the labour market programme in this study is one example (Forslund et al., 2019; Mörk et al., 2021).

Since the 1990s, the use of municipal labour market programmes in Sweden for activation purposes has expanded significantly, and now encompasses almost all 290 municipalities, primarily targeting unemployed social assistance recipients, and encompassing approximately 100,000 participants annually (Forslund et al., 2019). Labour market programmes, as defined by Lødemel and Moreira (2014), offer specific activation options with formal conditions and sanctions to support individuals facing long-term unemployment and precarious life situations. However, the decentralised local governance structure has resulted in substantial variations in programme structures and implementation, thereby making it difficult for research to draw general conclusions with regard to municipal labour market programmes (Forslund et al., 2019). At the same time, the development of activation measures in Sweden shares characteristics with the development of activation in Europe in general, particularly in terms of increased decentralisation, interagency cooperation and increasing work incentives through a combination of support and control (Lødemel & Moreira, 2014).

The municipal labour market programme in our study offered subsidised employment as its main service, and provided additional support such as vocational training, coaching, social support and adult education. The programme typically enrolled approximately 90 subsidised employees who worked in teams, either within the municipal labour market programme building or in various municipal departments. The programme's official policy objective was to facilitate the transition from subsidised employment to regular employment, and promote self-sufficiency upon programme completion. The terms of subsidised employment were regulated by

national and local policies, and collective agreements between trade unions and municipalities. Subsidised employees received employment for one to four years, with monthly salaries ranging from 1360 euros to 1700 euros before taxes. However, subsidised employees had limited access to workers' rights, such as the ability to influence salary increases, and certain forms of subsidised employment did not grant access to unemployment benefits.

Previous research

Research on activation has been extensive (see e.g. Clasen & Mascaro, 2022, for an overview), yet international and national studies specifically focusing on subsidised employment have mainly concerned impact evaluations, provide ambiguous results regarding intervention outcomes, and do not provide a comprehensive understanding as to why subsidised employment both leads to positive outcomes, and carries the risk of lock-in effects.

Overall, the types of subsidised employment interventions that seem to create the most positive effects in terms of labour market inclusion of the subsidised employees are interventions where the employment is located in the private sector (Sianesi, 2008; SBU, 2022), or where work tasks are performed as part of the ordinary operations of a municipal employer (Behrenz & Hammarstedt, 2014; Mörk et al., 2021). These are situations in which subsidised employees have the opportunity to show their capabilities to an employer. However, one study on Swedish employers' attitudes toward hiring unemployed individuals through subsidised employment also shows that some employers are hesitant, or in some instances even refuse to hire individuals using subsidised employment for fear it would risk productivity (Behrenz & Månsson, 2023).

With regard to lock-in effects, an early study by Sianesi (2008) shows that subsidised employment in both the private sector and municipalities creates short-term lock-in effects in Sweden. Card and Hysop (2009), Thomsen and Walter (2010) and Card et al. (2018) further discuss how subsidised employment, overall, creates lock-in effects for subsidised employees. However, the authors do not fully explain why lock-in effects occur, but simply that job search activity tends to go down when this type of

intervention is used. Still, Card and Hysop (2009) highlight that organisational aspects of the programmes, particularly service delivery, are an important factor, thus strengthening the need for qualitative research that can provide a deeper insight into those aspects.

In general, research into service users' experiences of activation practices demonstrates varying outcomes. Positive experiences often stem from community and relationships with peers and social workers (Hansen & Nielsen, 2023; Govender, 2023), which enhance skills and self-confidence (Hansen, 2018; Sunnerfjell, 2023). Conversely, negative experiences are common, with activation interventions found degrading and lacking meaningful labour market support (Hansen, 2018; Fredriksson, 2022; Hansen & Nielsen, 2023). Additionally, activation programmes convey societal norms and values, particularly among young people and migrants (Fredriksson, 2022; Vesterberg, 2016; Parsland, 2023): nevertheless, research is limited when it comes to service users' identity formation, and how this relates to activation interventions and public discourse on unemployment.

In terms of qualitative research into service delivery within subsidised employment, Govender (2023) has examined the meaning of recognition in the context of municipal activation practices. The study disclosed service users' feelings of a lack of recognition due to the low status and wages associated with subsidised employment. Similarly, Girardi et al. (2019) identified stigma as a hinderance to social inclusion in Belgian society. On the other hand, Hultqvist and Hollertz (2021) noted a decrease in stigma associated with subsidised employment and education in a Swedish municipal programme. While the aforementioned research analyses show how increased stigma and/or a lack of recognition can decrease the chances of being included in society, which could be understood to mean that the subsidised employees are more likely to become locked into welfare reciepience, it does not address how potential lock-ins could occur in the programme, nor how subsidised employees construct collective identities in the programmes.

Theoretical perspectives

We use the theories of social identity (Jenkins, 2008), and the symbolic construction of community (Cohen, 1985), to understand how subsidised employees constructed collective identities, and what role the municipal labour market programme had in that process. We based our analysis of identity construction among subsidised employees on three key aspects: 1) employment status (unemployed, subsidised employment, or employed); 2) their fellow subsidised employees in the programme; and 3) the social workers employed in the programme.

We understand identity as a multi-dimensional classification of individuals and collectives, ‘...to know “who’s who”’ (Jenkins, 2008, p. 5), and as ‘... the process of “being” or “becoming”’ (Jenkins, 2008, p. 17). From this perspective, identity unfolds within interactions, intertwining individual and collective identities, encompassing shared interests, and embodying both commonalities and distinctions (Jenkins, 2008, p. 17). Identity is not only about how a group defines itself, but also how the group is identified or defined by others. In this article, we differentiate between nominal identities and virtual identities (Jenkins, 2008, p. 99) to help explore how subsidised employees collectively named themselves, and how they practice and experience their identity. Nominal identity refers to the name of the group, whereas virtual identity pertains to personal experiences of the identity, as a shared group name can entail vastly different experiences within the group (Jenkins, 2008). Multiple nominal identities are possible, often involving power dynamics, in which external groups (for example social workers) may label a group (cf. Jenkins, 2008). Thus, we also examine how social workers as an external group categorise and label subsidised employees, and how this aligns with subsidised employees' own collective nominal identity to capture the role of the municipal labour market programme in the subsidised employees' identity processes. Identities have boundaries, shaped by societal context and debates (Jenkins, 2008), for example, contemporary Swedish labour and social policies.

According to the theoretical perspectives chosen for this article, there is a link between collective identities and the construction of symbolic communities, as they are often part of the same process (Jenkins, 2008). Communities are inherently

symbolic, fostering a sense of belonging. Symbols define the boundaries of communities, marking the start and end of belonging (Cohen, 1985). This article investigates the symbols and boundaries which subsidised employees use in the interviews, and the meanings they attribute to them in relation to their collective identification. Symbols and boundaries can carry varying meanings for individuals, thereby allowing them to contribute to the interpretation. The meanings which subsidised employees derive from symbols and boundaries are influenced by their past experiences, making 'community a boundary-expressing symbol, held in common by its members, but its meaning varies with members' unique orientations' (Cohen, 1985, p. 15). Hence, in our analysis, we focus on the interplay between similarity and difference in the interviews and connect this interplay to the social construction of collective identities and symbolic communities.

Method

The article draws on an interview-based study conducted in the autumn of 2020, with eight social workers and 11 subsidised employees who were all participating in a municipal labour market programme. The study has been ethically approved by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Uppsala (Reg. no. 2016/173). We gained access to the labour market programme through contact with the programme's manager. Access to subsidised employees was gained with help from the social workers in the programme. The social workers were instructed to provide a written information letter to all subsidised employees, and collect the names of subsidised employees who would like to voluntarily participate in the study. It cannot be ruled out that the social workers chose to exclude some subsidised employees from the study, but at the same time there were variations in the subsidised employees' ages, nationalities, genders, backgrounds, experience and views of the labour market programme, which suggests that no selection bias occurred (cf. Rubin, 2021). Author 1 conducted the interviews, and informed consent was obtained. The social workers interviewed had various roles within the labour market programme, such as team leaders of work teams and/or counsellors. For anonymity purposes, they are collectively referred to as social workers in this article. The subsidised employees interviewed had diverse backgrounds in terms of work and education, birth country, age and motivation for

participating in the labour market programme. Participation duration varied greatly, ranging from a few months to four years.

Two focus group interviews were conducted with four social workers in each session. In both of the focus group interviews, all four social workers knew each other from before, which enabled the respondents to feel comfortable discussing their experiences and views (Kruger et al., 2019). Eleven individual interviews with subsidised employees on the programme were conducted at the subsidised employees' request, which, in contrast to the more discussion-oriented focus group interviews, provided an opportunity for more in-depth interviews in order to capture the perspectives of the subsidised employee (Kruger et al., 2019). The interviews were semi-structured with themes guiding the questions asked, thus allowing for follow-up questions and avoiding unsuitable questions (Denscombe, 2010). The subsidised employees were asked questions about their past, present and future, and what significance the labour market programme had for them. The social workers were asked about the subsidised employees in more general terms, and how the programme could support the target group to enter regular employment. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, with quotes translated into English. For anonymity purposes, all interviewees were given fictitious names. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The empirical material was thematically analysed (Bazaely, 2009) using an abductive approach. Much like induction, an abductive approach starts with the empirical material, but can be combined with- or preceded by previous research and/or theoretical concepts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). We had no predetermined theoretical concepts in mind when we started the analysis. Instead, the analysis evolved by interweaving empirical data, diverse theoretical concepts and existing research in a cyclic manner (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The material was coded inductively in a first round of analysis, resulting in the themes 'the target group [of subsidised employment]', 'relationships', 'motivation' and 'perspectives on the intervention'. Through this first round of analysis, we noticed a significant divergence between social workers and subsidised employees in how the subsidised employees described themselves and their experiences in the labour market programme, and how the social workers described the programme and the subsidised employees.

This discrepancy piqued our interest, and was highlighted by analytically separating the interviews with subsidised employees from the social workers to compare their experiences.

By interpreting the experiences described by the interviewees in relation to the existing research regarding subsidised employment, and then interpreting existing research in light of the interviews, our findings captured the 'successful intervention-lock-in effect paradox', which formed the aim of the article. This led to identifying contrasts in how the interviewees talked about the risks and opportunities that subsidised employees faced as a result of participating in the programme.

Connecting our findings to Jenkins' (2008) theory on social identity, and Cohen's (1989) theory on symbolic communities, provided a deepened understanding of the discrepancy between the experiences of subsidised employees and social workers. When adding our theoretical concepts to the empirical material, a new round of analysis was conducted, thereby forming the themes presented below, showing how subsidised employees constructing identities which misaligned with social workers' categorisation and nominal identity of the subsidised employees, and also provided insight into how potential lock-in effects could occur in the programme, hindering labour marker inclusion.

Analysis

The boundary between social assistance and subsidised employment

Although the subsidised employment in the municipal labour market programme was a type of activation intervention, it was clear that the subsidised employees did not identify themselves as recipients of an intervention. The subsidised employees constructed their identity in relation to previously being unemployed when they talked about their experience of receiving social assistance and prior activation experiences. Hence, we interpret this as the subsidised employees creating a 'symbolic boundary' (cf. Cohen, 1985) between social assistance and subsidised employment, in which social assistance was associated with work exclusion, whereas subsidised employment was associated with the participant's path towards work inclusion. Ines described the difference between receiving social assistance, and being in subsidised employment, as follows:

Ines: I came every day [to activation practice] only because I seek social assistance every month. This is some kind of activity, that you do something. Then after that, I thought it was boring. Because you basically do the same thing. Imagine, every day. But you still feel forced to come. You have no choice. If you do not come, it happens, then you get a deduction [of social assistance] and so on. That was no motivation for me. [...] Then after that, I got [subsidised employment]. Then I felt more alive. Therein lies the difference. That you start doing something. Both for yourself, but also for others. I can say that is the difference.

Interviewer: Does it feel more meaningful now?

Ines: Yes, exactly. Doing something meaningful. When I go home. That I have done something good. Today I have helped people, today I have done this and that and that. Before it was hopeless, which became meaningless. (Ines, subsidised employee)

Despite both being interventions organised by social services, social assistance with activation interventions and subsidised employment were experienced very differently by the subsidised employees. An important difference between the two interventions seems to be that previous activation interventions were mandatory, on account of them being connected to means-tested social assistance, whereas subsidised employment was described as an opportunity. Nora also described that she felt both passive and restricted when she had social assistance with activation interventions: 'You can do nothing, just eat and stay at home [...] and I do not want to.' (Nora, subsidised employee). Zara said:

I am a person who does not like to just sit and get paid by someone else. I like to work and have responsibility for myself, my family, around me like that, and that is why I never intended to stay at Social Services. That is why I want to continue working. Still, if I do not find a job, then I have to study something and raise my grades. Instead of sitting at home and doing nothing. (Zara, subsidised employee)

Zara described that she is not the type of person that sits at home doing nothing, which is often associated with social assistance in the public discourse (cf. Fredriksson, 2022). Much like Fredriksson (2022) argues, our findings indicate that the subsidised employees had adapted to the discourse of activation, where the subsidised employees, through the subsidised employment, could construct a 'virtual identity' (cf. Jenkins, 2008) of someone who takes responsibility, and is capable of finding paths to become self-sufficient. Hence, these two different social service interventions are not just something that individuals receive; they also become connected to 'who you are' as a person. Our findings show how the labour market programme played an essential part in how the participants constructed a virtual identity, which we designate as 'persons with a job'.

Subsidised employment: A job or an intervention?

The subsidised employees' virtual identity as 'persons with a job'

In the interviews, we did not find there was a collective name the subsidised employees used to describe themselves; therefore they did not seem to have constructed a collective 'nominal identity' (cf. Jenkins, 2008). However, all subsidised employees referred to their participation in the programme as a job. This was thus an important part of their 'virtual identity' (cf. Jenkins, 2008). When asked to describe what they did in the programme, the subsidised employees emphasised their work roles in the programme by describing various work tasks they were employed to do, and referred to themselves with different job titles, such as 'janitor', 'groundskeeper' or 'kitchen assistant'. Arne, who referred to himself as a 'groundskeeper', described a typical day in the programme as follows:

The first thing you do is sit down and drink coffee, so you don't start until half past eight. Then you drive out and have a little look, so to speak. Down in the city centre we have the library, the town hall, the theatre. So, it's important to make sure that it's possible to walk there, so there aren't too many leaves and things like that. (Arne, subsidised employee)

A typical day described by Arne did not include any activation measures, just performing the work tasks within his role as a groundskeeper. According to Jenkins (2008), constructing an identity is performative. Therefore, the doing becomes essential to the identification. The quote from Arne exemplifies that the subsidised employees' virtual identity was constructed in relation to being a worker, where the programme enabled the subsidised employees to take on a virtual identity as 'a person with a job' (cf. Girardi et al., 2019). It also entailed that a part of the virtual identity of being a person with a job included feeling proud and meaningfulness, as can be seen, for instance, in Arne's description of keeping the pavements clean.

That the subsidised employees adopted a virtual identity as 'persons with a job' can be understood against the backdrop of the ideal in Sweden of being a worker, and hence a self-sufficient citizen (cf. Dahlstedt, 2013). For example:

Not because it's a lot of money or a little money, it's good if you can be self-sufficient. It's good if you get a job. Before, I also wanted to work but I didn't get a job. In my country I have not studied, I have not worked, I had nothing. And I'm happy now, for example. You can say that I am proud when I say that I work. I am happy, my children are happy, money is not everything. (Fatima, subsidised employee)

Fatima felt proud of working, having a job and of finally being self-sufficient.

Consequently, being excluded from the labour market is often associated with stigma and shame (Girardi et al., 2019). Nora explained:

When you work and earn money, I think it is better for you. You feel that you are human. When I work, you look at me with respect. If you work, they see you as successful, having things to do, you do, you earn money. Huge difference. (Nora, subsidised employee)

The quote exemplifies how external aspects affected the subsidised employees' identity constructions in such a way that respect from 'others' toward Nora meant not violating any normative rules regarding independence and self-sufficiency (cf. Frost et al., 2021). Thus, having a salary became an important symbol in the subsidised employee's identity constructions. In line with previous studies on subsidised employment, earning a salary was also a recognition that the work they performed was important, and that they were capable of it (Hultqvist & Hollertz, 2021; Govender, 2023).

Having a salary is not just an important part of a virtual identity process (cf. Jenkins, 2008). According to the subsidised employees, their financial situation also improved when they started to receive their salary for the subsidised employment. 'Then just that you get a little salary too. You get twice as much as you had on social assistance. So that also means a lot.' (Olof, subsidised employee). However, just because the salary was higher than social assistance did not mean it corresponded to a salary received through regular employment, which was also the main complaint from the subsidised employees interviewed with regard to the programme: 'My salary is piss [...]' (Johan, subsidised employee). Johan used the word 'salary' and not 'benefit', because he identified as a worker, but experienced his salary to be very low.

This section shows how subsidised employees constructed their collective virtual identity, both in relation to social assistance (work exclusion) and to full employment (work inclusion), where salary often became an important symbol of the boundary between the two positions, as the salary symbolised how the subsidised employees had left social assistance and were self-sufficient persons with a job, in line with the normative rules that exist in Swedish society.

The social workers' categorisation of the subsidised employees

An important aspect of identity construction is how 'external' groups understand, identify and categorise you (Jenkins, 2008). This is especially the case within organisations, which are infused with hierarchal relationships between groups, such as the social workers who held authority and power over the subsidised employees (cf. Jenkins, 2008). The social workers interviewed emphasised that the subsidised employment in the labour market programme was an intervention for individuals who were far from entering the labour market, and referred to the subsidised employees as 'participants', in contrast to the subsidised employee's own identity construction as 'persons with a job', as described above. In one of the focus group interviews, Erika and Anna said:

It's not really called job training. People are employed. But it is really that content or what to say. To make this work with times, with going to work and everything, how it works. (Erika, social worker)

It's social training too. Not everyone works well with others in groups, for example. And now you have to work in groups in most work teams, so you get to practice that as well, to be part of a context. (Anna, social worker)

Erika and Anna recognised that the subsidised employees were employed, but at the same time they emphasised training for the sake of developing social and job skills, rather than employment. In fact, the social workers recurrently talked about the subsidised employees not being ready for regular employment. For example, Patrik explained:

A landing strip for broken-down individuals. This is what this is. They never come here with a good social background, a good secure economy, a home. Some come here who had nothing. So, they have to start at a very low level. Some are a little over [the low level]. They see it [participation] as part of continuing a good social life. (Patrik, social worker)

Patrik described the complex social problems subsidised employees often struggled with when entering the labour market programme. The recurrent emphasis on the complex social problems of the subsidised employees, and not talking about the intervention as work, suggests that the virtual identity of the subsidised employees had not been institutionally and externally validated by the social workers (cf. Jenkins, 2008). This, in turn, may depend on how the social workers distinguished themselves from the subsidised employees. The social workers described themselves as role models for the subsidised employees, and in this process marked a clear difference between themselves and the subsidised employees.

But at all times it is about us being role models. So, we work in such a way that we are a norm that they can relate to. We are the ones who are normal in society, for them. That is how it is. (Lennart, social worker)

Lennart described himself and his co-workers as the 'norm', and in this process, subsidised employees are being categorised as deviating from the norm. Fredriksson (2022) shows that the role of labour market programmes, and thus the social workers, is to change and normalise service users who are constructed as not fitting into societal norms due to unemployment. Even though the social workers talked about role modelling as an important part of their intervention, this specific type of labour market programme practice can also have negative consequences for the subsidised employees, if the collective identity of persons with a job are not recognised by the social workers who are supposed to support them into regular employment (cf. Girardi, 2019; Govender, 2023).

Locked in?

By contrasting the subsidised employees' experiences with the social workers' experiences, our analysis reveals important insights into how and why a constructed community formed by the subsidised employees, alongside a lack of support to enter the regular labour market, can create potential lock-in effects in the labour market programme.

The subsidised employees' perspectives

In line with a number of previous studies regarding activation interventions in general (e.g. Hansen & Nielsen, 2023; Sunnerfjell, 2023), the subsidised employees in our study described how they enjoyed being in the programme, but also how it made them feel 'safe'. One of the reasons given was the fact they were working with people with similar backgrounds to their own:

Yeah, it is probably that there are many people with similar backgrounds who have come out of it. Everyone, you know, they have quite a lot of understanding of what you can go through and what, how you can, how you function. So it's good that way. [...] (Sven – subsidised employee)

The quote shows how the subsidised employees could relate to each other because of their similar backgrounds, and could engage in peer support. Johan explained: '...this is not an ordinary workplace. People who are here are dysfunctional for one reason or another' (Johan, subsidised employee). The experience of having similar

backgrounds gave them a shared understanding, which was used to create a community where the subsidised employees felt a belonging. The subsidised employees also described how they felt responsibility for each other, and especially for their own work team. For example, Kalle said: 'I know I must get up and go to work. If I do not show up, it hurts my team. You do not want to be like that with your team.' (Kalle, subsidised employee). The quote shows how the sense of community and the virtual identity of being a 'person with a job' also appeared to be intertwined.

An example of how the community was maintained by the subsidised employees was how they referred to the labour market programme as 'the house' and the positive associations connected with the house. For example, Fatima said: 'The house wants to help all people who come here. And it [the house] wants to give, you know, they [the unemployed] need jobs, and it [the house] actually helps.' The house provided meaning for the subsidised employees, and it can be interpreted as having become, and having been used by the subsidised employees as, a 'boundary-expressing symbol' for their community (cf. Cohen, 1985, p.15). The fact that the subsidised employees used the concept of 'the house' for their community may also help explain why they had not created a collective 'nominal identity' (cf. Jenkins, 2008). Perhaps there was no need for such a nominal identity when they all belonged to 'the house', thus suggesting that community and their virtual identity of being a 'person with a job', rather than a shared group name, was more important for the subsidised employees.

The strong sense of community may also be a key source of the potential lock-in effects because it seemed to make the subsidised employees hesitant about leaving the programme. When the subsidised employees were asked about their future and the social workers' support in transitioning to regular employment or pursuing other goals, the most common response was that the social workers did not encourage or mention leaving the programme:

Interviewer: Are you getting support to look for other jobs while you are here?

Josephine: No.

Interviewer: Not from anyone? Do you get tips on courses or anything else?

Josephine: No. I feel good here.

Interviewer: Okay. So you are thinking that now that you work here you are not looking for other jobs? You want to be here?

Josephine: Yes. (Josephine, subsidised employee)

Josephine experienced that the social workers did not encourage her to apply for other jobs, nor did she seem committed to seeking employment on her own, thereby providing an example of how the lock-in effect can occur. Our interviews show that the subsidised employees often opted to stay in the programme for as long as possible, even if it meant not transitioning to full inclusion in the labour market. While research has highlighted the risks of becoming locked into an intervention (Thomas & Walter, 2010, Card et al., 2018), the subsidised employees we interviewed did not seem to perceive the lock-in as a risk, but rather as a sense of belonging (cf. Cohen, 1985).

While most of the subsidised employees interviewed described a strong sense of community, which made them not want to leave the programme, some also expressed doubts that regular employment was a viable option for them: 'I'll see how long I can stay here. If I know myself, I won't be looking for a job in the first place. Because I can't imagine an industry job, and what else could I apply for?' (Arne, subsidised employee). Leaving the programme could also risk returning to social assistance, as Zara described it: 'Then if I don't find [a new job] or get an extension to this job, I will have to go back to social assistance.' As we interpret the quotes, they symbolise an uncertainty with regard to becoming included in the labour market if they leave the programme, where the constructed community of 'the house' provides feelings of safety, and fosters a sense of belonging. Hence, while lock-in effects can be manifested by a reduction in job search activity during the intervention, our analysis provides insight into why job search activity may decrease, and how it may be related to how collective identities are constructed into strong communities within the labour market programme and uncertainties around what the future will hold.

The social workers' perspectives

The social workers also confirmed that their experience was that the subsidised employees felt a sense of belonging, safety and enjoyment during the programme. In that sense, the social workers recognised the community constructed by the

subsidised employees (cf. Cohen, 1985). However, the social workers raised concerns with regard to the subsidised employees' inclusion in the labour market by conceptualising it as a 'lock-in effect':

David: This easily becomes a dilemma, I won't say that they enjoy [the programme] too much, but they enjoy being in these work teams so much that they don't want to leave either.

Göran: They feel safe here.

Erika: Yes.

David: It easily has a lock-in effect of sorts. But I think that is often the case in social work. That it's so easy to lock in people. (David, Göran and Erika, social workers)

The social workers recognised a potential lock-in effect inherent in the labour market programme, and connected it to the participants enjoying being in the programme.

Anna replied to David's comment above about the lock-in effect as follows:

They think it's a pretty hopeless situation. They have applied for jobs. And they don't get jobs. At the same time, they may not have put in as much energy as they should. [...] the only experience they have of being successful is when someone has given them a job, like here [in the programme]. Then you almost expect that you will get a job elsewhere with the help of someone else. (Anna, social worker)

Anna's statement reflects criticism among social workers that the subsidised employees are 'not doing enough' to find regular employment, and to leave the programme. This corresponds to previous research concerning potential lock-in effects in subsidised employment programmes (Card & Hysop, 2009; Card et al., 2018). While it is in line with the principles of activation to place responsibility for unemployment upon the unemployed, a core concept of activation is also to support the unemployed to enter the labour market in different ways (cf. Fredriksson, 2022; Govender, 2023).

The role of the social workers in this process becomes important to highlight and address, as it risks having negative consequences for the individual subsidised employees. The majority of the social workers who were interviewed emphasised that their main task was to instruct the subsidised employees to perform the work assignments in each work team: '[...] the task of the social workers is about work and showing how to work and how to function in a work team. Yes, everything around that' (Ivar, social worker). The focus was on the work the subsidised employees did within the labour market programme, and not on support to enter the labour market.

However, the social workers also saw the lack of support to enter the labour market as a shortcoming of the labour market programme. Although support to find regular employment outside the labour market programme was available (as a matching intervention), this was often only to make use of just before the subsidised employment ended.

The timing was described as too late in the process. Instead, David called for the labour market programme to plan:

Maybe a little more long-term, or that you plan already in advance for how to proceed. Even if you don't know the person [the subsidised employee], you can at least have a plan there. (David, social worker)

We understand this quote from David to be an expression of the concern that keeping people active through activation interventions such as subsidised employment does not automatically lead to inclusion in the labour market, which previous research also highlights (Hansen, 2018; Fredriksson, 2022). Instead, we believe that the potential lock-in effects should be understood as an interaction between, on the one hand, the constructed community of the participants, which brings a sense of belonging, and on the other hand, the organisation of the subsidised employment, where the focus is primarily on carrying out work tasks, and not on supporting the subsidised employees to obtain regular work until the end of the intervention. However, there appears to be a tension between the goals of the labour market programme and social workers' identity construction of participants as 'not-ready' for the regular labour market. It is inclusive if this construction of participants is intentional or not, but it clearly affects the implementation of social policy, and therefore the outcomes for participants.

Concluding discussion

Subsidised employment has both been described as a successful intervention for labour market inclusion, and as an intervention with a high risk of lock-in effects due to low job search activity. While lock-in effects are frequently mentioned in previous research, little attention has been paid to understanding *why* job search activity becomes low during subsidised employment interventions. Our findings of how the subsidised employees constructed a virtual identity as 'a person with a job', and simultaneously constructed a community named 'the house', provides intriguing

insights into how subsidised employment can both be a success story and, at the same time, create lock-in effects. We found that: 1) the gratitude of being 'a person with a job' and having a salary; 2) the fear of failure on the regular labour market and the risk of returning to social assistance; 3) the sense of belonging in 'the house'; 4) the lack of support to enter the regular labour market; and 5) social workers' identity construction of participants as 'not-ready' for the regular labour market, can help to explain why lock-in effects can occur in the labour market programme.

Our results show how potential lock-in effects may not be of the same concern for the subsidised employees as they are for the social workers. The results indicate how very important subsidised employment is for people who have been long-term unemployed and excluded from the labour market. The importance is connected to being able to leave the stigmatising social assistance system, and having the opportunity to construct an identity that is in line with the Swedish worker ideal (cf. Dahlstedt, 2013). Previous research shows how stigma, shame and a lack of recognition tend to obstruct the path towards inclusion in the labour market (Girardi et al., 2019; Govender, 2023), although subsidised employment may decrease feelings of stigmatisation associated with being unemployed and lacking self-sufficiency (Hultqvist & Hollertz, 2021).

A vital aspect is the improved financial situation the subsidised employee finds themselves in at a time when a few hundred euros per month can make an enormous difference for low-income households. Subsidised employment can therefore be a 'success' for the subsidised employees, even if they become locked in, and are still not included in the labour market after leaving the programme. Even though there clearly are some benefits for the subsidised employees, there is a risk that subsidised employment becomes a form of 'marginalised inclusion' in the labour market when the subsidised employee does not want to, nor are they properly supported to, leave the labour market programme for regular employment. This is amplified when the labour market has high thresholds, and thus is unable to include individuals who have been unemployed long term, which previous research suggests (Behrenz & Månsson, 2023). In that sense, subsidised employment largely becomes a form of borderland between work exclusion and work inclusion, offering the subsidised employees temporary relief from work exclusion. In order to avoid lock-in effects,

attention needs to be directed at the labour market, and not only directed at people who are already in a marginalised position.

As municipal labour market programmes vary in size, structures, methods and target groups, both in Sweden and internationally, any generalisation of the results of this limited qualitative study must proceed with caution. However, the study highlights the need to focus more on subsidised employees' experiences of interventions to understand when and whether activation really is a 'success story', and for whom that success is provided. Future national and international research could develop and test these results further, and comparative quantitative studies could benefit from empirical details of service delivery of Swedish subsidised employment in order to increase understanding of why effects can differ (cf. Clasen et al., 2016). By extension, the results can then be used for policy development with regard to activation interventions for unemployed individuals who are not yet established in the labour market.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (2018). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Bazeley, P. (2009). Analysing Qualitative Data: More Than 'Identifying Themes'. *Malaysian Journal of Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 6-22.
- Behrenz, L., & Hammarstedt, M. (2014). *Utvärdering av nystartsjobb i Växjö kommun: Sluttrapport*. Linnæus University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:772785/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Behrenz, L., & Månsson, J. (2023). Why don't employers hire long-term unemployed entitled to a wage subsidy? The employer's perspective on subsidised employment. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 44(1), 161-183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X211064338>
- Card, D., & Hyslop, D. R. (2009). The dynamic effects of an earnings subsidy for long-term welfare recipients: Evidence from the self sufficiency project applicant experiment. *Journal of Econometrics*, 153(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconom.2009.03.013>
- Card, D., Kluve, J., & Weber, A. (2018). What works? A meta analysis of recent active labor market program evaluations. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 16(3), 894–931.
- Clasen, J., Clegg, D., & Goerne, A. (2016). Comparative Social Policy Analysis and Active Labour Market Policy: Putting Quality before Quantity. *Journal of Social Policy*, 45(1), 21-38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000434>
- Clasen, J., & Mascaro, C. (2022). Activation: A Thematic and Conceptual Review. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 32(4), 484–494. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287221089477>
- Cohen, A. P. (1985). *The symbolic construction of community*. Ellis Horwood. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203323373>
- Dahlstedt, M. (2013). The Politics of Labour Market Activation: Employability, Exclusion and Active Citizenship. *Revija za sociologiju*, 43(1), 5-29. <https://doi.org/10.5613/rzs.43.1.1>
- Denscombe, M. (2010). *The good research guide: for small-scale social research projects*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Engdahl, M., & Forslund, A. (2019). *Vilka tar del av nystartsjobb och andra subventionerade anställningar*. IFAU - Institutet för arbetsmarknads- och utbildningspolitisk utvärdering.
- Forslund, A., Wasah, P-E., Ulmestig, R., Vikman U., Waernbaum I., Westerberg, A., & Zetterqvist, J. (2019). *Kommunal arbetsmarknadspolitik. Vad och för vem?* IFAU - institutet för arbetsmarknads- och utbildningspolitisk utvärdering. <https://www.ifau.se/Forskning/Publikationer/Rapporter/2019/kommunal-arbetsmarknadspolitik.-vad-och-for-vem/>

- Forslund, A. (2018). *Subventionerade anställningar: avvägningar och empirisk evidens*.: IFAU - institutet för arbetsmarknads- och utbildningspolitisk utvärdering.
<https://www.ifau.se/Forskning/Publikationer/Rapporter/2018/subventionerade-anstallningar--avvagningar-och-empirisk-evidens/>
- Fredriksson, M. (2022). *Fostran till Anställningsbarhet*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Mälardalen University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1627381/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Frost, L., Magyar-Haas, V., Schoneville, H., & Sicora, A. (2021). Shame and social work: An introduction. In L. Frost, V. Magyar-Haas, H. Schoneville, & A. Sicora (Eds.), *Shame and social work: Theory, reflexivity and practice*. Policy Press.
<https://doi.org/10.56687/9781447344070>
- Girardi, S., Puglignano, V., & Maas, R. (2019). Activated and included? The social inclusion of social assistance beneficiaries engaged in “public works”. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 39(9/10), 738-751. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-01-2019-0023>
- Govender, L. (2023). *Crumbs from the Rich Man's Table?: Municipal Labour Market Policies and Recognition of Welfare Recipients in Sweden*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Linnæus University. <https://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1755046/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Hansen, C. H. (2018). Recognition and gendered identity constructions in labour activation. *International Journal of Social Welfare*. 27(2), 186-196.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12294>
- Hansen, L., & Nielsen, M. (2023). Working Less, Not More in a Workfare Programme: Group Solidarity, Informal Norms and Alternative Value Systems Amongst Activated Participants. *Journal of Social Policy*, 52(1), 46-62.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279421000301>
- Hultqvist, S., & Hollertz, K. (2021). Individual need and societal claims: Challenging the understanding of universalism versus selectivism in social policy. *Social Policy and Administration*, 55(5), 940–953. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12680>
- Jacobsson, K., Hollertz K., & Garsten C. (2017). Local Worlds of Activation: The Diverse Pathway of Three Swedish Municipalities. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 7(2), 86-100.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2016.1277255>
- Jenkins, R. (2008). *Social identity* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2016.1277255>
- Johansson, H., & Hvinden, B. (2007). Nordic activation reforms in a European context. A distinct universalistic model?. In B. Hvinden, & H. Johansson (Eds.), *Citizenship in Nordic welfare states: Dynamics of choice, duties and participation in a changing Europe* (pp. 53-66). Taylor & Francis Group.

- Kruger, L. J., Rodgers, R. F., Long, S. J., & Lowy, A. S. (2019). Individual interviews or focus groups? Interview format and women's self-disclosure. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 22(3), 245–255.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1518857>
- Lødemel, I., & Moreira, A. (2014). *Activation or workfare? Governance and the neo-liberal convergence*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199773589.001.0001>
- Mörk, E., Ottosson, L., & Vikman, U. (2021). *Kommunal arbetsmarknadsanställning. Väg till arbete eller a-kassa?* IFAU - Institutet för arbetsmarknads- och utbildningspolitisk utvärdering. <https://www.ifau.se/Forskning/Publikationer/Rapporter/20212/kommunal-arbetsmarknadsanstallning--vag-till-arbete-eller-a-kassa/>
- Parsland, E. (2023). Ethnicising activation as a standard story in a Swedish municipal labour market programme. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 14(2), 269–282.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2023.2188484>
- Rubin, A. T. (2021). *Rocking qualitative social science: An irreverent guide to rigorous research*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503628243>
- SBU [Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services]. (2022). *Effekter av arbetsmarknadsinsatser för personer med varaktigt försörjningsstöd*. Statens beredning för medicinsk och social utvärdering (SBU). <https://www.sbu.se/sv/publikationer/SBU-utvarderar/effekter-av-arbetsmarknadsinsatser-for-personer-med-varaktigt-forsorjningsstod/?lang=sv>
- Sianesi, B. (2008). Differential effects of active labour market programs for the unemployed. *Labour Economics*, 15(3), 370–399.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2007.04.004>
- Stambe, R.-M. (2022). *Psychology, punitive activation and welfare. blaming the unemployed*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003112518>
- Sunnerfjell, J. (2023). *Un-learning to labour?: Activating the unemployed in a former industrial community* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Gothenburg.
<https://doi.org/10.13068/9789179243746>
- Thomsen, S. L., & Walter, T. (2010). Temporary Extra Jobs for Immigrants: Merging Lane to Employment or Dead-End Road in Welfare? *Labour*, 24(s1), 114–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9914.2010.00505.x>
- Vesterberg, V. (2016). *Ethnicizing Employability: Governing The Unemployed In Labour Market Projects In Sweden* [Doctoral dissertation]. Linköping University.
<http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A922827&dswid>