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Balancing care and work: a case study of recognition in a social enterprise

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a case study of a Dutch work-integration social enterprise (WISE) to add to the debate on the contribution of employment to the citizenship of intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions. In current welfare state policies, the value of labour market participation is narrowed down to regular employment, as workplace support and care provisions are seen as stigmatising and segregating. We argue that a more nuanced understanding is needed of the intersection of support arrangements with the benefits of employment. Building on ‘recognition theory’ by the German philosopher Honneth, our findings show that the work-integration social enterprise under study is successfully balancing the contrasting demands of logics of care and work, leading to experiences of ‘recognition’. However, this balance is fragile and does not undo the misrecognition of disabled people as unable to live up to the productivity norms of a capitalist labour market.

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KEYWORDS

Alternative employment; social enterprise; recognition; labour market participation; intellectually disabled people; those experiencing mental health conditions

Points of interest

- This article discusses a qualitative case study of an alternative form of employment for intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions, a social enterprise. For the people who work in this social enterprise it is important that it is a commercial enterprise, but also provides a supportive and caring environment.
- This combination makes mildly intellectual disabled people and those experiencing mental health issues feel recognised both as contributing

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members of society and as people with certain needs. These experiences are contrasted with negative experiences in day care centres, sheltered workshops and regular employment.

- Labour market policies should not only focus on enhancing disabled people’s labour market participation but also on providing supportive environments for people’s needs.
- However, we also find that the positive work experiences are fragile and limited, due to the structural misrecognition of disabled people as unproductive within the capitalist mode of production.

**Introduction**

One’s status as a citizen is derived from one’s position in the labour market in meritocratic Western societies (Gleeson 1997). Disability-related public policies aiming to promote the full citizenship of mildly intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions therefore seek to further their access to mainstream employment under the heading of ‘active citizenship’ (Parker Harris, Owen, and Gould 2012), in particular through supporting the transition from care provisions and alternative employment arrangements to regular employment (Hall and McGarrol 2012). Since care provisions and adjusted workplaces are seen as segregating disabled people from mainstream society and enforcing dependency, it is expected that such a transition leads to a ‘civic’ instead of a ‘patient’ identity.

 Critics have pointed out how these policies are too narrowly focused on enhancing disabled people’s employability, and fail to take into account how workplace support and structural labour market adjustments are needed to accommodate mildly intellectually disabled people (Hall and McGarrol 2012; Wilson 2003), and those experiencing mental health conditions (Buhariwala, Wilton, and Evans 2015). As a result, those disabled persons who manage to transition successfully to regular employment have to face discrimination and social isolation (Hall 2005), the need to hide their impairment from colleagues (Irvine 2011), and a lack of perspective in low paid jobs at the bottom of the labour market (Hall and Wilton 2011; Reid and Bray 1997).

 Therefore, it is argued that an alternative perspective is needed on the contribution of employment to the full citizenship of mildly intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions. The benefits of participation in the mainstream labour market on the one hand, and the role of care provisions and alternative workplaces on the other should not be dichotomised, but understood as complementary ways to facilitate positive experiences related to employment, such as a sense of belonging and the experience of having a valued social role (see Hall and McGarrol 2012; Svanberg, Gumley, and Wilson 2010; Torre and Van der Fenger 2014).
Building on the concept of ‘recognition’ and the results of our case study of sheltered employment in a Dutch social enterprise, we develop such an alternative perspective. First, we discuss Honneth’s conception of ‘recognition’ (1995) as a framework to understand the different ways care provisions, workplace support and employment contribute to positive work-related experiences. Second, we employ this framework to our case study of a social enterprise which offers employment to intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the debate on the value of employment for people experiencing mental health conditions and mildly intellectually disabled people.

**Theoretical framework – recognition**

Recognition theory, as developed by the German philosopher Honneth (1995), is a political-philosophical theory which highlights the working of structures of inequality and exclusion, how they play out on the scale of interpersonal encounters and how this affects the development of a positive self-identity (see also Fraser, in Fraser and Honneth (2003), and Taylor (1994) for the philosophical debate on ‘recognition’).

Honneth maintains that a ‘positive relation-to-self’ is developed through three different forms of recognition: the recognition of one’s needs in relationships of love and friendship, the recognition of one’s legal rights as a citizen, and the recognition of one’s merits as a contribution to a community. The corresponding types of misrecognition violate the dignity of the person, produce feelings of suffering and shame, and hamper the development of a positive relation-to-self (Honneth 1995, 129). The theory highlights how social relations are institutionally mediated to facilitate or hinder recognition. Stigmatisation on an institutional level leads to misrecognition in interpersonal encounters.

Though recognition is mostly studied theoretically, some authors have used the theory to empirically study marginalised people’s experiences. For instance, Juul (2009) employs recognition theory to understand the nature and origin of the feelings of shame and disrespect, which constitute the experience of marginalisation of service users. Marthinsen and Skjefstad (2011) investigate how experiences of recognition are connected to an increase in self-confidence in a workfare training programme. Sebrechts (2018) uses the theory to understand how discourses of participation in the labour market affect the experiences of mildly intellectual disabled young adults in a transitional sheltered employment workshop. In line with these authors, we employ the theory as an interpretative tool to understand the way in which a workplace can facilitate experiences that contribute to
positive relations-to-self of disabled people, by responding to needs, respecting rights, and noticing and acknowledging strengths in the workplace.

We derive a conception of ‘care’ from recognition theory that differs from the dominant understanding in disability-related social policies and takes the problems into account that are pointed out within disability studies concerning ‘care’. In social policies, ‘care needs’ are understood as pointing to problematic dependence, which should be overcome by ‘independence’ (Hall 2011). This is in accordance with the critique in disability studies that ‘care’ labels disabled people as burdensome and non-autonomous, locates power with the caregiver, and promotes patronising attitudes towards recipients of care (Morris 1997; Shakespeare 2000, 2006). Recognition theory, on the other hand, indicates the double-sided nature of ‘care’: care can be problematic when needs are unmet or in a way that hampers a positive-relation-to-self. However, ‘care’ can also be a form of recognition if needs are met in a proper way. According to Honneth (1995), the three forms of recognition are interrelated and recognition of needs should thus not be considered without taking the recognition of rights and strengths into account as well. This alternative conception of ‘care’ aligns with the plea of various disability scholars to think of forms of care that respect autonomy and voice, such as ‘support’ and ‘assistance’ (see Kröger 2009, for an overview).

In this paper, we also reflect on the limits of positive experiences of recognition in the workplace. Danermark and Gellerstedt (2004) discuss recognition theory in relation to disability studies. They argue that recognition is limited in scope, since positive experiences of recognition are generally sought after in small, bounded communities, such as workplaces, whereas misrecognition is related to the societal stigmatisation of their condition as well as the structural marginalisation and deprivation rooted in socio-economic structures (see also Gleson 1997; Oliver 1990). As scholars have argued (see Danermark and Gellerstedt (2004) for an overview), in a capitalist society, workers who are less productive than others are devalued in the labour market. In our analysis we will build on this criticism and reflect on the ways in which positive experiences of recognition interact with the misrecognition tied to ableist norms of productivity.

The case – woodworks, a Dutch social enterprise

In the Netherlands, the turn to active citizenship (Newman and Tonkens 2011) has accelerated since the introduction of the Participation Act in 2015 (TK 2013/2014) and the accompanied decentralisation of the social domain from the central government to the municipalities. The Participation Act aims to improve access to employment in the mainstream labour market for as many people as possible, including disabled people. Sheltered
workshops (sociale werkplaatsen) have been closed down and municipalities are expected to create 125,000 new jobs nationwide for disabled people who formerly worked in those sheltered workplaces by 2025 (EU 2015; Sebrechts 2018).

Since the introduction of the Participation Act, there are three forms of ‘employment’ or ‘employment activities’ for disabled people in the Netherlands. First, day care centres offer activities such as painting or handicrafts for people with severe and profound disabilities under the guidance of social professionals. They are usually affiliated to a care organisation. A place in a day care centre can be permanent and the person has an income from cash benefits. Nevertheless, this is often framed as a form of ‘work’ by the care organisation. Second, there are ‘transitional’ sheltered employment workshops where people create products or perform services to develop skills for the regular labour market. In these workplaces, employees do not receive a salary but remain on benefits. Employment is supposed to be temporary. However, in practice, a lot of workers remain in these workshops for an indeterminate period (Sebrechts 2018). Third, there are so-called ‘adjusted’ regular jobs. In these positions, disabled people work in an organisation within the regular labour market, receive a salary, while the organisation receives a (flexible) percentage of this wage as a subsidy to cover the costs of their ‘limited productivity’.

Social enterprises are new in this field, and several municipalities in the Netherlands see them as appealing alternatives for sheltered employment and adjusted regular jobs (SER 2016, 23–24). Social enterprises are organisations that combine a social purpose with the financial purpose of profit-making in the marketplace (Katz 2014, 137). Some social enterprises aim to provide employment for disadvantaged groups; such SEs are called a work integration social enterprise (WISE) (Spear and Bidet 2005). Since social enterprises operate in the market economy, policy makers believe these organisations offer a more accessible form of mainstream employment for disadvantaged groups. It is argued that WISEs provide a space that is not bound to the conventions of the mainstream labour market due to their social purpose (Buhariwala, Wilton, and Evans 2015) and strike a different balance between the needs of the employee and the demands of the labour market (Hall and Wilton 2011). Therefore, the WISE provides an interesting place to study positive work experiences related to recognition.

The WISE under study is located in a medium-sized Dutch city (approximately 125,000 inhabitants) and is regarded by its municipality as successful in offering different forms of employment to disabled people. Woodworks (pseudonym) is a wood shop that produces design products which are labour intensive and sold for high prices. The two employers have a background in industrial design and wood sales respectively. Customers can
order their products online or contact the designer for customised product requests. Its social mission is to provide a workplace which is tailored to mildly intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions, by being flexible in their expectations and workplace arrangements. The social enterprise has two employers and one paid employee. They take care of the day-to-day coordination, contact suppliers and customers, and coordinate the employment of their employees with other parties involved such as social workers or job coaches. During the research period, sixteen male employees were working at Woodworks. Ten of them worked just a few hours a week, and six of them worked almost full time. They were all on cash benefits and did not receive a wage. Some of the employees are classified as ‘permanent and severe disabled’ and live in a care facility. For them, Woodworks is an alternative for the care centre’s own day care: the care centre pays Woodworks to provide day care. Other people, who are classified by the Dutch social policy as ‘mildly intellectual disabled’ or as having a ‘temporary reduced work capacity’ due to mental health issues, are supported by caseworkers to find employment. Woodworks is subsidised by the municipality to offer ‘transitional’ sheltered employment to them. A small number of these employees find regular employment after their employment at Woodworks. Others remain employed at Woodworks or switch to a different form of adjusted employment. Four former employees were interviewed during this study. One of them found a regular job in the distribution centre of a grocery store. One started studying in order to become a cabinet-maker. The other two found transitional sheltered employment in the fields of printing and gardening. To conclude, this WISE is framed as part of the mainstream labour market due to being a commercial company instead of a government organisation, but backstage it mostly functions as an alternative workplace that offers both day care and ‘transitional’ sheltered employment.

**Methods**

Fieldwork took place in the period of June 2016 to January 2017 with a two-phase design based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The first exploratory design consisted of open-ended in-depth interviews \((n = 12)\) to clarify the purpose and method of the WISE, as seen and experienced by the different stakeholders. To compare experiences with the practices in the workplace, we conducted forty hours of participative observations in the workplace (see for example Jerolmack and Khan’s discussion on the importance of observations 2014). In the second phase, a round of data was gathered with semi-structured in-depth interviews \((n = 16)\) with durations between one and two-and-a-half hours. In these interviews, we explicitly
asked how practices in the WISE lead to experiences of recognition and misrecognition. We identified recognition in statements about feeling appreciated, valued, or unconditionally accepted as a (worthy/full) human being, feeling respected, and feeling appreciated for contributions, or being proud of achievements. We operationalised statements about an absence or lack of these feelings, or negative experiences that contrast with feeling appreciated, or being proud as misrecognition.

To gain insight into all the different experiences with Woodworks, a wide range of respondents were selected, including the employers, (former) employees, their social workers and customers (see Table 1). Respondents were recruited by presenting the research in Woodworks, handing out information leaflets, and providing invitations through our gatekeeper (one of the employers). Some employees signed up voluntarily. Others were selected by the employers as we asked them for a group of respondents who could represent the group of employees as a whole (see Table 2). During the participative observations, we were able to talk informally with all the employees.

The interviews were conducted face to face \((n = 27)\) or by telephone \((n = 1)\). The face-to-face interviews were conducted at the workplace, with the exception of the interviews with former employees which were

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**Table 1. Overview of interviews per research phase \(n = 28\).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of interviews ((n))</th>
<th>Number of interviews ((n))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>first phase</td>
<td>second phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former employees</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job coaches</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Background characteristics employees and former employees \(n = 10\).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of (former) employees (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–40</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–50</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectually disabled</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health conditions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living independent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living independent, extramural care</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with parents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care organisation 24 hours a day</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conducted at home. All interviews were conducted in a closed room with only the interviewer and the participant. Before the interview took place, participants gave permission to record the interview. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded and de-identified. Field notes were written during and right after participant observations. The data were analysed using ATLAS.ti and coded into core themes.

Our recruitment methods in such a small-scaled company made employees potentially identifiable. During our fieldwork and analysis, we considered how this might have withheld respondents from making negative remarks about the company, as they have little options to change jobs. Their positive statements, however, accord with those made by former employees, who are no longer in this dependent position. Also, respondents were able to give a lot of different examples when we asked them to elucidate positive statements about the company. We interpreted this as an indication of the validity of the positive experiences expressed by the employees.

Findings

In this section, we discuss the results of our fieldwork. At the start of our study, the municipality and the employers told us how Woodworks is successful in facilitating positive work experiences for its employees due to being ‘a real company’. According to them, the disabled employees feel recognised because they do ‘real work’ and they are not in a care facility. This is in line with the discourse of active citizenship. However, we find that the practices that facilitated experiences of recognition not only consisted of the verbalised work aspect. Elements of care played an important role, but they were not mentioned as such. In terms of the Dutch philosopher Annemarie Mol (2008, 10), we see two different ‘logics’; a logic is a rationale of a practice, that is, what is appropriate to do at a particular site or in a particular situation. Whereas Mol juxtaposes the ‘logic of care’ with the ‘logic of choice’, we juxtapose the ‘logic of care’ with the ‘logic of work’. In the social enterprise we studied, the ‘logic of care’ refers to all the habits, practices and ways of dealing with each other that express a concern for each other’s needs, such as a ‘caring attitude’, ‘taking care of’, ‘looking after someone’ and ‘being supportive’. In line with our framework, the logic of care refers both to positive forms of care as well as problematic forms of care that patronise or stigmatise disabled people. The ‘logic of work’ refers to all the habits, practices and ways of dealing with each other that are referring to work within and around the SE as wage labour or employment. This reflects a widely held understanding of work around notions as ‘productivity’ and ‘market value’, which excludes for example housework, care work or emotional labour. We find that the combination of these two logics leads to
creative balancing acts to reconcile opposing expectations and interpretations of workplace situations. First, we elaborate how the two different logics are present in specific practices within Woodworks and how these logics lead to experiences of recognition for the employees. Next, we discuss how they are carefully balanced, and we end with showing the fragility of this balancing act and how it easily turns to misrecognition.

**Logic of work**

The employees are aware that their position at Woodworks is no regular employment. They did not apply for the job but were introduced to Woodworks by their job coach or their former day care organisation. For some, their position at Woodworks is treated as a step that should ultimately lead to regular employment at another company. However, the employers stress that this is a regular company and a regular job. They state that the people at work are ‘employees’, not ‘clients’, and stress the obligations and expectations that come with the job. Employees are expected to arrive on time, to work dedicatedly and to perform all tasks that are necessary to make the products, including those they do not like. For the employees, these expectations differ from most day care support or the sheltered work organisations where some of them worked before. One employee who previously worked in a sheltered workplace explained how previous work activities felt like ‘just hanging around’:

Interviewer: Can you please tell me how you were doing at the sheltered workplace?

Respondent: Well, actually everybody is just hanging around. People really don’t have a clue. The social worker asked me once: ‘Can you please scour the chair for me?’, but I was aware that this chair was scoured and painted already two days ago! (Former employee 2)

Working at Woodworks is positively contrasted with working in a sheltered workplace, because the work is regarded as a ‘real job’:

When I was at the sheltered workplace, I didn’t learn anything. You had to paint or pack those boxes. That was so monotonous … packing boxes eight hours a day! At Woodworks I found a real job in which I am able to learn something. I just want to see results and that is certainly the case at Woodworks. (Former employee 3)

I really appreciate having a real job and being able to produce something that will be sold. I am not working just to keep myself occupied. (Employee 1)

In contrast to sheltered workplaces, in Woodworks, the product orders determine what needs to be done on a day-to-day basis. Each morning, the employers inform the employees about the tasks for the day, the orders and the reactions of customers. In this way, despite elements that could undermine the sense of regular employment (the absence of a job application and
salary – which is considered in more detail in the following section), a ‘work logic’ is actively created by the employers.

Listening to the employees, we found that the work logic leads to a form of recognition, because they are doing work which is valued by others:

I think it is very pleasant for people to find out how the things they do for business or at their daily work is being valued. I don’t think there are people who don’t care about that. It is important to do things which are appreciated by others. In Woodworks I found a place in which I really can perform something. (Employee 3)

Well, some of my friends thought that people with an intellectual disability are not able to work. They were saying: ‘These people are not able to perform anything’. They looked down on me because of this idea. In my early days, I have been really bullied because of my disability and the notion that I couldn’t achieve anything. And now they find out, because I am working at Woodworks nowadays, even people with an intellectual disability are able to perform something! (Former employee 1)

By placing demands on the employees, people feel respected and valued. A social worker discusses the meaning for employees:

By putting demands on people, you show that you are taking them seriously. When you start with ‘Well, you can start one hour later tomorrow?’, do you think people are feeling recognised and valued? Nobody cares if I come in an hour later, and nobody cares if I shop up! (Social worker 2)

Employees take pride in the results of their collective work. Employees tell us that they show the product catalogue on the website to their family members, friends and social workers. An employee states the following:

Most of the guys [colleagues at Woodworks] like to work at Woodworks, because they feel appreciated by their employers and here [at Woodworks] they get the opportunity to participate. They take pride in helping to produce a table or a lamp which can even be found on the internet. (Employee 3)

One of the social workers of an employee also talks about how working on a product contributes to the self-esteem of an employee:

Well, Kees really likes producing something tangible. He is very excited when the product is finished and is shown on Facebook. Then I say: ‘Hey, you made it again!’ He is very proud. (...) He likes working on the SE, because he can produce beautiful design products. That is a huge difference compared to supported employment projects, such as the day care centre where he worked before. (Social worker 1)

Employees also talk about the opportunity to learn special skills necessary for producing the products. According to the workers they develop their own expertise by, for example, mastering a particular machine. One of the employees feels proud since he is able to work more independent while producing a special design table:
At a certain moment I just produced a table myself, I worked more and more independently. They told me how to do it and after I while I was just doing it on my own. I was very proud of myself. That was great. There are so many things you can learn at Woodworks! (Employee 1)

The opportunity to learn special skills and to develop a kind of craftsmanship leads to experiences that one has something to offer by doing a job very well.

In short, Woodworks is an enterprise, but employees are aware that their job at Woodworks is not a regular one. For some, it is an alternative form of day care support or sheltered work, since they worked at such places before and remain on benefits. For others, it is a step forwards towards a regular job, and they are aware that their position at Woodworks is only temporary. However, employers actively stimulate a ‘work logic’ within the day-to-day work routines. Employees are told that they work in the service of the company, not the other way around, and that the job comes with expectations. This work logic leads to a form of recognition: employees feel that they have something to offer to the company. They take pride in the resulting products and develop a sense of craftsmanship.

**Logic of care**

Though the employers stress that Woodworks is similar to any other workplace, it has remarkable differences. The workplace is arranged in such a way that the employees can work at their own level and pace. There is a concern for the needs of all the employees, which is indicative of the logic of care. For instance, there are many breaks, and the working hours are shorter than at regular workplaces. The employers have designed their production line in such a way that there are some simple, very structured tasks that provide a low-level entry for new employees and a doable job for employees who are not able to handle more complex tasks. When making a deal with a customer, the employers arrange a long deadline. Sometimes they themselves work overtime during evening hours without telling their employees, to avoid work pressure for the employees during the day. The employers put much effort into making the workplace comfortable for their employees but never mention this to them. Instead, they stress how the way things work at Woodworks could be the same at any other company.

Employees also do not refer to these adaptations in interviews and, most of the time, do not seem to be aware of them. However, they do feel that there is much tolerance for mistakes and for a lack of endurance. They contrast these experiences with former work experiences and their expectations about work in a regular company. According to them, the most important difference between Woodworks and other companies, is that failure to
achieve targets is not met with indifference, rejection or discipline, but with intensified care:

The employers in Woodworks say ‘no you did that wrong, you should do it like this’, but they will not scold at you. If you make a mistake, you make a mistake. Then, they say ‘well that can happen’. In addition, they also explain to you how it happened and what you can do about it. When I worked at my former workplace, they first scolded at me and only later they said ‘no you should have done it like this’. (Former employee 4)

We also found a logic of care in the relationship between the employees and employers. This caring relationship not only was supportive to fulfilling their tasks at the workplace, but turned out to be very important in itself. Employees gave numerous examples of commitment of the employers, such as accepting employees’ mistakes or relapses, taking into account their deficiencies, showing interest beyond work (e.g., maintaining contact with former employees), and talking with them about how they were doing:

At Woodworks they really listen to people, what are you running into? What kind of problems do you have? You are not immediately being ridiculed or laughed at if something goes wrong. People are not immediately scolded at or fired, which is the case in many other companies, when you make mistakes. (Employee 3)

Yes, you can actually tell everything to the employers. If you don’t feel comfortable, they will listen to you. So yes, that is quite a different kind of employer, in comparison to what I’m used to. Under the previous employer I also had a relapse [because of using drugs] and he just got furious. He said ‘We have things to produce here, so we expect something from you’. However, the employers at Woodworks just start a conversation with you, they remain calm, they try to understand what is it that you really need. (Former employee 1)

We also heard several positive stories from employees about how the employers did something that stressed a personal bond. One of the employees for example was very attached to his own, very old, worn earmuffs. He did not want to switch to one of the pairs that were available in the workplace. Suddenly he got a present from one of the employers: a new pair similar to his own earmuffs. The employer told him how he had searched all over the Netherlands to find this specific pair and this made the employee feel valued. The following anecdote by a former employee describes how he feels about the employers’ personal approach:

They [the employers] also try to help many people. Like Michel, who also works at Woodworks. His father is very old and lives in a nursing home in a place a couple of miles away. Michel really wanted to show his father where he works but although he has his driving license, he doesn’t have a car. Then, one of the employers said: ‘here is my car, just pick up your father and bring him along’. I have great respect for John [one of the employers]. Because you know, it’s his car
and he puts his trust in you when lending you his car. Deep, deep respect. (Former employee 1)

The logic of care results in the experience of recognition of their care needs but comes forward in an implicit manner: the employees state that they enjoy working, feel at home and personally like their employers.

Employee: [The employers] are very open and friendly people. When they come to see how your work is going, they ask ‘how are you doing? Have you got around to this yet?’ It is a formal conversation, but in such a way that it is almost friendly.

Interviewer: Almost friendly, what do you mean?

Employer: They talk as friends, but the subject is business-like. They do not act like bosses, even though they own the company. It doesn’t feel like that. It feels as if they are co-workers who are just coming to see how you are doing, which is very pleasant. (Employee 2)

Occasionally, the recognition of who they are and what they need is explicitly explained as leading to greater confidence or self-esteem, as is clearly illustrated by the following quote by a former employee who used drugs and did not show up at Woodworks. He was visited at home by one of the employers and had a good one-on-one conversation:

I see the world differently now. When I used drugs, I had a lot more guts. However, since I no longer do so, and since that conversation, I look at myself in a positive way. (Former employee 1)

The caring attitude of the employer seems to help increase employees’ self-esteem, to lead to a climate in which employees are not afraid to make mistakes, and to make them feel at ease in the workplace. Such a relationship not only leads to the recognition of care needs, but also contributes to the experience as a competent worker.

**Fragility and limits of recognition**

It seems at Woodworks the employers are able to carefully balance the logics of work and care. The employers do not try to resolve the tension between the two logics but rather balance them. Similar to a rope-walker who keeps his balance by flexibly moving between left and right, the employers move flexibly between the logics of work and care. They stress the ideas of employees doing proper work, working hard and gaining recognition for their contributions. However, simultaneously, they act in a caring way. They adjust this balancing act per person, for instance, by providing a degree of work pressure, but not too much. This balancing act between the logic of work and care seems to be an important key to recognition. For example, a successful balancing act is found in the way the relationship between the employer and the employees is framed. The employers stress that
consciously address the employees as employees and make a clear distinction between the WISE as a work setting and the home as a care setting. Furthermore, the experiences of the employees show that they also build a personal relationship with the employee in which a worker feels that he or she is valued as a unique person, regardless of his or her productivity. As a result, the employees are not afraid to make mistakes and feel that they contribute to the business goals.

However, we also see that these forms of recognition are very fragile. First of all, the experiences of recognition are fragile, because they are dependent on the personal relationship between the employee and the employer. During our observations, a remark was made about the arrival of a new instructor. This paid employee had taken over some of the tasks of the two employers, especially day-to-day coordination in the workshop. One of the employers stated that they did not want to take any orders from him and did not accept his presence in the first place because they were afraid this new employer was going to replace the two other employers, which would damage the personal bond they had with their original employers. It was only after explicit instructions from the other employers to accept the authority of the new instructor that things worked out eventually (Participative Observation Woodworks, June 29, 2016). In one of the interviews, a former employee (former employee 1) mentioned how Woodworks ‘would only stay a nice workplace as long as one of the two employers would stay there’, suggesting that their sense of recognition is very dependent on the personal relationship with the employer.

Second, these experiences are fragile, because they are limited in scope. The work and care logics are successfully balanced between employer and individual workers, but not between co-workers among themselves. Employees are very sensitive to what they perceive as differences in care needs. In their negative remarks on care, they reflect the dominant policy perspective on care in which independence is good and dependence is bad:

Many people who are working here are getting support in their daily lives. In addition, they also need support by fulfilling their tasks here. However, I can work more independently. That is a difference between them and me. (Employee 3)

The above employee feels relatively independent and competent and distinguishes himself by highlighting the logic of care that others ‘need’, but that he does not need himself. In comparison, he positions himself as being more similar to a regular employee. The balancing act is successful in the way this employee feels about himself, but not in the way he feels about his colleagues. During our observations, we also observed how certain jokes led to tensions and certain questions created awkward situations.
Before the start of the day, the employees and employers gather at the table outside the workplace. The coordinator shows that something went wrong: a tree was sawn too thin, which has led to a tear in the wood. One of the more experienced employees, Dave, remarks how this would never happen to him and wonders out loud who could have done this. Then, he suddenly turns to Mike: ‘it must have been Mike!’ he says teasingly. Mike laughs a bit and it seems he feels ashamed and the other employees remain quiet. (Participative Observation Woodworks, July 6 2016)

The way Dave treats Mike teasingly shows that the balancing act in the relationship between employers and employees does not prevent misrecognition of co-workers.

Some others stress that, at Woodworks, everyone is a competent employee but that other persons outside of Woodworks, for instance former co-workers, are dependent and ‘needy’:

People who are working here, really have a hard work mentality. They know everything about wood and they know how to work. At the day care centre where I worked before, people are really having another level. There were people who were acting like this ‘huhuhuuhuhuhuhuhu!’ (is humming and acting as a deeply disabled person). I didn’t feel at home there. (Former employee 2).

For them, the balancing act is successful within Woodworks but it simultaneously leads to misrecognition of people who work in sheltered programs or day care centres.

There is also fragility in the way Woodworks addresses the differences in skills. We found that the low-skilled employees take pride in working with the more high-skilled employees. However, recognition requires a balancing act, since elements of a work logic – such as feelings of craftsmanship – are combined with tolerance for mistakes and workplace adaptations for the lower-skilled employees. This recognition is fragile, because co-workers remain sensitive to differences in skill level. Highly skilled employees are allowed to do more complex tasks and work with different machines. This highlights a sense of craftsmanship but leads some lower skilled employees to conclude that their contributions are less worthy than those of others. For instance, one lower-skilled worker says that he truly likes to scour but feels that this is a low-ranking task because others find it boring (Employee 2).

In contrast, highly skilled employees feel that more demands can be put on them than is currently done in this social enterprise, leading to feeling of misrecognition of their abilities. They especially dislike the fact that the employers standardise some work and make it more repetitive so that low-skilled employees can also do these tasks (the care logic). For instance, a former cabinet maker states:

I can understand their reasons to design products with a given size for the wooden parts. However, personally, I am not used to working with given sizes. At my first job, we also used to work like this, but we could deviate from it whenever we deemed it necessary. (…) I had to spend a lot more time making this table (at
In short, for both low-skill and high-skill employees, recognition as a person that contributes to the goals of the company is fragile because of the differences in skills, which are clearly present in the workplace. The balancing act between the ‘care logic’ of workplace adaptation and the ‘work logic’ that stresses craftsmanship cannot prevent painful comparisons between co-workers or feelings of devaluation of expertise.

The differences in skills in the workplace seem to result in a zero-sum game: when every task is treated equally, the highly skilled employees experience misrecognition of their expertise, but if recognition would be more differentiated according to the type of work people do, the lower-skilled employees would experience misrecognition of their contribution at the workplace. The same applies to the way the workplace is adjusted: structured tasks seem to make recognition for lower-skilled employees possible, but undermine the experiences of competency and craftsmanship of the more skilled employees. The recognition of one comes with the misrecognition of the other (see also Sebrechts, Tonkens, and Da Roit 2019).

Moreover, the structural conditions of the labour market constantly threaten to undermine the recognition derived from successful balancing acts. The employees do not receive a salary and the employers state that they could not run the company if they did pay a salary. Misrecognition is displayed by the (former) employees, who stated that in an ideal situation, they would prefer a salary and that, in general, they are against unpaid labour. However, employees and employers work hard to prevent the lack of salary from undermining recognition. Employers provide other rewards, such as food (e.g., fries on Fridays, ice cream or a barbecue party) and material rewards (e.g., Christmas gifts, leftover wood and for example the special earmuffs). Employees explain to others, including us as researchers, why it is not a problem, or even ‘self-evident’, to not receive a salary in this particular WISE. For them, the other rewards are a good compensation for the lack of wages:

You get compliments when you perform well, and we get fries every Friday. That’s awesome, because they [the employers] don’t need to do that. Or when there’s some pretty leftover wood, I can ask to get that, and often that’s okay. That’s just extra, a bonus, I guess. With that wood it’s also a pity if it’s disposed, but the fries are different. I mean, it’s a lot of money to buy fries for ten persons every week. Okay, they don’t pay us. However, still, they don’t need to do that. (Employee 1)

Salary is seen as infeasible and beyond the employees’ expectations for the immediate future, and the employees feel appreciated through their employers doing their best to reward them in other ways. Some even state that they prefer alternative rewards over salary. Apparently, the employees cannot imagine receiving both a salary and alternative rewards.
Most likely, I would like my job less if I would get paid. Since I now get this kind of appreciation: ‘you did a great job, ‘that looks neat’. In contrast, if you get nothing but money and would not hear that kind of things, then it would probably be less fun. (Employee 2)

For some (former) employees, salary is perceived as a trade-off for other forms of rewards (resulting from troublesome former work experiences). This demonstrates that experiences of recognition cannot overcome structural problems that disabled people currently face in the labour market, where they do not meet the requirements of ‘productive’ wage labour or end up in lowly esteemed jobs. The different justifications show that our respondents experience considerable recognition in terms of doing something that is appreciated by others (as described in the first section), but still have very low expectations of their position in the wider labour market.

As said before, some employees do not only receive no salary, but *Woodworks* is paid to provide them day care. This can be devastating when employees find out:

I found out in a really nasty way that *Woodworks* was being paid to provide me employment. I entered the office of the social care centre and I saw a bill of the SE, 802 euro’s. ‘Did you order furniture at the SE?’ I asked. ‘No, this is what we must pay for you to work there’. How crazy can it be! (Former employee 1)

This employee told us that it took a long time before he could reconcile this situation, since he always thought he was ‘working’. Although this is an extreme case and this situation does not apply to all employees, it does show that the recognition derived from working at *Woodworks* can turn into misrecognition in an instant.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In western societies, participation in the labour market is considered the key to full citizenship and this idea is expressed in ‘active citizenship’ labour market policies for disabled people. This leads to a negative take on work support and adjustments for disabled people, since these are seen as segregating and stigmatising. Instead, disabled people should move to mainstream employment, especially people who are considered to have a ‘mild impairment’. The current stress on transitioning to mainstream employment has led to exclusionary practices for mildly intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions. Therefore, a different perspective on the relationship between ‘work’ and ‘care’ is proposed in disability studies that sees these notions not as mutually exclusive but as different ways to facilitate positive employment experiences, thus contributing to the full citizenship of disabled people.
In this article, we add to this debate by discussing our case study of day care and sheltered work in an alternative workplace, a Dutch social enterprise which employs primarily mildly intellectually disabled people and those experiencing mental health conditions. We deepened the understanding of how positive employment experiences for disabled people are achieved at the workplace. It was assumed by various stakeholders that the work elements in the social enterprise make it a good workplace for disabled people. This fits well within the active citizenship discourse, in which work is seen as important and care as stigmatising. However, building on Honneth’s recognition theory and Mol’s conceptualisation of logics, we argue that care is important as well. The logic of care supported employees to experience themselves as competent workers instead of undermining it, and therefore seems in line with alternative conceptualisations of the value of care in disability studies such as ‘support’ and ‘assistance’ (Kröger 2009). This is not due to an intrinsic ‘caring’ or ‘work like’ quality of a WISE, but seems to consist of finding the right ‘balancing acts’ in which positive ‘work logic’ aspects such as a sense of craftsmanship are successfully balanced with ‘care logic’ aspects, such as an adapted workplace and tolerance for mistakes. It is important to note that different settings could also be an alternative workplace. For example, day care centres and transitional sheltered employment workshops provide care as well as work-related activities and it is likely that both logics can be balanced there as well.

However, our study also highlights the limitations of seeking positive employment experiences as a contribution to the full citizenship of disabled people. Successful balancing acts leading to experiences of recognition are fragile as well as limited in scope (Danermark and Gellerstedt 2004). They can easily collapse or fail to encompass the sensitivities of employees, especially when they compare themselves to each other. Though more well-known labour market problems for disabled people such as social isolation, discrimination and the fear of being open about impairments seemed absent in this particular SE, even the most successful balancing acts could not resolve the structural misrecognition that disabled people face in the labour market. Namely, how the right to receive a wage is linked to ableist notions of productivity (see Barnes and Mercer 2005) which classify persons as ‘disabled’ in the first place (Russell and Malhotra 2002).

Therefore, we conclude that alternative workplaces such as WISEs are important, because they are able to balance elements of work and care. Especially the importance of a logic of care should not be underestimated in workplaces. However, despite the positive work-experiences, such workplaces do not lead to a structural transformation of the exclusionary workings of the labour market per se. In addition to such places, labour market policies aimed at the full citizenship of disabled persons should seek to transform
ableist notions of productivity and the way salaried employment is tied to these notions.

**Note**

1. By acting as if how *Woodworks* works is normal, they also challenge what ‘is normal’. It thus seems that this WISE (aims to) challenges the dominant norms and perceptions of (regular) employment.

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