Empowering the 'Unemployed': Representations of Unemployment in Australian Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)

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THE RESEARCH PUZZLE

AIMS AND SIGNIFICANCE

work integration social enterprise (WISE)

a social enterprise that provides training or employment to people experiencing labour market disadvantage. also known as employment-focused social enterprise.[2]

empowerment

the process of acquiring greater choice and control over one's own life. this study uses Kabeer's theory of empowerment (see *RESEARCH CONTEXT*, page 2).

agency

the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.[3]

Social enterprises are organisations that use business activities to fulfil social purposes and 'do good'.[1] In Australia, *work integration social enterprises* (WISEs) have been gaining traction as an innovative solution to a difficult social problem: the persistent unemployment of 'marginalised' or 'disadvantaged' jobseekers. Social entrepreneurs, policymakers and scholars have championed WISEs as an *empowerment*-based response to this challenge, as they enable individuals to work, be self-reliant and thus show *agency*.

Despite these grand claims about WISEs, researchers have thus far made few attempts to explore what 'empowerment' actually means in the context of social enterprises. This study responds to this gap in academic literature by looking at the extent to which the premise of empowerment is reflected in the use of language in the Australian social enterprise sector. It examines how they represent 'the unemployed' in their annual reports, how these representations align with common ideologies about unemployment, and how these findings might affect how we understand the role of social enterprises.

Language is powerful, because it can both reflect and reinforce the structures of the social worlds around us. By analysing how WISEs describe unemployment and the people experiencing unemployment, we can better understand how they are empowering (or perhaps, *not* empowering) 'disadvantaged' jobseekers.

Defining Empowerment: Choice and Constraints

According to Naila Kabeer,[4] when a person's ability to exercise choice is limited by social inequalities, empowerment refers to the processes which allow them to acquire greater control over their own lives. Individuals are thus empowered when their 'power-deficiency' is alleviated. This might involve removing the structural barriers constraining a person's choices, or increasing a person's ability to overcome these structural barriers. In other words, empowerment can be the result of change relating to structures, *or* to individuals.

Kabeer further suggests that a person's ability to exercise choice is contingent upon *resources* (such as income, social networks, skills and other 'employable' qualities), demonstrated through *agency* (the ability to define and act upon goals), and evidenced in *achievements*. Empowerment can thus also be evaluated with reference to each of these components.

Unemployment as a Structural Problem

In Australia, cohorts such as young people, people with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment, and are commonly targeted by WISEs.[5] The labour market disadvantage within these groups is often attributed to their lower rates of education and low skill levels.[6] Unemployment is thus commonly understood as a problem located within individuals – an issue of jobseekers being deficient in the skills and qualities valued by employers.

This explanation of unemployment ignores demand-side factors of the labour market. In recent years, the availability of entry-level and 'low-skilled' jobs has declined in Australia.[7] Discrimination is also a key barrier to work – for groups such as people with disability and Indigenous jobseekers, but also for *all* long-term unemployed people, who are often stereotyped as lazy.[8] Hence, unemployment in 'disadvantaged' cohorts is caused not only by the characteristics of individuals, but also by labour market structures: it is the rules of the game that are flawed, not just the players.

The policies, cultures and institutions that drive social inequality are also structural causes of unemployment: they deprive certain groups of people of the resources they need to become 'employable'. For instance, individuals in 'disadvantaged' cohorts may lack the financial resources to invest in education, or the cultural 'know-how' they need to thrive in certain types of workplaces. Unemployment cannot be understood as the result of *personal* actions or circumstances when particular groups of people have been *systemically* prevented from acquiring the traits necessary to enter and stay in the workforce.

Representations of Unemployment in Government and Charity Discourses

People experiencing unemployment are often described in terms of what they *lack* – the skills, qualities and resources they do *not* have.[9] These representations of 'the unemployed' as 'in lack' are disempowering because they fail to account for people's unique goals, capabilities and achievements.

In political discourse, people experiencing unemployment are often also portrayed in terms of character flaws: welfare recipients are lazy, unlike 'ordinary', 'hardworking' citizens.[10] In the UK, this idea has been captured in the idea of 'strivers' and 'skivers',[11] a concept which implies that 'the unemployed' are *choosing* not to work. This assumption is central to the *neoliberal ideologies* that drive *work obligation* responses to unemployment. Such policies have been widely criticised for reinforcing the structural inequalities which cause unemployment in the first place.[12] Hence, representations of 'the unemployed' as defective in character inform policies that underpin unequal distributions of power.

Charity organisations have frequently relied on notions of helplessness in representations of 'the disadvantaged'. Their beneficiaries are often portrayed as hopeless, pitiful, and dependent on others.[16] Often dubbed 'poverty pornography', these romanticised narratives are usually met with compassionate but superficial responses from audiences. They allow people to distance themselves from 'victims' of poverty or 'disadvantage', and remain oblivious to the fact that they *benefit from* the power structures causing poverty.[17] These representations of 'disadvantage' hence disempower because they also enable structural inequalities to endure.

While language use has not yet received much attention in social enterprise literature, there is some evidence to suggest that WISEs also rely upon disempowering narratives about 'the unemployed'. Daya argues that some WISEs use 'discourses of saving' the 'disadvantaged' to encourage buyers to purchase social enterprise products. [18] Levander similarly demonstrates how WISEs emphasise the 'problem-identities' of their beneficiaries to represent them as in need of rescue, and simultaneously highlight themselves as the 'innovative agents' providing support. [19] These kinds of narratives enable WISEs to validate themselves as change makers.

WISEs: An Empowerment-based Response to Unemployment

WISEs are often described as offering 'a hand-up, not a hand-out': by enabling individuals to train or work, they 'help them help themselves'. This contrasts with government policies which focus on welfare provision, as well as traditional, charity-based models of service delivery. Such approaches supposedly cause 'the unemployed' to become passive recipients of support, and reliant upon others. WISEs are thus considered empowering because, unlike governments and charities, they seem to foster self-reliance, whilst honouring individuals' agency and dignity. [20]

Despite this premise, limited attention has been given to what 'empowerment' truly means in the context of social enterprises, or the ways in which WISEs may aim, but fail, to empower. This study draws heavily upon one key inquiry about empowerment in social enterprises: the degree to which their focus upon self-reliance might reinforce individual *responsibility*, rather than *agency*. When structural barriers to work are not acknowledged, does embracing ideals of self-help put the onus upon jobseekers to fit themselves to labour market conditions, whilst hiding the fact that the problem might actually lie in policies, cultures and institutions?[21]

THE RESEARCH STRATEGY
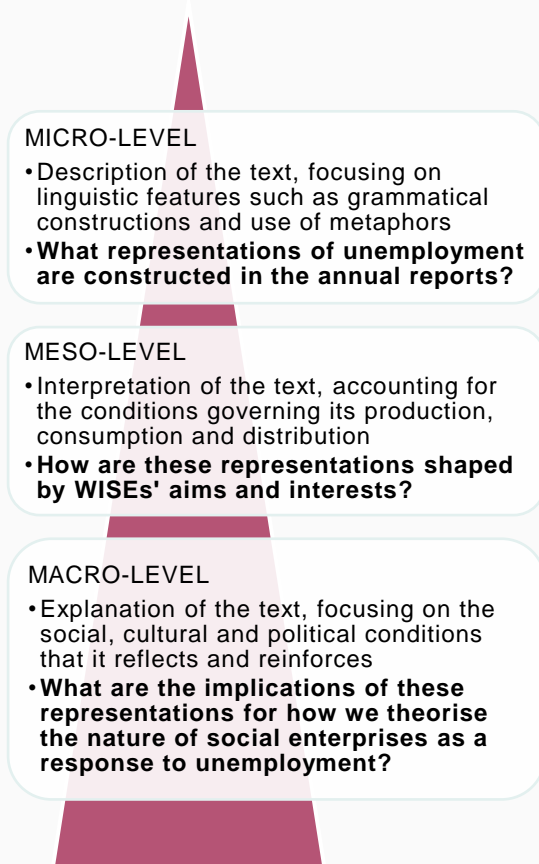
This research project was based upon a critical discourse analysis of the 2017-2018 annual reports of six WISE organisations.

Examining Language: Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

Discourse is the use of spoken and written language, or 'talk and text'. Social theorists are interested in discourse because it can reinforce structural inequalities. This occurs when our use of language reflects certain ideologies, or sets of attitudes and beliefs, such that they become engrained as 'common sense'. This causes power relations to appear justified.[20]

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a way of studying language that focuses on examining the relationship between discourse and power. This study applied a model of CDA developed by Norman Fairclough,[21] which involves three levels of analysis, as illustrated below:

MICRO-LEVEL
- Description of the text, focusing on linguistic features such as grammatical constructions and use of metaphors
- **What representations of unemployment are constructed in the annual reports?**

MESO-LEVEL
- Interpretation of the text, accounting for the conditions governing its production, consumption and distribution
- **How are these representations shaped by WISEs' aims and interests?**

MACRO-LEVEL
- Explanation of the text, focusing on the social, cultural and political conditions that it reflects and reinforces
- **What are the implications of these representations for how we theorise the nature of social enterprises as a response to unemployment?**
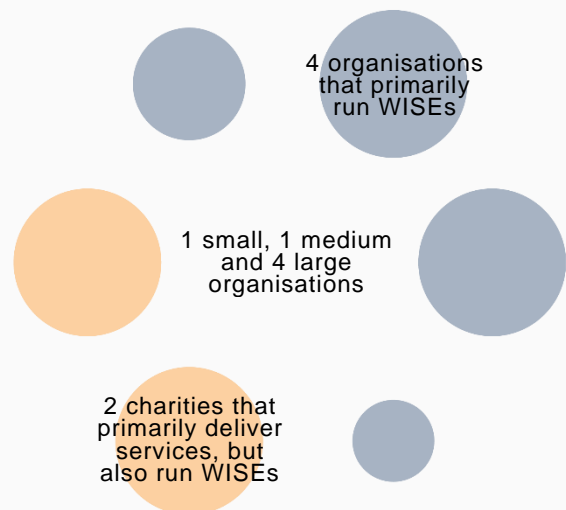
Annual Reports as Corporate Autobiographies

Organisations carefully produce their annual reports to appeal to a diverse range of stakeholders, foster legitimacy as businesses (and, in the case of social enterprises or charities, as social change agents), and negotiate their identities.[22] Thus, a social enterprise's annual report is likely to be – or at least, should be – a strong reflection of its activities, values and interests.

legitimacy

the perception of an organisation's activities as desirable or acceptable. legitimacy impacts upon an organisation's ability to survive in its field.[23]

The Sample: From 'Charity-focused' to 'WISE-focused'

4 organisations that primarily run WISEs

1 small, 1 medium and 4 large organisations

2 charities that primarily deliver services, but also run WISEs

To facilitate comparison, the six organisations chosen for analysis in this study included four organisations running WISEs as their core activities ('WISE-focused'), and two charities primarily delivering programs and services, but running WISEs as components of their work ('charity-focused'). It also included one small, one medium and four large organisations.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

A Typology of Narratives

This study identified a typology of three different narratives about WISE beneficiaries: the 'supported client', 'driven trainee' and 'capable worker' narratives. Whilst the 'capable worker' narrative was clearly reflected by just one of the six organisations, the 'supported client' and 'driven trainee' narratives were apparent in most of the annual reports.

The Supported Client

"The average young person training with us is relying on Newstart payments, homeless and at risk of going to prison." (Examples adapted from similar quotes across the six reports)

The 'supported client' narrative suggests that WISE beneficiaries are experiencing various forms of disadvantage. It uses the language of 'the unemployed' as being 'in lack' to describe beneficiaries as, for instance, being dependent on welfare payments, living in insecure housing, and engaging in criminal behaviour. These factors contributing to unemployment are listed as though they are personal traits or experiences. Little acknowledgement is made to their structural dynamics, or their links to broader patterns of inequality in society.

"We intervened to support John by providing him with work experience at our store."

This representation of WISE beneficiaries is particularly notable for its characterisation of the relationship between WISEs and their beneficiaries. It gives little acknowledgement of WISE beneficiaries' agency and capacity to set and work towards their own goals. Rather, *organisations* are highlighted as the active 'doers', whilst 'the unemployed' remain passive and are *provided* with opportunities and skills.

"At the end of our training program, 65% of our young people were in employment or further education, meaning we have met our target for less than 40% of our participants to be unemployed."

The 'supported client' narrative also offers little detail about the achievements of people experiencing labour market disadvantage. It largely aggregates beneficiaries' employment outcomes by reporting them as statistics, hence framing them as organisational, rather than individual, accomplishments.

This narrative is most apparent in the annual reports of 'charity-focused' organisations and organisations seeking to achieve greater financial sustainability. This suggests that the 'supported client' narrative may be shaped by the need to attract funding: organisations may use this narrative when they are under pressure to demonstrate their impact and appeal to donors, consumers or investors. It also implies that these organisations may seek to garner legitimacy by highlighting their efficacy of their interventions in their beneficiaries' lives.

The Driven Trainee

"Many young people have existing experiences of disadvantage, causing them to be denied opportunities to work."

The 'driven trainee' narrative assumes that WISE beneficiaries are experiencing barriers to work due to challenges outside of their control. To some extent, it seeks to absolve people experiencing unemployment of responsibility for their labour market disadvantage, by affirming the impact of outside forces such as discrimination and limited working rights.

"Two of our former trainees have obtained employment. Our current trainees have been given a space to work on their barista skills and develop greater confidence."

In accounting for their resources, this narrative is also distinct because it focuses upon beneficiaries' development of key 'employable'

traits, including customer service and time management skills. While the 'supported client' narrative also characterises beneficiaries as learning skills that are 'necessary' in the labour market, the 'driven trainee' narrative is more specific as to what these competencies are.

"We are so proud to share that all our trainees to date have been able to secure meaningful employment in fields such as retail and trades."

Unlike the 'supported client' narrative, this representation of unemployment also pays greater attention to beneficiaries' agency, with frequent references to people's goals and aspirations. It portrays WISE beneficiaries as taking initiative and working hard. Even where organisations credit themselves for providing resources or opportunities to support trainees, beneficiaries are still recognised for their own efforts to 'work on' and 'develop' skills. Their individual achievements are also emphasised, with the reports noting (former) beneficiaries' new employers and promotions.

The 'driven trainee' narrative is largely reflected in the reports of organisations with a narrower focus on employment outcomes, as opposed to those aiming to fulfil a broader range of needs for their beneficiaries. For such WISEs, emphasising beneficiaries' skills development and work ethic affirms their legitimacy as effective responses to people's labour market disadvantage. The 'driven trainee' narrative also supports the interests of organisations which engage in advocacy, since it subverts negative stereotypes of unemployed 'skivers'.

The Capable Worker

"Our senior worker started with us as a young person disengaged from school, but is now one of our knowledgeable employees."

Uniquely, the 'capable worker' narrative gives little insight into the causes of unemployment. While it may note that most employees at WISEs are 'people experiencing disadvantage', it treats the various 'disadvantages' faced by beneficiaries as *incidental* to their employment at WISEs. Descriptions of employees as 'in lack'

are used only in reference to *specific* workers, and only to contextualise their achievements – not to make generalisations about the labour market barriers experienced by a group.

"This team has achieved great results this year, thanks to their fantastic customer service skills, extensive experience and dedication to work."

This narrative is also unique because it represents the capabilities of its employees as existing skills, rather than newly developed skills. Unlike both the 'supported client' and 'driven trainee' narratives, which portray WISE beneficiaries as people becoming more competent, the 'capable worker' narrative portrays them as already highly skilled and knowledgeable. Hence, this representation of people experiencing 'disadvantage' affirms that they have assets that are valued in the workforce, and can deliver positive outcomes for WISE clients or consumers.

"John is leaving us because he is taking on a new full-time role at a different company. We are sad to see him go but are proud of him for securing this exciting new opportunity."

The 'capable worker' narrative also highlights the accomplishments of WISE beneficiaries as employees, as workers more generally, and as individuals. Staff members are singled out by name and praised for their achievements at the organisation, as well as other successes in their personal and work lives. This suggests that people experiencing disadvantage are highly capable in all aspects of their lives.

This representation of people experiencing unemployment manifests in the language use of organisations that specialise in community development. By electing not to emphasise WISE beneficiaries as *'disadvantaged'* workers and celebrating their accomplishments, it appears to support two core principles of community development: building solidarity and championing individuals' agency.[24]

The Empowerment Continuum

This typology of three narratives about WISE beneficiaries appears to form an 'empowerment continuum', with the 'supported client', 'driven trainee' and 'capable worker' narratives being, in this order, least to most empowering.

The Supported Client: Erasing Individual Agency

The 'supported client' narrative largely portrays WISE beneficiaries as gaining access to more opportunities for economic participation, and thus having greater choice. However, it frames these outcomes as the results of organisations' interventions: it characterises beneficiaries as *recipients* of training and jobs, rather than as workers actively engaging in labour market activities. Simultaneously, it aggrandises the role of WISEs in their lives by describing the organisations as heroic, effective agents of change. Hence, with its similarities to 'poverty pornography' and 'discourses of saving', the 'supported client' narrative denies the agency of 'disadvantaged' jobseekers.

The assumptions reinforced by the 'supported client' narrative thus seem to accord with the logics of traditional models of charity. This suggests that WISEs are perhaps an adaptation of conventional models of service delivery, not a departure from them. Social enterprises may simply be a means to deliver 'hand-outs' in a more financially sustainable way. This situates WISEs as part of the increasing marketisation in the non-profit sector. Given the various criticisms that have been associated with this neoliberal push for charities to become more business-like,[25] this runs counter to the premise of empowerment in WISEs.

The Driven Trainee: Disciplining the 'Unemployed'

By recognising their agency and achievements, the 'driven trainee' narrative constructs WISE beneficiaries as diligent 'strivers', and not being 'in lack'. However, by doing so, it implicates the same neoliberal ideologies that underpin the demonisation of government welfare recipients as 'skivers': that individuals can overcome labour market disadvantage by rectifying their lack of 'job-ready' skills, and in turn, that it is their own responsibility to accomplish this. By showing that joblessness can be remedied through effort and persistence, the 'driven trainee' narrative places the onus to 'solve' unemployment upon individuals themselves.

To some extent, this characterisation of WISE beneficiaries also entrenches unemployment as an issue of personal responsibility by not making the systemic causes of unemployment clear. Even though it notes that unemployment is driven by circumstances outside of individuals' control, it fails to identify the parties or actions driving these conditions, or how they can be mitigated. As a result, attention remains upon how people can be transformed to fulfil labour market demands, rather than the structural drivers of unemployment.[26]

For these reasons, WISEs that focus on training and employment outcomes seem to align with neoliberal work obligation policies: both these approaches to mitigating unemployment aim to encourage individuals to be 'strivers' and fulfil their own needs. This also situates WISEs as part of the increasing marketisation of social welfare – in this case, the shift in responsibility for welfare provision away from governments and towards the private sector.[27] Accordingly, despite celebrating the increasing agency of 'the unemployed', the 'driven trainee' narrative further undermines the claim that WISEs are fundamentally empowering.

The Capable Worker: Celebrating Accomplished Employees

The 'capable worker' narrative strongly demonstrates the agency, resources and achievements of people experiencing labour market disadvantage. Furthermore, it avoids positioning them as high-achieving staff members only in relation to roles *designated* for 'the unemployed'. This implies that WISE beneficiaries are no more constrained in their employment prospects than employees who are not 'disadvantaged'. Hence, this narrative represents people experiencing labour market disadvantage as skilled in their own right – not only when considering the barriers to employment that they have faced.

The 'capable worker' narrative thus implies that structural, demand-side constraints upon individuals' choices in the labour market, such as discrimination and a lack of suitable jobs, can and should be removed. It shows WISEs as end-employers providing 'mainstream' roles for people experiencing 'disadvantage' – not just a special category of jobs for the 'hard-to-employ'. It represents WISEs as 'market-making', rather than 'market-moulding': instead of *moulding* jobseekers to adapt to existing labour market conditions through training and skills development, WISEs can *make* jobs that are suitable and available for people experiencing barriers to employment. The 'capable worker' narrative hence supports the claim that WISEs empower 'the unemployed'.

THE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS
CONCLUSIONS

There is limited evidence to support the claim that WISEs are an empowerment-based response to unemployment

To caveat, this study has not accounted for beneficiaries' lived experiences or the empirical outcomes of WISEs' practices. Nevertheless, it suggests that many Australian WISEs contribute to disempowering ideologies about 'the unemployed'. They produce narratives that align with the discourses which have been reflected in traditional charity responses to unemployment ('discourses of saving'), as well those which have informed work obligation policies ('skivers' and 'strivers' discourses). Whilst this finding does not mean that WISEs do not empower their beneficiaries at all, it does challenge the assumption that WISEs hold empowerment as a core or defining principle.

WISEs may instead be adaptations of charity, or complements to work obligation policies

By challenging the view that WISEs are an empowerment-based alternative to government and charity-based 'hand-outs', this study questions how we theorise the nature of social enterprises as a response to unemployment. It suggests that WISEs may in fact represent another, new way of doing service delivery or 'charity': a more financially sustainable way to deliver employment programs. Alternatively, WISEs may also form part of work obligation policy frameworks, as supportive environments where jobseekers can develop the skills that governments are compelling them to learn. This study offers these hypotheses to guide future research into social enterprises.

WISEs can use the typology of narratives developed in this study to evaluate their own use of language

This study has demonstrated how WISEs can empower their beneficiaries by affirming their agency, resources and achievements, and furthermore, acknowledging structural barriers to unemployment. The typology of narratives developed in this study hence provides a framework that can be used to assess the use of language of WISEs, and even of charities, in policy documents, and so on. Social enterprise scholars and practitioners can apply similar analyses to other texts, to develop greater insight into how WISEs may be empowering or disempowering beneficiaries through discourse.

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