

EMPOWERING THE 'UNEMPLOYED'

REPRESENTATIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN
AUSTRALIAN WORK INTEGRATION
SOCIAL ENTERPRISES (WISEs)

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UNEMPLOYMENT

Due to structural inequalities, certain groups of people are particularly disadvantaged in the labour market.

WORK INTEGRATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISES (WISEs)

WISEs allow people experiencing unemployment to work, and thus offer 'a hand up, not a hand-out'.

LANGUAGE AND EMPOWERMENT

The language we use to describe people experiencing unemployment can shape relations of power.

THE RESEARCH PUZZLE

THE CLAIM

Unlike charity or government responses to unemployment, WISEs **empower** people experiencing unemployment.

THE QUESTION

To what extent is this claim reflected in the use of language in Australian WISE annual reports?

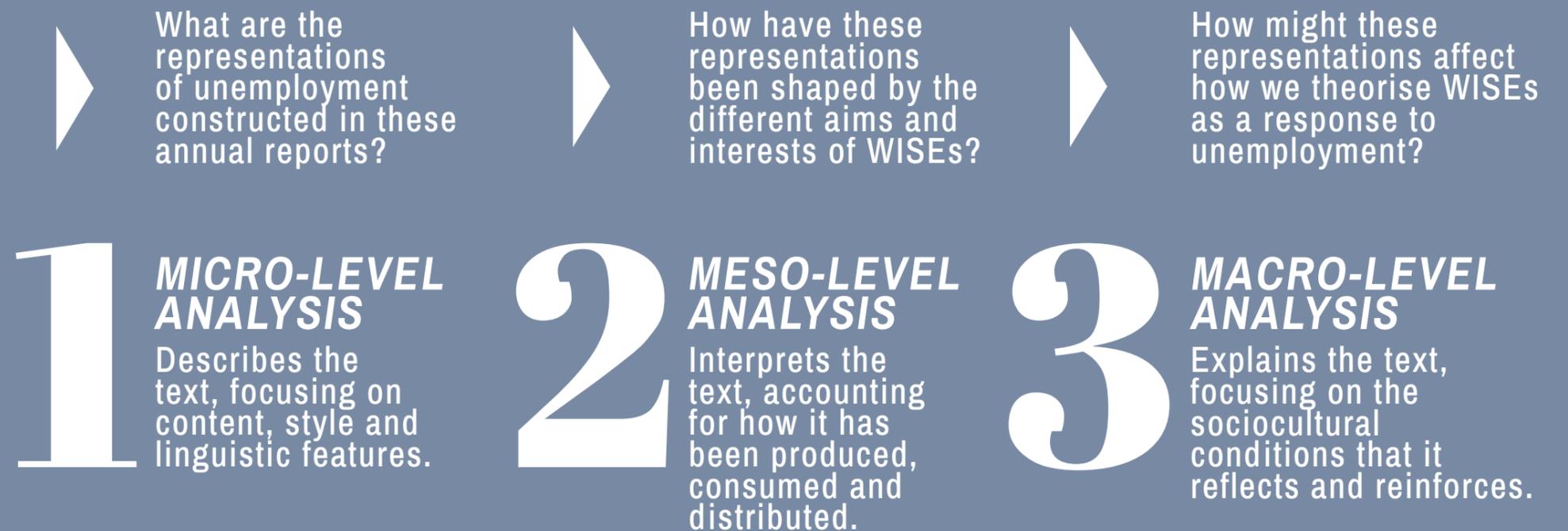
THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

Organisations are increasingly using annual reports as corporate 'autobiographies'. They've become important marketing documents that organisations can use to create a particular identity for themselves. This means that annual reports can tell you a lot about an organisation's values and interests.



a CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS of the ANNUAL REPORTS of SIX AUSTRALIAN WISEs

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodological framework that focuses on the relationship between **discourse** and **power**. Discourse is the use of spoken and written language. It can reinforce structural inequalities when it reflects certain beliefs about the social world, causing them to become accepted as 'common sense'. This study used Fairclough's three-level model of CDA.¹



¹ Fairclough, N 2010, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London, United Kingdom.

A TYPOLOGY OF NARRATIVES ABOUT WISE BENEFICIARIES

THE TEXTS

THE 'SUPPORTED CLIENT' NARRATIVE

WISE beneficiaries are being supported to improve their employment prospects and general wellbeing.

They are becoming equipped with greater confidence, social networks and other 'necessary' skills. Not much detail is given about what these skills are.

Their employment outcomes are the organisations' achievements — WISEs are successfully providing them with training and employment.

Their unemployment is attributed to individual experiences of 'disadvantage'. They are 'at-risk' and 'vulnerable', but the structural forces that have put them 'at risk' aren't made clear.

THE 'DRIVEN TRAINEE' NARRATIVE

WISE beneficiaries are 'trainees' who are striving towards personal goals and actively working to improve their employment prospects.

They are developing new skills, including in customer service and time management. WISEs are providing them with opportunities to train and acquire work experience.

They are successfully moving into jobs at the WISEs and with other employers, particularly in retail and hospitality. The WISEs celebrate their beneficiaries' work achievements.

Their unemployment is linked to circumstances outside of individuals' control, but the structural drivers of these conditions aren't made clear. They are 'people experiencing disadvantage', not 'disadvantaged people'.

THE 'CAPABLE WORKER' NARRATIVE

WISE beneficiaries are high-achieving employees delivering quality services for their clients. They are individuals who are part of a team and a community.

They are very skilled at their jobs and are gaining new qualifications.

They are achieving outcomes in their work and personal lives. The WISEs celebrate their beneficiaries' achievements, even when they are not related to their jobs.

They may or may not have overcome barriers to employment. Their labour market disadvantage is treated as incidental to their jobs at WISEs — they are simply employees, not 'disadvantaged' employees.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

THE 'SUPPORTED CLIENT' NARRATIVE

Mostly demonstrated by organisations with a focus on service delivery ('charity'), financial sustainability, or a broad range of beneficiary needs

THE 'DRIVEN TRAINEE' NARRATIVE

Mostly demonstrated by organisations with a narrow focus on getting people into employment, or a strong advocacy function

THE 'CAPABLE WORKER' NARRATIVE

Mostly demonstrated by organisations with a focus on community development

LEAST
EMPOWERING

MOST
EMPOWERING

THE HELPLESS 'UNEMPLOYED'

WISE beneficiaries are framed as the passive *recipients* of training and jobs. WISEs are the heroic change-makers which are 'saving' them.

This narrative focuses on the qualities that 'the unemployed' *lack* and discounts their agency. It reflects unequal relationships of power and distances readers from 'the disadvantaged'. It hides how readers might *benefit from* (and thus be complicit in) the structures causing unemployment.

'LIFTERS', NOT 'LEANERS'

WISE beneficiaries are framed as determined to learn new skills, and as having the ability to help themselves out of unemployment.

This narrative shows that 'the unemployed' reinforces the assumption that barriers to the labour market can be overcome through hard work (which is often not the case.) This same assumption is used to demonise 'leaners' or 'dole bludgers'.

This narrative puts the responsibility of 'solving' unemployment on individuals themselves, especially as it also fails to identify the parties or actions behind the structural causes of unemployment.

JUST LIKE ANY OTHER EMPLOYEE

WISE beneficiaries are framed as no more constrained in their job prospects than other employees, and thus have choice in their employment.

This narrative positions WISEs as 'mainstream' or permanent 'end-employers'. It rejects the idea that people experiencing labour market disadvantage can only be trainees or workers in short-term, transition roles. Rather, it focuses on their strengths and alludes to structural drivers of unemployment.

THE SUBTEXT:
UNDERLYING IDEOLOGIES

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

THE 'SUPPORTED CLIENT' NARRATIVE

Aligns with the 'poverty pornography' and 'discourses of saving' reflected by charities

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE AS ADAPTATIONS OF CHARITY

Like charities, social enterprises provide 'hand-outs' — they 'hand out' training and other forms of support.

Their distinguishing characteristic isn't a principle of empowerment, but their ability to offer services and 'do charity' in a more financial sustainable way.

They signify the marketisation of the non-profit sector — the push for charities to be more 'business-like'.

THE 'DRIVEN TRAINEE' NARRATIVE

Aligns with the neoliberal ideologies reflected by current Australian governments

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE AS A COMPLEMENT TO WELFARE-TO-WORK

Like government welfare-to-work programs, social enterprises aim to turn individuals into 'lifters', and get them to help themselves out of unemployment.

They do this by positively reinforcing active labour market participation, which contrasts with punitive welfare-to-work policies, but their overarching aim is the same.

They are part of the neoliberal shift of the responsibility for social welfare away from governments and towards the private sector.

THE 'CAPABLE WORKER' NARRATIVE

Aligns with the values of community development organisations

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE AS EMPOWERING 'MARKET-MAKERS'

As end-employers, social enterprises do more than just 'mould' jobseekers to fit the demands of the current labour market. As employers themselves, they also 'make' the labour market by increasing the number, quality and accessibility of jobs for people experiencing disadvantage.

They empower individuals because they recognise their agency, but also work to influence labour market conditions — and address *structural* causes of unemployment.

THE IMPLICATIONS:
THE ROLE OF WISES

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS