Title: The possibility of cooperatives: a vital contributor in creating meaningful work for people with disabilities

Introduction

To live in a society without meaningful work is to experience some form of ‘social suffering’ (Bourdieu, 1999) or ‘social injury’ (Brown, 1995). However, without attention to social support, certain members of society will experience this form of social suffering. Our research into the rich lived experience of members of a 20-year old workers’ cooperative in Brisbane, Australia – primarily made up of members who have disabilities – reveals the need for significant social support to ensure people can access meaningful work.

Drawing on the findings of our case study research conducted from 2015 to 2017, with the Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative (NCEC), Brisbane, and key local allies in their work, we argue for the importance of cooperatives as a vehicle for social and economic inclusion for people with disabilities. Cooperatives offer an alternative to the current marketised approach to employment placement and creation. While current neoliberal economic policy is focused on the efficient use of the market through atomised, flexible and mobile individuals, this case study pushes in the opposite direction; foregrounding the need for the kinds of social support and partnerships that community-based cooperatives can provide.

Cooperatives are a middle-way form of enterprise built on a long tradition of mutuality, in contrast to the efficiency tradition of capitalist enterprise and equality tradition of socialist imaginaries (see Restakis, 2010). We are not making an ideological case for cooperatives per se but emphasise them as one vehicle for creating meaningful work. We
argue that cooperatives provide an alternative to sheltered workshops, mainstream employment and current marketised job placement models, where the social is subjugated to the economic. Our research highlights that while cooperatives can possibly be a solution, a range of other supports is required. The case study shows that:

1. Cooperatives can provide meaningful social for people with disabilities;
2. That the cooperative model has huge advantages over mainstream open employment; and that,
3. There are significant professional inputs at multiple levels in diverse ways, with particular personal supports that are needed to sustain participation.

At the same time our research does not lead to the argument for replication of the specific cooperative under examination here, the NCEC. The research shows clearly that too many issues to do with good timing, right policy, and right people in right places, are needed; the success of NCEC was highly contextual and contingent. What usually gets focus are the financial mechanisms necessary to make these arrangements work. While recognising that such financial mechanisms are important, we argue for a range of other social practices that needs to also come into play.

The Importance of Work
There is little doubt that work is important in all peoples’ lives. Work has been linked to wellbeing, identity, skill development, self-esteem, confidence, and better health outcomes for all citizens (Sayce, 2011). Access to work enables increased economic wellbeing and higher social status. Socially there are also numerous benefits to working including the development of friendship, and a reduction in loneliness and social isolation (Sayce, 2011).
Employment is often used as a key signifier within contemporary society for social inclusion because it plays a substantial role in how individuals fulfill their citizenship duties (Rummery, 2006; Stancliffe, 2014; Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Morris 2001).

For people with disabilities the role of work is particularly important to explore as people with disabilities have been shown to be more likely to have poorer health (Sayce, 2011); be lonelier; be more socially isolated (Macdonald et al, 2018); and be unemployed or highly underemployed. The cyclic link between disability and poverty is well known, with poverty both a cause and effect of disability (Groce et al, 2011). Where people with disabilities have been able to gain employment, the work is typically menial and dirty, which according to Holmqvist (2009) actually creates a sense of disablement.

Australia shares a similar trajectory to many other countries. Data from a survey of disability, ageing and carers demonstrated that there has been little change in the labour force participation rates for people with disability aged 15-64 years between 1993 (54.9%) and 2012 (52.8%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Within the same time period the participation rate for work-age people without disability increased from 76.9% in 1993 to 82.5% in 2012 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The median gross income for a person with disability, aged 15-64 years was AU$465 per week, which is less than half the AU$950 per week average income of a person without disability (ABS, 2015). This suggests that the gap between policy rhetoric and practice has not narrowed, and despite the acclaim for the Convention on the Rights or Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and at least here in Australia – recognition of rights has not translated into economic and social inclusion. Evidence for this observation is that in Australia, the rates of social and economic inequality facing Australians with disability compared to their fellow citizens, are among the highest in the world (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011).
Historically the main means of employment for people with disability was through a segregated model of work known as ‘sheltered workshops’. Now called Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), these segregated sites currently employ about 20,000 Australians with permanent and significant disability (ADE web site: www.ade.org.au). However, as autonomy and choice become key words in Australia’s disability policy, widespread criticism has emerged of ADE models, with open employment recognised as the more socially inclusive employment option (Humber, 2013; Graffam et al., 2005; Hall and McGarrol, 2012; Laurent, 1998; Stancliffe, 2014; Tremblay, 2010). As Australian researchers Gooding, Anderson, and McVilly (2017, 18) observe,

…while employment has potential to promote social inclusion, attention needs to be given to the setting and form of the employment (including labour rights), and the additional policy and practical supports needed to foster inclusion in an employment context (for example, support workers assisting the person initially to understand workplace culture, or employing existing employees in a particular workplace to mentor the person).

How ADEs, and the people they provide employment to, transition to more open employment, and how this will play out in the context of the new National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is still emerging (National Disability Insurance Scheme, n.d.). However, what seems to be missing in this environment, at least in Australia, is policy support for alternative models of employment, that provide not only economic remuneration, but also enable avenues for social inclusion, belonging and identity. This is the space that our present research speaks to.

Studies on the social experiences of people with disabilities have often treated disability homogenously, yet recent research shows that there are very different experiences
for people with learning disabilities,¹ and psychiatric disabilities, compared to those with sensory and physical impairments (Macdonald et al, 2018). For example, while over 50% of the disabled population described feelings of emotional loneliness compared to only 15.5% of the non-disabled population, this increased to 63% for people with mental health issues, and to 74% for people with learning impairments.

Discussions on the challenges of employment for people with disabilities have tended to locate the problem in one of three places: in demand, in supply and in the broader system of production. Within the demand side of the equation the problem is located in the individual. The inability to find employment is framed as a deficiency in skill, experience, ability or work readiness (Lewis, Dobbs and Biddle, 2013). Consequently, policies have focused on ways to “motivate” individuals, usually with more sticks than carrots. Yet research shows that people with disabilities are complying with systems but not seeing any connection between the activities they are required to carry out and employment opportunities (Lantz and Marston, 2012). Lantz and Marston (2012, 865) refer to this as a “cultural insult” as people are actually highly motivated to work.

Moving the analysis to the supply side of the problem the argument is made that people have impairments but are made disabled by social barriers, through stigma, ignorance and discrimination (Kuznetsova and Yalcin, 2017). The response is to place an emphasis upon rights. In March 2007 Australia joined 80 other nations in signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights or Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). As would be familiar to readers of Disability and Society, the CPRD (2006) promotes, protects and ensures all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities (UN Division for Social Policy and Development Disability, 2018). People with disability are recognised as having the same rights as other citizens, to live in the community, to attend mainstream education,
participate in activities in their local community, and – pertinent to this article – engage in paid work. The right to work is upheld in the CRPD as “the right to work on an equal basis with others in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible”. However, research shows that despite these advances in human rights, changes to employer practices are not keeping pace. Employers name the financial cost of making adjustments as the key barrier to employing people with disabilities and argue for financial incentives (Henry et al., 2014; Kaye et al., 2011).

The third body of literature locates the problem in the larger capitalist systems of production and neoliberal ideologies. In this age, policies are geared towards the creation of responsibilised individuals, productive members of society (Juhila, Raitakari, and Hall, 2016). While this relocates the issue in individuals, it is also a more pessimistic view as it relegates certain members of society to the discard pile. The capitalist system works for the few at the cost of the many and there is no real desire for change. As Bates, Goodley and Runswick-Coles (2017) demonstrate, the current system not only creates but relies on a precarious workforce, of which people with disabilities are key members. Numerous commentators have noted that people with disabilities often have very negative experiences of mainstream work which fails to connect people socially and does not advance their skills, and that the benefits of work that flow for many people do not flow for them, but actually heighten their experiences of marginalisation and loneliness (Grover and Piggot, 2013b). Citizenship in liberal states is conditional on active and full participation in society (Harris, Owen and Gould, 2012), consequently neoliberalism can be seen to actually promote ableism (Goodley, 2014). Similarly,

Rather than context the system (capitalism), we should well, work it more responsibly – be more prudent in our spending and more committed in our labour … We are all
expected to overcome economic downturn and respond to austerity through adhering to ableism’s ideals, its narrow conceptions of personhood, its arrogance and its propensity to buddy-up with other fascistic ideologies that celebrate the minority over the majority (Goodley, Lawthom and Runswick-Cole, 2014, 980-981).

Given these challenges, a response then is to ask if we need to fundamentally question whether paid employment is the holy grail (Grover and Piggott, 2015), whether people with disabilities have a right not to work (Grover and Piggott, 2013a) and/or to expand the definition of “work” to unpaid work, volunteerism, charity work, and participation in social activities (see for example St. Martin, Roelvink, Gibson, and Graham, 2015; McGill, 1996). Proponents of the re-imagining of work argue that disability politics can lead the way in thinking about alternatives to neoliberal-ableist capitalism (Goodley, Lawthom and Runswick-Cole, 2014) and to broader understandings of citizenship (Abberley, 1999).

The problem with the re-imagining of work is twofold: first, it yet again relegates people with disabilities to the margins and assumes a second, lesser-valued path for “people like them”. In doing so it subtly and effectively undoes the advances made for people with disabilities. It does nothing to challenge disabling attitudes and practices, nor does it speak back to the system that keeps people oppressed, reinforcing the idea that people with disabilities cannot participate, or can only participate with people in spaces of charity – in other words, with other marginalised groups.

Second, while ideologically appealing, embracing “other spaces of meaningful activity” (Hall and Wilton, 2011, 874) re-imagining work does nothing to address the fundamental issue of people being kept in grinding poverty. The issue of whether people have a right not to work can only be argued in the context of arguments for a basic income for all, and as Mays (2016, 208) acknowledges, this is no easy task in neoliberal frontiers like
Australia where “ideologies of Commonwealth authority, conservatism sanctioned paternalism, and disablism…influence and shape disability income support measures”.

A final response is to look for pathways that position work as a paid endeavour, but that also privilege the social connections and networks that work provides – both with people with and without disabilities. The flexibility of these models enables supports to be put in place to help shape work around the individual – not to expect the individual to simply conform to the demands of the workplaces, but to be in a relationship of co-creation where the person and the organisation mutually shape each other. A number of authors exploring such options have examined models of work such as social enterprises, social entrepreneurship and self-employment and social collective workplaces (see for example, Harris, Renko and Caldwell, 2014; Neath and Schriner, 1998; Pagán, 2009; Roulstone and Hwang, 2015).

It is into this final response that the present research speaks by focusing on the experience of cooperatives that privilege mutuality, solidarity and community. The intention is not to frame cooperatives as an ideal employment model but rather to suggest that it represents a type of work model that may provide one solution to the employment challenges for people – particularly those with learning and psychiatric disabilities, and to challenge whether and how this actually works in practice. While many of the case studies of both traditional and alternative employment models have spoken to the vital nature of support for disabled people, we suggest that the particular case we discuss offers a unique arrangement that challenges not only employment, but the idea of employment support.

Cooperative policy context

Cooperatives have a substantive formal history, from the Rochedale cooperators of the 1800s through to the 2012 United Nations Year of the Cooperative. Globally there is a significant
The ‘cooperative sector’ has evolved in diverse ways across different countries, yet there is a consistent recognition of their different way of addressing issues of equality, work, and participation. From a global perspective, scholars such as Restakis (2010) and Gibson-Graham (2006) see cooperatives as offering a post-capitalist or/and humanising economy. However, from a meso-level perspective (between the micro-level of the individual and household, and macro level of policy and government institutions), research has identified the role of cooperatives in applying community development strategies focused on community control, local ownership, social enterprise development and community leadership development (Majee and Hoyt 2011; Roulstone and Hwang 2015; Nolan, Massebiaux and Gorman, 2013; Vicari 2014). Cooperative institutions have historically proven useful when improving the lives of disadvantaged or oppressed populations (Majee and Hoyt 2011).

Much of the literature has focused on the ‘conceptual components’ of cooperatives and their potential benefits for members, with findings confirming that members’ involvement in decision-making (a core cooperative principle) has a positive effect on job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Holland et al 2011; Farndale et al, 2011; Nolan, Massebiaux and Gorman, 2013). However, some cooperative social enterprises have been critiqued for their lack of participatory management and their orientation towards market-based principals. This can inhibit the degree of participation in the decision-making process, which is an integral part of social endeavours (Ohana, Meyer and Swanton 2012).

The above insights from the literature reveal a powerful affinity between cooperative enterprises, social inclusion and meaningful work. The need for further exploration into the
use of cooperatives in addressing gaps in disability employment services, and the effect on the lives of their members has guided our research and the development of our research questions (articulated below in the methodology section).

Within Australia a mix of welfare reforms include the possibility of including cooperatives as a way of delivering ‘services.’ For example, the Queensland Premier’s Department (located in Brisbane, the site of our research) is looking for different ways of doing business for the state to deliver especially in the context of the above-mentioned NDIS. In fact, our partner, the NCEC was highly motivated in this research endeavour to ensure we could influence the current policy debates occurring with Queensland, Australia, as one of those different ways is “cooperatives”.

**About the Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative (NCEC)**

The NCEC is a worker’s cooperative that was created to provide sustainable employment and training opportunities for people with a disability. This cooperative employs people at their Espresso Train Café in the Brisbane suburb of Nundah (http://www.ncec.com.au/), and also in a parks maintenance service that has mowing and garden maintenance contracts across Brisbane. Beginning in 1998 as a jobs club, the NCEC now has 26 members in total (20 men, six women), many – although not all – of whom have a disability. Of those with a disability, 80% of them have remained with the NCEC since its formation. The cooperative now generates over 5000 hours of work every year (Community Living Association (CLA) 2015). The cooperative has a manager and two supervisors (also members) that work in the Café and Parks crews, and are responsible for the daily business affairs, while governance and policy is a Board affair with all members able to participate. Significantly (as the findings will show) the cooperative works alongside the non-profit community organisation, Community Living
Association (CLA) that provides on-going social work support to members. This latter organisation is crucial in that it plays a key part of the social support work for members of the cooperative who have disabilities.

On the eve of their 20th Anniversary, the management committee approached the researchers to identify and more clearly capture the experiences of cooperative members with an intellectual disability, learning difficulty and mental illness within the Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative. The next section details how we operationalised this research agenda.

**Methodology**

The research design was an action research project focused on the case study of the NCEC. The action research component involved key people within NCEC and CLA wanting to be clearer about the effectiveness of their work, and to also be more conscious of issues arising from members. They were particularly interested in the action research project helping identify ways to increase worker democracy (a key tenant of the international cooperative movement), particularly, how members/workers with disabilities could participate more actively in governance of the cooperative. All worker-members had formal participation rights, but there were challenges around every-day practice.

These key people also, as above, wanted to be more confident about their work as they attempt to influence key disability related policy debates occurring in Australia right now. More specifically, they sought to understand:

- What are the positive elements of the cooperative structure for members?
- How does the cooperative help foster meaningful work for its members?
- How does the cooperative create social inclusion for its members?
- What are members’ experiences of meaningful work and how does this
affect their lives?

- How do members envision their future within the NCEC?

The case study focused on the NCEC, but also on linked organisations, including current and past social work and community work professionals (over the past 20 years), current worker members (with disabilities), several policy professionals, and documents. Our sample included 10 professionals who have provided significant input into the set-up and consolidation of NCEC over the past 20 years, including the current manager/member and two supervisors/members. These 10 people were social workers and community development professionals. We also interviewed three policy professionals, employed by local and state government who had input into the work. Finally, eight of the twenty worker-members, who live with disabilities, were interviewed. Throughout the analysis and findings we refer to these eight participants as workers. All people are deidentified, and we use pseudo-names in presenting any data.

In discussion with the organisation we identified three key areas that they were interested in. First, *people* and their ‘lived experience’ – namely, exploring member’s experiences of being a member, worker, supervisor and so forth within the story of NCEC. Second, *practice* that is crucial within the NCEC story, particularly the ‘inputs’ from professional community workers, social workers (e.g. clear that people coming from long-term unemployment have needed social work support to help with life issues outside of work, and also to help other coop workers understand people’s experience), and other supports (such as the role of CLA as a key partner supporting the coop, conceptualised as a people’s organisation). Third, *policy* analysis that is shaping the lives of individual members of the cooperative, and the cooperative as a whole; and analysis of the kind of policy that would be required to support similar initiatives to NCEC – including social policy, disability policy, but contextualised within a broader analysis of globalising labour policy.
Based on these conversations, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate way of gathering data, as it provided rich, contextually located data (Cresswell 2013, 24), while also valuing the contribution of participants as the most reliable source of knowledge on problems affecting them (Van den Hoonaard 2012, 2). Structured interviews were undertaken with the 13 social work and community development and policy professionals. For the workers’ component, we used a narrative approach, chosen as the best way to approach the collection of personal experiences needed to answer our research agenda. Denborough (2006, 47) notes the transformative and empowering effects that narrative processes can have on individuals who share their story in a trusting environment. Narrative research served to draw together elements of people’s stories to convey a meaningful continuum of participant’s past and present circumstances (Polkinghorne 1995, 12).

Alongside these narrative interviews with workers we also utilised visual methods as “visual image has been seen to empower those from disadvantaged groups through creating enhanced choice and control through the research process” (Kearns 2014, 506). We adopted two visual tools called a Relationship Map and the People Tree. The Relationship Map is an established visual method used in human service design and evaluation and in disability inclusion work (see for example, Inclusion Europe, 2013). The Relationship Map was used to contrast past and present relationships. This method allowed for a temporal comparison across participants to clearly identify trends in the number and quality of their relationships. The Relationship Map addressed one of the central concepts of social inclusion and showed how this manifested through the relationships each person has formed while working at the NCEC. People were able to identify who was in their lives at the start of their work with the NCEC, and who was in their life now, and the nature of those relationships – whether they were family, friends, co-workers, or professionals paid to be with them.
The People Tree is a visual resource that shows people situated in different positions and levels on a tree – for example, some are depicted as confident and high up the tree, others are slipping down the tree, or holding on to someone, others are leaning out to help someone else. Locating themselves visually helped to draw out individual’s experiences of meaningful work, through self-identified moments of changing perceptions of self-worth and accomplishment. Furthermore, the use of the People Tree created a new form of engagement, helping members to think “differently about issues” and elicited “information which would possibly have remained unknown otherwise” (Bagnoli 2009, 560).

These two tools were utilised to facilitate a dynamic understanding of lived experiences with cooperative members. Similarly, the combination of methods allowed us to uncover stories of past and present turning points to map personal change. Triangulating data by using three methods per worker provided rigour to our analysis while improving the reliability (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006, 320).

We applied thematic analysis to identify and describe both implicit and explicit themes within our data (Cresswell, 2013). We used comparative analysis at each stage of the process to identify, compare and contrast themes across transcripts in order to understand the abstract social and personal processes within the data. This allowed our conclusions to be grounded in and informed by, the subjective feelings and lived experiences of workers at the NCEC – an essential part of narrative research.

Finally, it should be said, that we, the two authors, have a long-term relationship with many people involved with the NCEC, and therefore removal of ‘bias’ is difficult. This long-term relationship creates a tension within action research as the ‘agency’ agenda (founders and workers of the NCEC) is usually to validate the effectiveness of their work, whereas an academic agenda is to be ‘objective without objectivism’ as Pierre Bourdieu puts it (Bourdieu, 1977). That is, we have attempted to be rigorous in our data collection and
analysis, using a variety of methods (described above) accurately depicting the story of people’s experiences.

Findings

The Positive Elements of the Cooperative for Workers

Workers expressed many positive elements about the cooperative. Various themes emerged that relate to the research questions, and the following discussion explores how the cooperative delivers outcomes for members and how members experience these outcomes. The ways in which meaningful work is co-created and the transformative effects that the people within the cooperative have on members’ lives will also be discussed. Our findings highlight how the cooperative network devotes the time to care for its members, to facilitate their needs, empower their voices and encourage their skills to be utilised. Both the cooperative structure, as well as the role of the two supervisors and the manager, were found to play a key role in facilitating positive.

Respect and Care

An understated and yet strong theme emerging from analysis of the data is that members felt respected and cared for, as individual people, not just workers. Seven out of eight participants who have a disability said they feel personally supported by their supervisors and the manager. These participants expressed that they are listened to and are encouraged to speak up through regular one-on-one meetings with the manager of the cooperative. For example, Elliot focused on key values such as respect, and getting help when needed:

I wanted to find a job that I could fit in…basically find something that would help me with my disability…where I am here people really treat you like respect and that,
when you need help you can just ask them and talk to [coordinator] or somebody and they can sit down and talk to you about it, and you really know that they’re listening. [Elliot]

Although these interactions are casual, these simple words indicate a profound experience of being cared for at work.

While workers still respect their supervisors as figures of authority and leadership, six workers talked about their supervisors as ‘mates’ (colloquial terms of affection and friendship in Australia), and people who respect them for who they are. Speaking of his supervisor, Brett reflected,

He respects us for who we are, he treats us like who we are. You know, there’s no, “oh you’ve got a disability, or you can’t do this.” [Brett]

The social barriers between ‘boss and worker’ are seen to be less apparent within the cooperative compared to previous workplaces. This was seen to be primarily due to the caring attitudes of supervisors towards members. The kind of close relationships that seemed to exist between the manager and workers cultivated an environment where members felt valued for who they are. These findings suggest that the complex needs of people with disability can be met through this respectful and personal environment.

**Supporting Worker’s Autonomy**

The care and respect, as previously mentioned, which supervisors and the manager shows to workers, is strongly linked to a flexible work environment that respects the limits of
members’ capabilities, while also encouraging their participation. For example, Brett shared how,

…he supports us in doing what we are doing. He stands back and all that, he just lets us do what we do. But if he sees that we’re taking the wrong track he’ll step in and say, “Do you think you’re doing the right thing here?”

The narrative illuminates how supervisors respect workers’ capacity to solve situations and correct mistakes without intrusive instruction, thus supporting workers’ autonomy. This finding also illustrates that when supervisors do step in to solve new problems, they engage in a ‘working-with’ or collaborative approach with the aim of creating an empowering work environment such that workers gain confidence rather than lose it.

Clark, a member of the parks crew, reflected on the encouragement he receives from his supervisor: “My boss, like Ian, tells you, you are doing a good job.” For two workers, being able to reflect on their mistakes during a probation period was a significant part of this flexibility as it reaffirmed the employment focus of the cooperative and ensured workers were not fearful of dismissal for making mistakes. In this same vein, a non-hierarchical leadership style was also identified as creating a comfortable environment.

The respectful and understanding attitudes of the supervisors towards disability appeared to open up space for workers to feel relaxed and comfortable while having control over their everyday work experience. Literature on the mechanisms to foster meaningful work for people with a disability is sparse, however, the behaviours of the supervisors shows an attempt to operationalise the values associated with meaningful work such as helping employees feel accepted, confident and happy. As Yeoman states, this process creates a work environment that gives purpose to those people’s lives (2014, 246).
A Socially Inclusive Environment

A socially inclusive workplace has been developed by the NCEC that does not segregate, but ensures that people with a disability feel included. The cooperative creates a socially inclusive environment where workers can create friendships and other forms of generative relationships both in the NCEC and the wider community. Analysis of the Relationship Maps depicted the support networks that members had both prior to and after joining the NCEC organisation. The Relationship Maps indicate that most workers expanded their social networks after they joined the NCEC. Most workers spoke highly of the relationships they had built since starting at the NCEC. Brett eloquently demonstrates the importance of having social networks:

I’m just making it in my own world. And work has helped me do that because at the end of the day, I’ve got networks... Now I can make it because I know there’s a couple of networks in my life that I can rely on.

It is evident that the cooperative provides an environment that fosters and builds social networks for its members. This socially inclusive environment is key to creating a supportive and enjoyable working environment for its members. The analysis of all eight interviews with people living with disabilities made clear that the relationships built between co-workers are both friendly and positive.

Daniel shared how these relationships can sometimes turn into friendships outside of work, sharing how, “I met Nathan at the co-op and ended up getting along with him and ended up going to a show together.” In addition, George who works in the parks crew, expressed how he experiences an inclusive environment at work:
Like you’re not doing a job, more like you’re getting to know someone while doing some hard labour. That’s fine, that’s what I look for in work. And this crew is definitely that.

Furthermore, Allen, a worker in the café, demonstrates that social inclusion is not only happening within the workplace, but that the NCEC helps build a relationship bridge to the outside community of Nundah:

But people who are in the Nundah community who come and have their coffee and get to know the people, it connects NCEC to the whole Nundah/Northgate community…getting involved in the community and talking to people that I don’t know.

These findings indicate that the cooperative provides a working environment where relationships within the community are of high importance and friendships formed at work can lead to time spent with each other outside of work.

However, one participant’s experience showed divergence with these findings. Fiona stated, “I don’t have time...I don’t have that flexibility that the other ones do. They go out, but I can’t go out.” Fiona makes it clear that while she enjoys working with everybody she doesn’t have the same time outside of work to socialise and form closer relationships like the other members do. For Fiona, the work is more important for her than the relationships.

Members’ Experiences of Supportive Work Environment
All workers interviewed spoke of experiences of past work that were unsupportive in comparison to the NCEC. When comparing these experiences, an overwhelming majority of workers expressed appreciation for the balance of respect, care and autonomy offered by supervisors at NCEC. The inclusive and supportive environment within the cooperative produces a meaningful work environment for all members that were interviewed. As a consequence of this, all workers expressed that their work at the NCEC has positively affected their overall wellbeing. These sentiments confirmed the literature on meaningful work and the ways it can affect people’s lives (Freedman and Fesko 1996; Leufstadius et al 2009; Dunn, Wewiorski and Rogers 2008).

This meaningful work environment fosters feelings of acceptance, equality and belonging, according to all participants. The community focus of both the café and the parks crew provides employees with a connection to their local community, and through this connection, they feel accepted for who they are. Half of the workers expressly commented on the value they gain by interacting with their local community as a part of their job, and this has been highlighted as a way that meaningful work is fostered. Clarke expressed the feelings of pride he gains as a result of seeing how the community benefits from his work. He stated that he leaves work “feeling good because you have done something for yourself and proud because you have some something for the community.” Overall, the findings demonstrate that the NCEC provides members with a supportive environment for employment, but provides people with work that adds meaning to their lives.

**Meaningful Work as a Facilitator of Personal Change**

Our study found that for people with disabilities there was a struggle to find and maintain meaningful employment within orthodox mainstream employment. All of the workers stated in one way or another that they either received no support from their past employers with one
worker summarising, “[they] didn’t help me one bit”. This shows a clear trend of people struggling to find work that supports and understands them as people. In comparison, seven out of eight of the workers we spoke to, stated that their mental health had improved since they started working within the NCEC and that they have a much better relationship with their employers and co-workers then at their past jobs. For this reason, one key theme that emerged in our data was “personal change”.

When expressing how their lives have changed since working at the NCEC, three workers directly expressed that their mental and emotional health is much better than it was in previous jobs. Daniel said he is doing “a lot better in the head”, while Brett supported this by saying:

Now I’m just making it my own way, and instead of mum and dad getting 30 phone calls a day, they get five on a bad day… there was a long period of just hanging in there…surviving, not enjoying life as much. Now it’s more enjoyment, being able to have those networks, socialise a bit more, have a better life, do the things that I want to do.

Similarly, George highlighted that:

I think I’m happy with the way everything’s going at the moment; I mean my life is going really well, my mental health has been stable, I’m really enjoying the work.

These stories of personal change and achievement were also reflected in the People Trees that were used as a visual method for documenting individual’s subjective sense of transformation. As Brett poignantly stated, “This job has helped me to become the person I am”. Their work at the cooperative has also given members goals for the future, not only in
regards to working there, but also within their own personal lives. Many workers stated that they look forward to having more independence in the future, through the skills and networks that they have developed at the NCEC. Workers also stated that they would like to take on more roles within their work at the NCEC. For example, Allan commented: “Things like getting involved in the café, going shopping for them, delivery for them, wiping the tables, but I really want more cooking as well”. Daniel added, “maybe being an extra hand, or being a foreman and teaching people how to work”.

By providing a uniquely supportive work environment, the cooperative has managed to make its mark on workers’ lives in transformative ways, by helping them to manage their disabilities, aspire to achieve future goals and to expand the scope of their lives.

**Having a Say**

The mantra of the NCEC is an inversion of the normal profit-oriented idea of, ‘employing people to make coffee’. By contrast, NCEC argues that it ‘makes coffee to employ people’. Thus, the NCEC reconstructs how workers are valued within their workplace. The emphasis on workers at the NCEC is primary. However, while a key tenant of cooperative ethos is not only employment, but worker democracy, our findings indicated that the degree of workers’ formal participation in the functioning of the NCEC, either on the board, or through attendance at Annual General Meetings, was sporadic. Six workers did not comment on their involvement in the organisational decision-making structures of the NCEC. In addition, one worker stated explicitly that ‘it is not a priority’, and another was not aware of his membership (and its meaning) and only one worker mentioned that they regularly attended AGM meetings. Therefore, findings indicate that workers’ involvement in the cooperative’s formal decision-making processes is not a high priority. This resonates with the analysis of the key people in NCEC and CLA who approached us to engage in this action research.
In contrast, in workers recounting their one-on-one casual meetings and check-ins with the manager or supervisors, it appears that they actively encourage workers to have their say in more informal ways. These *informal* meetings between supervisors and the manager and workers provide a safe and comfortable environment for members to express their concerns, as opposed to larger *formal* group meetings. There were no negative elements of the cooperative that workers felt were important to them, and any need for change in their personal involvement in the cooperative appeared to be facilitated by regular informal discussions with supervisors and the manager. As Elliott, a worker at the café, highlights:

> When you need help you can just ask or talk to [the supervisors or manager] or somebody and they can sit down and talk to you about it, and you really know that they’re listening.

Daniel supported Elliot’s sentiment by commenting that he catches up with the manager of the cooperative weekly, as a way for the manager to check in with him.

Three out of eight workers explicitly mentioned that the manager and supervisors at the café and within the parks crew encourage members to speak up about their concerns and make decisions on behalf of themselves. This idea is expressed by Brett, a worker within the parks crew, who raised the importance of having a say in the decisions of the cooperative as an organisation:

> I get to vote and have a part/say. Being a member, if I think something’s not right I can put my hand up and say, “Hey, I disagree with this”.
This highlights that the cooperative facilitates worker’s needs, as their voices are placed at the forefront of management’s concerns. However, there is, as per the action research focus, a dissonance in terms of worker democracy and formal participation in the cooperative governance.

**Discussion**

Drawing on our analysis above, three key points are made. First, that the case study offers a holistic model of meaningful work and employment. Second, that there is a crucial role for meso-level community organisations, re-orienting solutions to place-based practice. Third, our case study indicates a need to reverse the gesture of current policy regimes.

**A Holistic Model**

The case study demonstrates the possibility of cooperatives providing a holistic model of employment, integrating meaningful work, social inclusion, worker autonomy, and a space of respect and care. We have portrayed the analysis of the findings discussed in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: holistic model of economic participation and employment*

*Insert Figure 1 here*

Importantly, this holistic model not only integrates the social and the economic for people living with disabilities, but is also a model for re-socialising, and even democratising, workplaces for all people. This is a crucial point, shifting the cooperative approach away from a service-delivery paradigm for people living with disabilities, and towards a model of meaningful work for everyone, that is inclusive of, and able to respond to, the particular
social needs of all members. This echoes findings from Restakis (2008) in Canada and Roulstone and Hwang (2015) in the UK, that the power to participate directly in the decision-making, design and delivery of a service is perceived as essential to a cooperative philosophy.

Clearly, based on the findings, of significance to the success of the cooperative is the quality of the professional staff that are not only members working for themselves, but are also cognisant of the social needs of their fellow workers and members who are struggling with significant challenges related to their disability. This cannot be understated, and many of the participant narratives reported above illuminate this necessity. It could be argued that the quality of the cooperative as a social and economic innovation is dependent on the quality of those who have intentionally nurtured it over two decades.

This is not to say that there are not significant challenges in terms of formal worker democracy. As per one of the questions within the action research component of the project, that is, how to engage workers who live with disabilities participating formally in the governance of the cooperative, the research highlighted workers experience, and the need for experimentation in creative forms of governance participation.

**The Importance of Meso-Level Community Organisation**

Of importance to this case study are the linkages of the cooperative’s development with both a long-term community organisation (CLA) and also geographical place. This is usually understood to be the space of meso-level practice, mid-way between the micro world of individual and household issues, and macro-world of policy, legislation and large institutions (the market, government and so forth). In this case study, the meso-level, understood as place-based and relationship-oriented community, becomes organised through community-based organisation. By this, we mean that community-based organisation enables people in places to come together and make sense of their felt private issues (such as, ‘I can’t get
employment, what’s wrong with me’) and translate them into structured public work (‘we can create work together’). Community organisations are one of the key structural forms within which this ‘translation’ work can take place. Our case study strengthens the case that such meso-level community-based organisations are important to support meaningful work and social inclusion for people living with disabilities. In this case the NCEC and CLA also indicate the particular potential for joined-up meso-level work, one organisation more oriented towards the economic and the other to the social.

Unfortunately, in Australia, many such community-based organisations are collapsing under the weight of the audit-culture, over-regulation and the marketising of the social sector (Kenny, 2010; Shore and Wright, 2015).

**Reversing the Gesture of Current Policy Regimes**

Not only is the cooperative success linked to the quality of workers, but the history of the NCEC and the current practice are indicative of an approach to social and economic innovation that is adaptive, emergent, somewhat opportunistic, and experimental. This would align with what international development thinker Robert Chambers talks about as a paradigm of adaptive and participatory pluralism (Chambers, 2010). As per this paradigm, the development of the cooperative occurred as people came together, recognised particular issues, needs and opportunities in the context of deep listening, relationships and a willingness to collaborate with stakeholders who themselves were responsive. For example, professional workers, alongside people living with disabilities, linked to key personnel in local government, who facilitated social procurement, way before the time of ‘social procurement’ policy.

We argue that this confluence of people, practitioners, and street-level policy workers (Lipsky, 1980) enabled the cooperative to develop, and in many ways it represents a case of
‘positive deviancy’. While most policy supporting meaningful work for people living with disabilities has been oriented towards either mainstream employment or sheltered workshops, the cooperative represents a different way. This was made possible by values and expertise in particular practices – community development and developmental work, mutuality and cooperative enterprise, and collaboration across complex systems.

We are left asking ourselves, in the context of increasing regulation and prescriptive policy regimes, ‘What would it take in a policy space to enable such practices to flourish?’ The preferred gesture of policy makers is blueprint oriented, with ‘one-size-fits-all’.

**Conclusion**

The case study is really the story of what solidarity and mutuality can achieve, and of one way of overcoming the social distress or social injury of not having meaningful work. First, the case study evidences the employment benefits of solidarity among the cooperative members. Cooperative members, particularly those living with disabilities, experience meaningful work in the context of a socially supportive and democratised cooperative workplace. However, unlike sheltered workshops, they are not segregated from society or congregated only with other people with disabilities, but experience solidarity with a range of people in an everyday setting in community. A holistic model that integrates the social and economic is articulated.

Second, our research shows the possibilities of joined-up cooperative efforts between community-based meso-level organisations – the NCEC and CLA. It highlights that there is an important role for ‘organised’ community – in the form of community organisations working together to address local issues. Overall, the social solidarity of cooperative efforts can act as a counter-force to an economically oriented society that is often dismissive of community-based responses. We see the 20-year legacy of this cooperative’s work as
supporting the ideas of Harris, Renko and Caldwell (2014) who suggest that an attitudinal shift is needed to counter reductionist perspectives of disability as a limitation or risk, to seeing it as an investment in the potential of people’s ideas. Significantly, this is a case study that tells the story of more than 20 years of work – it is not a ‘flash in the pan’ social experiment - but the story of meaningful work sustained over a long period of time. Because of this longevity and sustainability, the case study also illuminates a way policy-makers could think afresh – through the paradigm of adaptive and participatory pluralism – focusing on how to create the conditions for experiments such as the NCEC to flourish.

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[1] For the purposes of this journal we have adopted the UK definition and use the language of learning disabilities to refer to intellectual disabilities. In Australia, a distinction is made between intellectual disabilities (which includes cognitive impairments) and learning disabilities (also called Specific Learning Disabilities which refers to neurologically based processing difficulties resulting in challenges in reading, spelling, writing and maths – for example, dyslexia). See https://dsf.net.au/what-are-learning-disabilities/