

The self at work: Understanding the experience
of community placement in activation schemes
in a post-recession context

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DECLARATION

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SUMMARY

Situated at a particularly complex period of transformations reshaping work, welfare and the labour market, this thesis set out to explain how long-term unemployed welfare recipients taking part in activation schemes made sense of their experiences of unemployment, job seeking and placement as they deliberated their past, present and future aspirations sustained by an ongoing tension between contextual and internal change. Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, I interviewed 16 men and 14 women taking part in an activation scheme - Community Employment or Tús - across two counties in Ireland between May 2018 and March 2019. These schemes consist of welfare recipients working 19.5 hours per week in a local voluntary and not-for-profit organisation delivering services for the community. At the time of the interviews, participants were at different stages of their placement, and their ages ranged between 28 and 64.

Since 2012, marked by a post-recession context, Ireland has fully embraced activation and the “making work pay better than welfare” rationale and introduced a significant welfare reform that made welfare assistance for the unemployed subject to work-related requirements. This study is situated within the broader discussions about activation, welfare conditionality and the notion of welfare recipients’ agency that this mobilises, as well as the discussions about the centrality of work and its role in human fulfilment within a context of precarisation. How contextual changes interplay with research participants’ reflexivity as they ponder their possibilities and constraints to project into the future, is a question that connects the findings with the scholarly discussions. Irish literature on these topics has been growing since 2012 and has focused on policy reforms (e.g. Murphy, 2016, 2019), welfare conditionality (e.g. Boland and Griffin, 2016), welfare stigmatisation (e.g. Gaffney and Millar, 2019) and the precarisation of the Irish labour market (e.g. Murphy, 2017). However, there has been less research into the specific realm of community placement schemes and participants’ experiences and aspirations. This thesis offers an original contribution on the experience of unemployment and job seeking in a post-recession context.

The findings encapsulate participants’ trajectories before and during placement in an activation scheme. Going through contextual and internal changes - wanted and unwanted - and the making of a future course of action were core component processes of participants’ experiences. Placement was depicted as an experience that gave the participants a different vantage point from which to engage with the future. Placement introduced a change in the lives of participants who were coming from a long period of unemployment and unsuccessful job search; a period that was signified as gradually losing aspects of oneself. Arriving at placement with diminished self-esteem and modest expectations, participants were persuasively engaged by schemes supervisors to co-produce their placement position. The experience of placement acted as a counterbalance;

participants felt they were able to reconnect with themselves and their abilities through helping others and adopting a volunteer-like identity that mobilised more positive meanings than their earlier welfare recipient identity. From there on, individual processes of changing through regaining some of the aspects lost as unemployment settled in, developed. However, participants felt ambivalent about whether the placement would effectively bring them closer to the labour market.

The internal work that participants focused on was fuelled by the tension between contextual and internal change and stability as participants deliberated their future after placement. Participants' reflexive understanding of their circumstances, personalities and past decisions underpinned this process, which recalibrated identities, aspirations and plans. This process was influenced by emotions and feelings as participants saw themselves having little control and facing an uncertain future. Thus, the experience of change and the making of the future were core processes of participants' experiences. Patterns were identified: (1) older men with low-skilled employment trajectories saw little chances of regaining employment; (2) women who had focused on care responsibilities embraced a personal project of change realisable through paid work; (3) those with health issues needed more time to recover before projecting into the future, but felt pressurised by standard welfare rules; (4) those with inconsistent employment paths who found it difficult to fit in structured environments, wanted to create their own work situation; and (5) those focused on career-making saw placement as a stepping stone. Among these five groups, all except (2), considered prolonging their time on the scheme or moving on to a second scheme as their first (most realistic / desirable) option.

The main contribution of the thesis is to offer a conceptual framework of these experiences from the stance of agential reflexivity as participants pondered their possibilities and constraints to project into the future. This framework relates to central processes concerning identity, self and future thinking which are shaped by gender and age. Going through long-term unemployment meant changing by losing as participants' disconnection with work as a source of personal and social identities, deepened. During this process, participants acquired a multifaceted identity in interaction with external demands: becoming unemployed meant becoming a welfare recipient, who was demanded to become an active jobseeker who, despite their efforts, failed to get a job. Underpinned by the placement period, the process of changing through regaining made accessible the volunteer-like identity ascribed to the local organisations through which new possibilities were potentially available and, thus, future thinking recovered a central role as participants deliberated courses of action.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CE – Community Employment Scheme

CLG – Companies Limited by Guarantee

DSP – Department of Social Protection

DEASP – Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

FÁS – An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (Training and Employment Authority)

INTREO – Public Employment Income Support Office

JA – Jobseeker’s Allowance

JB – Jobseeker’s Benefit

LDC – Local Development Companies

LES – Local Employment Service

LESN – Local Employment Service Network

MOU – Memorandum of Understanding

NESC – National Economic and Social Council

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Individual change as a policy aim?

In Autumn 2019, RTÉ (Ireland's National Public Service Media) broadcasted a programme called *Raised by the village* which, in brief, followed the journey of “city teens” whose behaviour had become problematic for their parents and, thus, were sent to live for a couple of weeks with a family in a rural village. A core element of the experience involved learning the values of hard work, respect and discipline through performing daily tasks for which they were responsible (e.g. cleaning, taking care of animals), doing things for the community, and learning family values from the host family. Every week, viewers would see the teens having an initial negative attitude and struggling to get up early in the morning to help with farming tasks. In each 60-minute episode, viewers witnessed a journey of “self-discovery” as the teens glimpsed their potential through being exposed to a new lifestyle and activities while struggling to adapt. As a foretold conclusion, every week, the teens reached the end of their journey with a newfound motivation to project into the future and get their lives “back on track”. In one episode, a boy enthusiastically declared that he could now picture himself in the future, as a farmer, and another girl - who had dropped out of secondary school - realised she wanted to finish school, go to college, and work with youth.

The programme made no concessions in showing a stark difference between the teens’ families and the host families. The former were usually one-parent families which appeared to lack the composure and moral ground of the village families (e.g. adults did not work, family life seemed chaotic). The village families, in contrast, were represented as hard-working and having harmonious relationships and were active in their communities. Implicitly, the teens’ behaviour was presented as a result of the lifestyle of their parents, and few connections were made between their family situations and institutional or structural influences and responsibilities. Instead, the programme opted to focus on the psychological and normative side of things and assumed that changing the teen’s mindset would change their situation at home and beyond. Thus, the teens embarked on a process of experiencing a different type of environment and lifestyle, as a result of which they were to get to know themselves better, to know what life could and should be like, and, to some extent, express a measure of self-blame to commit to actions to improve themselves. Many aspects of this television programme connect to the topics that this thesis enquired about and, as an opening example, it helps to depict a widespread “normative mood” in our

contemporary society, which promotes and values a self-conscious, responsible and motivated individuals who, making the right life choices, strives for a productive and self-reliant life. Commentators have conceptualised this normative mood as stemming from neoliberal principles and the processes of individualisation fostered by these (e.g. Brown, 2015; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1999; Rose, 1990). Three brief points can be made here; first, the individual is increasingly charged with the responsibility for their outcomes in life; second, work is central and structures the relationships of contribution and redistribution between society and individuals; third, moral and psychological explanations of social problems, such as unemployment or teens dropping out of school, are preferred to structural explanations. Then, while the teens were initially shown “wasting their time” and glued to their phones, their village experience was structured according to a schedule that would teach them something about effort, work and reciprocal obligations. The television programme proposed that the experience of the village had the potential to be *transformative* for the young person and for their future selves, the selves they could become if they committed to putting their energies in the right path. The underlying views about contributing, being responsible for one’s life, and the belief that people can be “changed”, steered towards particular goals or shaped in specific ways, are all core features of activation policies aimed at the unemployed, which is the central topic of this thesis.

It has been argued that the representation of unemployment as a problem attributed to the individual goes back to the Poor Laws, in the 18th century, which managed the unemployed through the categorisation between deserving and undeserving recipients of public help. Those unemployed, but regarded as fit for work, were considered undesirable and problematic, and making them work was a way of correction and discipline observed through the workhouses (Fletcher, 2015; Considine and Dukelow, 2009; Burnett, 1994). Complementary, the notion of the centrality of work embedded in society since late industrialism, has contributed to the establishment of a work-based society that situates paid work as a foundational source of material and symbolic dimensions of social and individual life (for analysis see Chamberlain, 2018; Weeks, 2011). Consequently, unemployment is problematised as a matter of individual failure and deficit (Pultz, 2018). In recent decades, commentators have argued the decline of the collectivisation of risks and responsibilities that underpinned the welfare state, and the consolidation of the liberal principles of personal responsibility and self-reliance through paid work (e.g. Paz-Fuchs, 2011; Mead, 1997; Jessop, 1993). In this context, the ability of welfare systems to manage unemployment has been criticised, and welfare benefits have been deemed passive. In turn, support for a rationale that would instil active strategies to incentivise welfare recipients to move from welfare to paid work developed. The “activation turn” refers, then, to these systematic welfare reforms that focus on the responsibility and behaviour of welfare recipients and seek the improvement of their employability and motivation to work (Bonoli,

2013). Activation policies make welfare benefits for the unemployed conditional to work-related requirements (Lødemel and Trickey, 2000). Giving welfare recipients responsibilities, similarly to what happened to the city teens, expecting a change of mind and a renewed commitment, activation policies have pursued behavioural change through conditionality and personalised monitoring (aspects that Chapter Two describes in more detail).

Known under different names, such as workfare, active labour market policies (ALMP) or welfare to work, activation policies have been embraced across Europe, the US, Australia and a few other OECD countries since the 1980s (Lødemel and Moreira, 2014; Bonoli, 2013; Dingeldey, 2007; Serrano and Jepsen, 2006; Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004; Lødemel and Trickey, 2000; Peck and Theodore, 2000; OECD, 1998). Activation, as a term, is said to derive from a 1988 OECD document calling for an “active society” and “a shift away from measures that generate dependency on income transfers to those that mobilize labour supply and foster economic opportunity” (OECD, 2012, p.11). Activation policies implement different strategies in order to bring the unemployed closer to the labour market, such as job seeking obligations, training, coaching, community placements and workfare volunteering. These strategies are aimed at activating the unemployed “whether this entails working inside or outside the ordinary labour market, participating in a job training course, educating oneself, getting up in the morning, searching for jobs” (Hansen, 2019, p.6). Welfare conditionality is an essential dimension underlying activation strategies aimed at welfare recipients, whereby the access to certain welfare benefits and services, that had been previously held as entitlements, become “dependant on an individual first agreeing to meet particular compulsory duties or patterns of responsible behaviour” (Taylor-Gooby, 2019, p. 2).

This study focused on two Irish activation schemes that operate through community placement: Community Employment (CE) and Tús schemes. In the Irish context, welfare recipients who are long-term unemployed (i.e. unemployed for longer than 12 months) can be requested to join these schemes and be placed in local and not-for-profit organisations to work for 19.5 hours per week in the delivery of services for the community. Placement is proposed by these activation schemes as a means to reconnect with a working environment and routine, improve motivation and confidence, and gain training. More recently, the aspect of social inclusion has been emphasised by the Department of Social Protection (DSP, 2015) as a coalesced purpose of community placement, through which communities and unemployed persons can benefit. Nonetheless, while the benefit for the communities and the organisations is clear, in terms of counting on the work of volunteer-like rotating staff, the benefit for the schemes’ participants is less clear in terms of how much closer to the labour market the placement can bring them, or what other gains they can experience. The thesis sought to give visibility to this dimension from the rather absent

perspective of the participants of these schemes, in order to know and understand from their accounts, what the experience of placement does for their aspirations and plans.

As Chapter Two will explore, the rationale, aims and methods of activation policies are intertwined with contextual transformations at a global scale, and with the impacts of those at a national and local level. Most countries had turned towards activation many years before the Great Recession and had managed activation programmes for a long time. Ireland, however, is considered an outlier in that it committed to fully introducing activation policies in 2010, in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The next section presents the Irish background to help in framing a contextualised understanding of the lived experience of schemes' participants, at a time of ongoing changes.

1.2 Background

The study took place during a period of significant changes in the prevalence of unemployment in Ireland, and a period where the recent activation policy Pathways to Work was adapting to a post-recession recovery path. At the very start of this research, in 2016, Ireland was well into a path of recovery after the economic crisis and was slowly exhibiting optimistic employment figures. Nonetheless, the general elections of that year and the difficulties in forming a government, showed the loss of political capital of the main parties, after strict austerity measures that had meant severe welfare retrenchment. With the economic recovery as a paramount priority, the new government formed in 2016 focused on foreign investment and job creation, while the annual Budget was still modest. Bringing people from welfare to work was also high on the list of government priorities, and that same year the government launched Pathways to Work 2016-2020 based on the assessment that the introduction of activation and welfare conditionality with the first Pathways to Work (2012-2016) programme had had much merit in the reduction of unemployment.

Going back to 2010, in the aftermath of the recession, Ireland exhibited a 14.7 per cent rate of unemployment and massive emigration of young people. That same year, Ireland signed a bailout package of €85 billion in loans to bring the country back from the recession. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between Ireland and the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) included, among other conditions, the introduction of stricter measures to incentivise employment, reduce welfare expenditure and activate the long-term unemployed. Under the motto of “making work pay better than welfare” Ireland embarked on major welfare reforms that included: merging various services, the creation

of Intreo (a one-stop-shop combining employment and income supports), the contractualisation of welfare benefits for the unemployed, the introduction of conditionality and sanctions, and the creation of new activation schemes.

Pathways to Work 2012-2016 was the umbrella activation policy leading these reforms; it was designed in a time of crisis to reduce unemployment and, by the end of its first term, it was credited with reducing unemployment from 14.7 to 8.8 per cent. The government was optimistic of its further potential to shift from a policy of activation in a time of recession to a policy of activation in a time of recovery (Department of Social Protection, 2016, p.4). At the launch of Pathways to Work 2016-2020, the Taoiseach [Prime Minister] promised that “we are never going back to that passive welfare system (...) I want to see people independent in work, not dependent on welfare. We believe that a job is the best route out of poverty” (Irish Government News Service, 2016, n.p.). The support and enthusiasm for the activation rationale and for elevating work as a duty, showed by the government and political allies, have never been shy. As some commentators of the recent reforms have analysed, the Irish reforms towards activation - although much slower than in most European countries – have involved reinforcing the neoliberal mindset that has recommodified work, stressed personal responsibility, contractualised welfare and stigmatised welfare recipients (Murphy and Hearne, 2019; Murphy, 2016, 2012; Boland and Griffin, 2015a, 2015b; Dukelow, 2015; Dukelow and Considine, 2014; Fraser, Murphy and Kelly, 2013; Kitchin *et al.*, 2012). In that regard, it has been argued that the Irish shift towards activation and conditionality, prompted by the aftermath of the recession and the bailout commitments, met with an affirmative reception by the leading political forces and has been further sustained by popular and media discourses (Devereux and Power, 2019; Gaffney and Millar, 2019; Flynn, Monaghan and Power, 2014).

By mid-2018 unemployment continued falling steadily, and the annual Budget started to look less restrictive. At the time I was conducting the fieldwork, between May 2018 and March 2019, month after month unemployment was losing ground as a public concern while the government was confidently foreseeing a scenario of near-full employment. Despite the auspicious context, and research participants’ efforts, they had not found a job, and many were anticipating their return to welfare benefits after finishing their placement. I asked research participants for their views about the publicised economic recovery and declining unemployment. In response to this question, most participants spoke of seeing the recovery happening to other people and in other localities. On the one hand, participants referred to the unequal geographical extension of the recovery, which they saw benefitting the capital city (a view that has been supported by the figures about jobs creation); many lived in areas with poor public transport and in small villages where there were none or very little employment opportunities. On the other hand, many participants

had skills and experience in areas that were not as much in demand as before, or their profiles had become less attractive for the labour market; older participants spoke of age-based discrimination, while others referred to the increasing focus on qualifications that left many as “unmarketable” jobseekers. Other voices, from the academic realm, have also been less enthusiastic about the extent of the recovery in Ireland, describing worrying trends of precarisation of the Irish labour market, persistent youth unemployment and the rise of in-work poverty (e.g. Nugent, Pembroke and Taft, 2019; Bobek, Pembroke and Wickham, 2018; O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2017; Murphy, 2017).

By the end of 2019, it seemed as if being a participant of an activation scheme - at a time in Ireland when unemployment was statistically at its lowest - was rather anachronistic. While being unemployed at the peak of the recession was a situation shared by many affected by “external” forces, being unemployed at a time of high employment helped to reinforce the perspective of the deficiency of the unemployed person thought about as lacking skills or the will to work. In that sense, the narrations of research participants about their experiences are timely. Participants were particularly well-positioned to comment on the experience of an unemployed person who might be portrayed as somehow deficient, lacking in effort, or even undeserving, given that the context appeared to be conducive to something approximating full employment.

Tús and Community Employment (CE) have also been affected by the fluctuations in unemployment, and by late-2018 some of the local schemes I visited had difficulties meeting their targets. Fewer welfare recipients on the live register¹ meant fewer referrals and, as I learned from scheme supervisors, it also meant that schemes had a more significant proportion of what they saw as participants with more complex needs, such as participants with mental and physical health issues and older participants. As Chapter Two details, the CE scheme is pre-Pathways to Work and was reformed to fit the new rationale; it is one of the largest activation schemes and enjoys a strong reputation among community organisations and local politicians. The DEASP² Ministers for the past and the current governments have promised to keep the scheme running and delivering services to the community; however, some future reforms to it were said to be under consideration. Tús, in contrast, is a new scheme (created in 2011) and could be seen as a scheme with less political support and its continuation, in the long-term, is uncertain. Much of the future of these schemes, and Pathways to Work itself, was to be revealed in early-2020, with its third version 2020-2024.

¹ The Live Register provides the numbers of people (with some exceptions) registering for Jobseekers Benefit (JB) or Jobseekers Allowance (JA).

² In 2017 the Department of Social Protection (DSP) was renamed Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP).

At the time of writing, in Autumn 2020, dramatic and unforeseen turning points have brought unemployment and economic crisis back as leading priorities for the newly formed government of Ireland. Nonetheless, the loss of jobs amidst the current pandemic crisis seems to resemble the collective experience of the recession (i.e. unemployment driven by forces beyond one's control). However, the government was quick to urge the "involuntary" unemployed to be flexible and consider re-training for areas with available jobs, and the application of the "actively seeking for job" clause to the newly-created pandemic welfare payment³ is proving the extent and strength of the activation rationale in Irish policy. Pathways to Work 2020-2024 survived government formation negotiations, and it was expected to be launched in mid-2020; however, in the light of the coronavirus crisis, it has been delayed. A process of public consultation on Pathways to Work took place in early 2019, and different stakeholders presented their submissions to the DEASP, such as organisations sponsoring community placements and the agencies implementing these schemes, many calling for extended placements and personalised services for the long-term unemployed with specific needs. Central in these submissions, considering they were elaborated at a time of low unemployment, was the preoccupation for the immediate future of the delivery of the community services linked to community schemes. In July 2020, the Minister announced, "increased activation activity" and 3,000 additional places on activation schemes, including community placements (Dáil debate 997, 22 September 2020).

This brief narration of the recent trajectory of welfare activation reforms and unemployment trends in Ireland provides a contextual backdrop to the study. The next section sketches out some central features of both schemes, which will be revisited in greater depth in Chapter Two.

1.3 Activation through placement in community organisations

The study sought to understand the lived experience of participants in the specific type of activation schemes that operate through community placements in Ireland: Community Employment (CE) and Tús schemes. The CE scheme was created in the mid-1980s under the control of Fás, and provided services to the long-term unemployed, such as training and placements, but without compulsory or conditional requirements (Boyle, 2005). CE was voluntary and enjoyed popularity, but over the years, evaluations showed poor results in terms of increasing employment chances (O'Connell, 2016). Eventually, Fás was terminated, and the CE scheme was taken under the, at that time, Department of Social Protection. Still, the CE scheme had a long-established reputation having placed thousands of welfare recipients in a wide range

³ The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a social welfare payment for employees and self-employed people who have lost all their employment due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

of local not-for-profit organisations, which supported the scheme. The CE scheme became part of Pathways to Work 2012 under the new rules of conditionality and active job seeking. Tús was created in 2011 to be one of the new activation schemes of Pathways to Work, aimed at placing long-term unemployed in community organisations.

Both Tús and CE are aimed at the long-term unemployed in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance (JA) to complete 19.5 hours per week in a community not-for-profit organisation. CE takes participants between 21 and 64 years of age, who are placed for a one-year term which can be renewed for up to three years, depending on an annual evaluation; those over 62 can remain on the scheme up to State Pension age (66), subject to availability since these places are limited to 10 per cent per scheme. Tús offers one-year placements, and this term cannot be renewed regardless of the age of participants. Both schemes are aimed at reconnecting long-term unemployed people with a work environment and, to some extent, they offer training opportunities.

Both schemes are implemented by LDCs (Local Development Companies) also known as partnership companies, and by CLG (Companies Limited by Guarantee) with a charitable purpose. These agencies are responsible for the implementation at local level and they deal with the local organisations where participants are placed, also known as sponsors. These local organisations comprise a wide range of areas, such as local sport clubs, charity shops, centres for senior citizens, local tourist offices, creches, rehab centres, to name some. Scheme supervisors, who are agencies' staff, are responsible for placing participants and supervising their term. Chapter Two explores additional aspects related to the involvement of these agencies in the running of Pathways to Work.

1.4 Being activated

As the notion of “to activate” implies, an underlying assumption tells of someone who needs to be activated through specific strategies. As mentioned earlier, and as will be further explored in Chapter Two, behavioural change has been proposed by activation reforms to be encouraged through conditionality, incentives and sanctions; in other words, a combination of “carrots and sticks” that would stir the unemployed person out of welfare. Critical literature has debated these aspects of activation as representative of what has been identified as an ideological dimension of the activation rationale and, stemming from this dimension; it has been argued that activation transports a weak, morally charged and deteriorated notion of the agency of the welfare recipient (e.g. Patrick, 2016; Wright, 2016, 2012; Fletcher, 2015; Crespo Suarez and Serrano Pascual, 2007). The assessment of the work ethic and life decisions of the unemployed tends to be morally

charged and to foster the image of “bad” agency on the part of the welfare recipient that justifies the enforcement of conditionality and work requirements (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Wright, 2012). Relatedly, the emphasis on the unemployed person as the source of the problem and the solution obscures the role of structural forces and, as critics have pointed out, this standpoint depoliticises and privatises unemployment (e.g. Hansen, 2019; Demazière, 2019; Dean, 1995). Thus, as Rose (1996, p. 151) explains, there is a connection between the ways of thinking, judging, and acting upon selves, that these dimensions of activation depict.

The enquiry about the experience of “being activated” and its impact upon processes of identity, selfhood and formation of subjectivities, has opened avenues for different perspectives. Within the literature, the governmental perspective has stimulated a large body of research that focuses on the pervasive neoliberal influence upon the formation of subjectivities. This focus interrogates the power that activation ostensibly exerts upon people to make them willingly shape themselves in the image of the active rhetoric, the active jobseeker being its epitome (Boland, 2016). According to this perspective, welfare recipients are governed and govern themselves shaping their subjectivities according to the rhetoric that presents unemployment as an opportunity to improve oneself (e.g. Pultz, 2018, 2016; Boland, 2016; McDonald and Marston, 2015; Born and Jensen, 2010; Rose, 1996; Dean, 1995). Another corpus of research, that focuses on identity and selfhood in the context of the transformation of work and unemployment, has produced analyses interrogating the identity processes of those transiting in and out of work in contexts of precarisation (e.g. Armano, Bove and Murgia, 2017; Alvesson 2010; Sennett, 2006, 1998; du Gay, 1996). The impact of the activation welfare reforms, especially on the stigmatisation of welfare recipients, has conformed another focus of the literature, which also highlights the downside of conditionality upon welfare recipients’ lives, exerting control but not improving their living conditions (e.g. Gaffney and Millar, 2019; Taylor-Gooby, 2019; Fletcher and Wright). As a whole, this literature has generated knowledge about the phenomenon of being activated and the influence that activation exerts upon welfare recipients’ sense of agency, identities and selves.

Conversant with the literature, this thesis addressed the question for the lived experience of activation and the agency of scheme participants. I was interested in exploring the exercise of agential reflexivity of scheme participants and wanted to explore the interplay between this and the influence of the activation rationale. I considered the notion of agential reflexivity to be a relevant site to explore the interplay between the welfare activation reforms and the living experience of them. Reflexivity has been situated at the centre of different theories that seek to describe how the transformations of contemporary society interplay with the making of life trajectories (e.g. Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Archer, 2003, 2005, 2007).

I found in the critical realist proposition about agency and structure, as relatively autonomous entities each with causal powers, and in Archer's theory of agential reflexivity, in particular, an insightful approach to this matter (Archer, 2000, 2003, 2016). From Archer's critical realist perspective, reflexivity is historical and an inherent feature of human beings, which takes the form of the ability we share as human beings to consider ourselves in relation to the circumstances and contexts we are in, which are not of our choosing. Through this reflexive activity, people arrive at fallible descriptions of their situation and design courses of action that interplay with structural constraints and enablements and, thus, might fail or succeed (Archer, 2003, 2007).

Building upon the earlier sections, which have framed the background and rationale of the study, the next section states the aims of the study.

1.5 Aims of the study

Intense and rapid processes of transformations in major domains of societal life, such as welfare systems, the labour market and work, exert a major influence upon people's lives and the possibilities and limitations they encounter along their life-paths. As far as work plays a fundamental role in the making of life trajectories and selves, processes such as losing a job, failing to secure one, feeling unwanted by the labour market and having to rely on welfare assistance, they all expose the experience of contextual changes directly embedded into people's lives. These transformations, nonetheless, do not come to unconstrainedly impact on people, since structural, cultural and institutional changes are met by reflexive beings who give them meanings and significance and, in turn, mediate their effects. In that sense, "being activated" is a complex and relational phenomenon that cannot be predetermined as a linear and unproblematic movement from welfare to work.

As the findings of the study will present, the experience of going through community placement in an activation scheme involved processes of meaning-making, future thinking and identity work in relation to the circumstances that the contextual changes and the experience of placement in an activation scheme presented to research participants. Activation policies, such as Pathways to Work, work upon assumptions about what welfare recipients should be and should do, why, and how. At the same time, participants produce and carry their own meanings about fulfilment, their outcomes in life and their future.

This thesis set out to explain *how research participants made sense of their experience of long-term unemployment, job search and placement in a community organisation, as part of an*

activation scheme, in relation to their aspirations and contextual possibilities. The thesis sought to shed light upon the experience of activation from the perspective of those experiencing being targeted by activation schemes, and, thus, it paid particular attention to meaning-making processes as participants worked upon their aspirations in the light of the possibilities and limitations that the experience of placement presented. The thesis focused on the two activation schemes in Ireland that currently operate through community placements, namely CE and Tús schemes. The study chose to focus on the experience of schemes participants who lived and carried out their placement in urban and rural villages across two counties: Meath, in the Eastern part of Ireland, and Cavan, a county bordering on Northern Ireland. The study comprised the experiences of 30 schemes participants, 16 men and 14 women. Chapter Three details the sampling and recruitment decisions and procedures.

I opted for a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006, 2014), as Chapter Three explains, and as such, the aims of the research were not strictly limited at the starting point. The broad interest in the lived experience of community placement in an activation scheme guided the approach to the fieldwork which, moreover, was underlined by the scarce Irish literature about this specific topic. Two sets of questions oriented the initial approach to the interviews, concerning: (1) the meanings that research participants attributed to their experience of long-term unemployment, job search and placement in relation to the making of aspirations, expectations and plans; and (2) the opportunities and barriers that participants encountered in their experience of placement. The findings emerged grounded on the sense-making process of research participants accounting for what it meant for their trajectories to intersect with such experiences in specific moments of their life course, and the influences these had on their aspirations and future thinking.

I was mindful of the premise of Constructivist Grounded Theory to guide the researcher to discover, co-construct and learn from the data. In Grounded Theory studies the data collection and analysis take place simultaneously, and they inform each other, opening avenues for emergent concepts and gradually narrowing and focusing on central categories (Timonen *et al.*, 2018). The Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology provided the standpoint and tools to generate inductive knowledge from the data co-produced by the interactions between researcher and research participants. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, and through memos, fieldwork observations and (casual, in the fieldwork context) conversations with schemes' supervisors. Research participants comprised of 16 men and 14 women, and their ages ranged between 28 and 64.

An explicative framework emerged through the iterative process of data co-production and analysis, according to Grounded Theory principles. This framework describes and accounts for the lived experience of activation in community placement in post-recession Ireland. To some extent, I believe this framework can be explicative of similar experiences of going through changes amidst contexts of crisis/post-crisis, especially in relation to working lives. As much as Grounded Theory aims at developing substantive theories of new phenomena (Charmaz, 2006), the construction of an explicative framework, grounded in the data, should not be underestimated in its capacity to generate knowledge.

1.6 The relevance of qualitative research in researching the experience of activation

The political and economic aspects and outcomes of activation policies have been extensively studied and discussed in the literature, providing arguments in favour and against the results and efficacy of these policies, and why they should – or should not - continue to be supported. Qualitative research about the lived experience of welfare recipients targeted by activation reforms is also relevant and numerous, as the earlier section briefly explored. Much of the qualitative research enquiring into the first-person account of these transformations has been committed to critically signalling the impacts that stricter measures are having on the self-image, mental health and living conditions of welfare recipients.

Activation schemes delivered through placement in community and not-for-profit organisations have gradually captured scholarly attention, more frequently through research analysing the cases of Australia and Nordic countries. Nonetheless, this specific aspect of the experience of activation policies remains less researched. In the case of Ireland, little is known about these schemes from the experience of participants and, thus, it is important to develop an understanding about the function that these schemes exert in participants' lives. What is known about Tús and CE schemes are the aims that Pathways to Work, the implementing agencies and sponsor organisations pursue through them, and through a few evaluations of the schemes (e.g. DSP, 2015) we partially know some indicators of their performance from the policy point of view. What is little known are the meanings that those experiencing the schemes attribute to community placements.

Within the field of social policy, researching the lived experience of social problems is significant; these studies offer rich accounts of phenomena as they give central voice to those who experience them and possess expertise that can be easily overlooked (for analysis see McIntosh and Wright, 2019). Essential dimensions, such as age and gender dimensions of the lived experience of social problems, are better captured from the first-person account. Researching activation and

unemployment, grounded on the lived experience, is relevant and timely. As it was briefly presented, assumptions about welfare recipients circulate with a rather hegemonic tone. Research can reinforce these assumptions, but it can also challenge these and other ideas that potentially classify people into static and negative conceptions; as Patrick (2020, p. 254) warns “academic efforts to question and unpick the dominant framing of ‘welfare’ are important, not least because of the ways in which this framing is mobilised to defend and justify calls for each successive wave of welfare reform and welfare state retrenchment”.

Foregrounding the lived experience, agency and reflexivity open other standpoints from where to observe structural influences, that could challenge the dominant place of conditionality and behavioural control, as well as the dominant notions of work as duty and as paid work only. The weight and influence of institutions and policies intersecting people’s lives make it all the more relevant to explore the experiential dimension. As individuals become a target or recipient of specific policies and measures, the intersection of their experiences of a social problem and the specific actions of policies upon that problem traces for them a new experiential route. Recent qualitative research has called for “more sociologically-informed explanations of conditionality and its effects” (Wright and Patrick, 2019, p.3) accounting for the lived experience of these measures through an empirically-based understanding of the meanings that these policies embodied once they interplay with welfare recipients’ lives.

1.7 Reflexivity of the researcher

A central principle of Constructivist Grounded Theory is the “self-consciousness” of the researcher which, as Charmaz (2017, p. 36) explains, refers to conducting reflexive research in which researchers examine themselves “*in* the research process, the meanings we make and the actions we take each step along the way”. Then, this means that our positioning, views and biases as researchers are visible and accountable for, rather than concealed. This self-consciousness is of greater relevance when one adheres to the Grounded Theory premise of the co-construction of data and knowledge by research participants and researcher (Charmaz, 2017).

The starting point of this doctoral research was my professional interest in social inclusion as a goal and aspiration, both shared and contended between social policy and the individuals targeted by them. As I came to realise - through my professional experience as a social worker - the aspirations and paths that people want for themselves are not always aligned with the circuits of social inclusion that social policy designed for them; especially when people are in situations of need and disadvantage, social policies tend to be stricter and offer very homogeneous circuits.

Working in programmes of social protection in Chile, I encountered how these policies were based on the belief in employment as *the* solution for the problems that clients presented, regardless of the feasibility of it; and making them realise this path was a constant pressure upon myself as a social worker. I first systematically approached these questions through Master's level research, where the findings brought me closer to the concepts of life-plans and reflexivity as "something" that was disrupting the circuits of inclusion stipulated by these programmes. Then, when I became aware of activation policies, their rationale and strategies captured my attention, and I started to mull over the question about how unemployment, and the fact of being subject to conditionality, impacted on people's trajectories and the making of their life-plans. This was the starting point of my decision to pursue this doctoral research.

My social worker self, with her experiences, assumptions and views about social problems, social policy and the living experience of these, is an influence I must be conscious of and acknowledge. Thus, I do hold a personal view against uniform conditional welfare, which probably has made me more receptive to the literature that holds a critical stance towards it. Having acknowledged that, it is also true that the opinion I initially had about activation policies has been challenged many times during the research process. After a few interviews, I could see how research participants' stance towards their situations challenged some of my initial preconceptions. The fact that the research process was guided by a Constructivist Grounded Theory stance demanded from me as a researcher much reflexivity as to "keep an eye" on my own biases and, at the same time, on the narratives of participants as the experts of their experiences.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The thesis comprises seven chapters. This first chapter has exposed the background to activation policies and the specific schemes based on community placements, the arguments for carrying out the study and the aims that guided the enquiry into the life experience of placement in an activation scheme. A more detailed account of the literature pertaining to these topics is offered by Chapter Two, which develops a revision of the literature on unemployment, activation and welfare reforms; particular attention is given to Ireland. Chapter Two also dwells upon the recent debates concerning agency and social policy.

Chapter Three presents the methodological aspects of the study. In this chapter, I discuss the ontological position I took to understand the interplay between structure and agency, and agential reflexivity, from a critical realist stance that is non-conflationist (i.e. agency and structure are not reduced to the other) (Archer, 2003). Next, the chapter explains the option for a Constructivist

Grounded Theory methodology and its main principles. The chapter also explains the process of recruitment and sampling, the use of theoretical sampling, the process of analysis and the option for the method of the interview. Ethical considerations of the study are also reviewed in Chapter Three, along with a brief description of the research participants' profiles.

The findings of the study are presented throughout three chapters (Chapters Four, Five and Six). The organisation of the findings follows the logic given by research participants to their own narrations, which comprised their past, present, and future. Chapter Four portrays the relatively recent past of research participants, strongly contoured by their experience of unemployment. Participants reflected upon the circumstances underpinning the occurrence of unemployment in their lives, mostly linked to the Great Recession, and from then on, unemployment unfolds as a three-fold experience: (1) the experience of losing; (2) the experience of becoming a welfare recipient; and (3) the experience of dealing with new rules of job search. In direct dialogue with these findings, Chapter Five focuses on the present experience of placement, which also unfolds as a three-fold experience that seeks to counterbalance the experiences presented in Chapter Four, through (1) gradually regaining some of the pivotal elements lost as a result of unemployment; (2) co-producing the placement position by entering into a dialogical selection with the scheme supervisor; (3) helping others and adopting a volunteer-like identity. As a whole, Chapter Four and Five presented the meanings that participants attributed to unemployment and placement, and they are narratively constructed as two sides of an experience of change.

Chapter Six dwells upon participants' future thinking from a trajectorial view. Participants recalled the futures they imagined in the past when they were about to leave or finish school and initiate their working lives; the outcomes of these "future-in-the-past" were known and informed the making of their future after placement. The experience of placement, along with age and gender, were paramount influences in the future thinking of participants. The final chapter, Chapter Seven, presents the conclusions of the study. An explicative framework of the experience of placement, grounded in the data co-produced between the researcher and research participants, is offered. The principal findings of the study illuminate a core tension between change and stability that sustains the reflexive making of a future path after placement.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The logic of this chapter

Having outlined the aims and focus of the study, this chapter situates it in connection with the relevant literature about the core topics of this research: unemployment, activation, community placement schemes and agency. These topics are far-reaching across fields and present interesting perspectives and debates; nonetheless, an extensive review of each topic is not possible. This chapter offers a focused narrative account of the literature in order to contextualise the study within the broader discussions about unemployment, activation and agency. This chapter focuses on the rationale underpinning activation policies, and the related welfare reforms, as a pivotal influence upon the lived experience of research participants.

The literature review in Constructivist Grounded Theory, as Charmaz (2006, p. 163) explained, is an ideological site “in which you claim, locate, evaluate, and defend your position”. This insight is particularly relevant considering the political and normative character of the phenomena concerning unemployment, work and activation. Relatedly, scholarly debates reflect this contended nature. Reflexively engaging with the literature means acknowledging that this speaks from and of contested stances that, concerning these topics, transport notions of human agency. In keeping with Constructivist Grounded Theory, most of the literature review was carried out at the final stage of the study. Nonetheless, and as it has also been argued, grounded theorist researchers engage with the literature before entering the field, as to identify the area of study and justify the research questions, provided that the researcher remains open to the data (Timonen, Foley and Conlon, 2018; Charmaz, 2006). Relatedly, I conducted a literature review at the onset of the thesis to contextualise the study and justify its relevance. Some aspects covered by this initial review lost relevance for the study as the research process advanced, while new topics that I had not foreseen, emerged. This chapter offers a narrative account of the literature on the more relevant aspects; additional pertinent literature was reviewed based on the analysis of findings, which is presented in Chapter Seven.

The chapter opens with a brief overview of the thesis of the centrality of work and the work-centred society, acknowledging its influence upon the understanding and research of the phenomenon of unemployment, which is the focus of the subsequent section. Next, this chapter develops a narrative account of the turn towards activation, the reasons underlying it and the main

features of activation policies. This account is based on the work of authors who have gained a status as central analysts, as assessed through familiarisation with the literature on activation; in that regard, much of this literature emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and it mostly depicts the European context. This chapter also dwells upon the rationality of and justifications for activation, especially as to why it continues to maintain an interest in fostering behavioural and moral change in welfare recipients; these aspects are central to the understanding of the lived experience of welfare recipients targeted by these policies, and, in particular, the experiences of the research participants in this study. This section is followed by a brief account of the debates concerning the agency of the welfare recipient.

The last section of this chapter focuses entirely on the case of Ireland. It first offers a brief historical account of the Irish path to activation and later focuses on the schemes providing community placements. The section closes with a brief review of the literature on workfare volunteering, topic that can be regarded as the closest conceptualisation of the experience of community placement schemes found in the literature; since there is no evidence of research on this topic in Ireland, this depiction has relied entirely on international literature.

2.2 The Centrality of Work

The thesis of the centrality of work is widely accepted as a taken-for-granted aspect of Western society (for analyses see Chamberlain, 2018; Frayne, 2015, 2019; Weeks, 2011; Bauman, 2001; Gorz, 1999). Weeks (2011) explains that since industrialisation, society has been re-signified as a work-centred society, as most needs and dimensions of social and individual lives, such as identity, well-being and belonging, have become tied to work. In turn, the work-centred society marginalises and stigmatises people who do not or cannot engage in paid work (Chamberlain, 2018). The thesis of the centrality of work occupies a pivotal role in the study of the experience of work and unemployment and, more recently, it divides stances within the literature, giving form to post-work perspectives that propose the reformulation or end of work and its role in social and individual lives. Section 2.3 offers a brief overview of the main perspective underpinning the understanding of the phenomenon of unemployment, the deprivation model, which is intrinsically connected to the notion of work as essential for individual and social life. This overview is relevant to the study, as the centrality of work is an omnipresent idea and value underpinning the activation rationale.

However, before going further, it would be helpful to answer the question: What is work? Marx and Engels (1947/2004, p. 42) defined work as a primary human activity, a way of self-realisation

and fulfilment; in other words, “it is a definite form of activity of individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life”. This understanding of work is usually referred to in the literature as work in the broad sense, the philosophical or anthropological sense⁴ (e.g. Weeks, 2011; Gorz, 1999). This definition of work in the broad sense, according to Gorz (1999) is not the one at the core of the work-centred society but is the notion of paid work which can only mean an exchange in the market, the labour market, based on economic value. The dominant understanding of work as paid work has marginalised those forms of work that occur outside the market, such as care; this notion is better illustrated in Gorz’s (1999, p.3) question “why do we say that a woman 'works' when she takes care of children in a nursery and 'does not work' when she stays at home to take care of her children? Is it because the one is paid and the other not?” (for a feminist critique of work see Weeks, 2011). Gorz (1999) argued that the remuneration of a specific work confirms its insertion into the flow of social exchange; thus, work is translated into a social activity that is identifiable by the specific skills that employs, which provides it with a socially identified purpose judged necessary for the functioning of society (i.e. a job, a profession). This understanding of work, and its monopoly upon other forms of it, was a foundational mark of the transit to an industrial-capitalist society; from then on, individuals had to engage in paid work, which, as this structures nearly all dimensions of life, gained central cultural and psychological meaning for people. Related aspects, such as the work ethic and work as a source of identity, derived from the centrality of work (James, 2018; Weeks, 2011).

Work has held an unmistakable power, structuring people’s biography and providing a sense of cohesion to their notion of self. Since the onset of the post-industrial society, the transformation of work has been redrawing biographical trajectories and saturating working life with uncertainty, and the capacity of work to sustain a sense of continuity through time is being challenged (James, 2018; Bauman, 2001; Ezzy, 2001; Sennett, 1998). Since it is argued that work can no longer give the sense of lifelong identity that it used to decades ago, people identify with work as a temporary aspect of their life (Bauman, 2001). Relatedly, the phenomenon of unemployment has become central for life trajectories, as this life event has become frequent, intermittent and immune to educational and occupational backgrounds (Gallie and Paugman, 2000).

2.3 Researching unemployment from a work-centred perspective? Critical views

Unemployment possesses a multifaced nature that cannot be reduced to a status or to a statistical reality, and it cannot be reduced to the individual and subjective experience, as Demazière (2017)

⁴ I use the term work mostly interchangeably with employment and job. When I refer to work in its broad sense, I will note it.

proposes, thus, unemployment is a web of normativities and subjectivities, both contingent upon time, positions, contexts and life experiences. Still, the notion of the centrality of work – that work is necessary and good – has been a strong normative drive for how unemployment and the unemployed appear in society and how they have come to be researched. A dominant perspective in the research of unemployment, which, in turn, has informed social policies, is the latent deprivation model by Jahoda (Jahoda, 1982). Jahoda's perspective built upon *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community* (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel 1933/1975), which, in the mid-1930s post-recession era studied the unemployed men of a textile town and concluded that the common attitudes they manifested were consequences of the loss of the benefits they obtained from work, since that was the source of fulfilment for individual and social needs. *Marienthal* has maintained its status as a foundational study. Building upon *Marienthal*, Jahoda (1982) developed the latent deprivation model that became a chief perspective in the understanding of unemployment; the model gives paid work a manifest function (i.e. income) and five latent functions through which individuals fulfil specific psychological and social needs. These functions of work are (1) structure; (2) social contacts; (3) participation in collective purposes and use of skills; (4) status and identity and, finally, (5) regular activity.

As Cole (2007, p. 1135) asserted, the assumptions of *Marienthal* “have become sedimented into sociological research on unemployment, whether or not the seminal influence of the study is formally cited or acknowledged”. Under the influence of Jahoda, most of the studies conducted between the 1970s and the 1990s focused on the psychological well-being of the unemployed (Nordenmark, 1999). A large body of research has recorded the negative effects of unemployment on the person and family (e.g. Strandh *et al.*, 2014; Fryer, 2002, 1992; Feather 1990; Warr, 1987; Fryer and Payne, 1984); indeed, as Sage (2018, p. 1043) has argued, the negative consequences of unemployment “[are] one of the most universal findings in social science, demonstrated across a wide variety of welfare states”. Relatedly, these findings have informed policies which have been largely aimed at managing these effects through work. Paul and Moser's (2009) meta-analysis supported the connection between health and unemployment and found that the average prevalence rate of psychological disorders among unemployed persons was twice that found among employed persons. Jefferis *et al.* (2011) found a correlation between depression and unemployment, while Wanberg (2012) identified that unemployment also affects physical health and can even be associated with suicide and mortality. Strandh (2000) argued that not knowing the duration of their unemployment and the expectations people have regarding their job search and regaining employment soon have an impact on their mental health.

Illuminating the loss of income, Fryne's (1992) research found that long-term economic deprivation affected unemployed people's well-being more negatively than the loss of the other

functions of work. Zechmann and Paul (2019) supported that the economic dimension caused much of the stress during unemployment. Similar studies have suggested that psychological distress associated with the loss of income lessens in countries with systems that reduce the impact of the economic loss (Paul and Moser, 2009; Strandh, 2000). However, these studies did not take into consideration the dimension of conditional welfare, which has been argued by other studies to be a source of psychological distress and deterioration of living conditions (e.g. Dwyer *et al.*, 2020; Patrick, 2014). Relatedly, the literature has argued that while the loss of the functions of work can cause psychological and physical distress, jobs of low quality can produce similar effects (Dejours, 2015; Malenfant *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, an increase in research about meaningful work has been noted (e.g. Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; May *et al.*, 2004), reflecting the growing subjective search for the worth, purpose and meaning of work as working conditions deteriorate and meaningless work generates apathy, detachment and, eventually, severe pathologies (Jaeggi, 2017; Dejours, 2015; May *et al.*, 2004).

The influence of the deprivation model upon research (and policies) has been criticised for its tendency to draw upon binary conceptions, with work seen as positive, good and a “cure”, and unemployment as the opposite; moreover, it is argued that the centrality of work fuels these assumptions, but it fails to address ongoing transformations such as the precarisation of work, the prevalence of illnesses associated with the workplace, or the fact that people opt out of paid work or decide to work less and lead positive and fulfilling lives (e.g. Frayne, 2019; Pultz, 2017; Boland and Griffin, 2015; Cole, 2007). Along similar lines, some authors have interrogated how much paid employment is needed to get the latent benefits of work (e.g. Kamerāde *et al.*, 2019), and some authors have suggested the reduction of working hours for reasons of well-being (Balderson *et al.*, 2020). Other studies suggest that paid work is not the only way to obtain the functions of work and argue that these can be achieved through unpaid work, leisure activities or more intense social contacts (e.g. Nørup, 2019). The disconnection of unpaid work (or work in its broad sense) from the latent functions of work has been criticised largely by post-work and feminist authors (e.g. Weeks, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2004; Federici, 1975).

Nørup (2019) found that people who suffer from chronic illness and are unemployed face additional difficulties since there are aspects of their lives they have already lost; thus, they face a double sense of loss and experience decreased well-being and less personal autonomy. At the same time, these individuals are more likely to have lower levels of education and face discrimination in the labour market. Nørup argued that the negative social and psychological effects that unemployed individuals experience depend, to a large extent, on individual and structural aspects that produce differentiated modes of coping with the experience. These

dimensions are relevant to the contextualisation of the experience of some of the research participants in this study, as Chapters Four, Five and Six will explore.

Sage (2008) argued that while the causal association between unemployment and health is supported, there has been less research to explain why unemployment produces these effects. Moreover, Sage argued that addressing this gap is relevant if we consider that policy decisions, such as activation measures, are aimed at these consequences and, for example, that the ideation of work-like schemes (such as community placement schemes) are based on the deprivation model and, consequently, mimic a work environment that provides routine, purposive tasks and the use of specific skills. Participation then becomes a benefit in itself for the unemployed. These arguments connect with the idea of soft outcomes associated with workfare volunteering (section 2.9). Other studies suggest that activation schemes can provide a way of regaining a lost sense of purpose and self-esteem but can also provoke negative emotions and feelings of exploitation (Baines and Hardhill, 2008). Similarly, Sage (2015) identified a growing scholarly support for subjective well-being and social capital as non-economic outcomes of activation policies, which, in turn, are influenced by perspectives supporting the benefits of the work-like environment to fulfil most of the latent functions of paid work. Positive effects, in terms of an improved sense of well-being, agency and self-worth, are found in activation schemes that utilise a more personalised approach and that prioritise participants' self-assessed needs (Dean, 2003; Kampen, 2020). However, as Bonin and Rinne's (2014) study showed, the subjective well-being obtained from such schemes is temporary if participation does not lead to employment. These arguments provide a context for understanding why schemes providing work-like experience through community placements have such a strong focus on subjective gains and obscure the progression into paid work. Chapter Five and Seven will return to some of these aspects.

A different perspective for understanding the experience of unemployment has been offered by Ezzy (2001, 2000, 1997). Ezzy (2001, 2000, 1997) argued that the meanings that people give to their work and unemployment experiences, which are not inherently positive or negative, are socially constructed, and this attributed social meaning is largely negative in light of the centrality of work, which situates work as a life-project and a source of social value. Consequently, the unemployed construct their experience of unemployment with a combination of subjective meanings, where past and present experiences and the circumstances that they face are considered. Work, then, provides different functions, depending on the meanings that work has for a person, and the effects on well-being are derived from that. Ezzy (2001) identified two main accounts of unemployment, victimic and heroic, which are construed by people to make sense of the event of unemployment. Those who identified with a victimic plot spoke of their unemployment as tragic and something that was out of their control; on the other hand, those

narrating it as heroic emphasised their autonomy and saw unemployment as part of a bigger plan and as an opportunity to retrain, change career and so on, and depicted themselves in control. Tragic loss accounts are narratives “that suppress the individual’s responsibility or agency as the cause of actions” (Ezzy, 2001, p. 123) and depict the person as a victim who blames other people or events for their current situation, which serves the purpose of shifting the blame away from the individual. This role is important, considering that the emphasis on self-responsibility and failure lead the unemployed to practice self-blame (Pultz and Hviid, 2016).

The role of paid work in the construction of identity is another relevant aspect to be addressed. As mentioned in the opening of this section, for a long time, work has played a pivotal role in the construction of personal and social identity. At its best, work can provide fulfilment and meaning, and at its worse, it can be alienating; in that sense, the connection between work/unemployment and identity is better understood as subjectively evolving and embedded in contextual and structural circumstances (James, 2018; Ezzy, 2001, 1993). Still, paid work does exert an appeal as a source of identity, self-concept and fulfilment that cannot be dismissed and that cannot be seen solely through a standard model of experience such as Jahoda’s (1985). From the perspective of gender, for instance, Hochschild’s (1997) study showed that men and women have different relationships to work, and, in particular, women have sought an escape into work. Women’s development of an identity not bound to being a wife and mother has been a common motivation among women for returning to work after staying at home. Hochschild’s (1997) study found that women considered their work at home to be invisible and that the sense of recognition, accomplishment and self-worth they were missing could be satisfied in the workplace. Hochschild’s insights illuminates important dimensions of the experiences narrated by women research participants (Chapters Four, Five and Six).

As this section has presented, a dominant view of paid work as a source of livelihood and subjective and physical well-being has been influential upon research and policies as well as on the lived experience of unemployment. In that light, Beder (2000) argued that the unemployed have been stigmatised to ensure that no social identity is possible outside paid work. McDonald and Marston (2005) and Boland and Griffin (2016, 2019) have argued that the identity of the unemployed is construed in social relations as a deficient moral identity that needs to be rectified through work. All in all, the centrality of work has been a major normative influence framing the subjective experience of work and unemployment. Perspectives emphasising the moral and psychological dimensions of work and unemployment have gained dominance. As the next section describes, activation policies have emerged from a strong criticism against social policies that were deemed to be disincentivising paid work.

2.4 The Activation Turn

The establishment of welfare states in Europe relied upon a Fordist model of production, the state management of macro-policies to guarantee economic growth and full employment, and social policies aimed at decommodification and redistribution (Jessop, 1993). From the late 1970s onwards, the advance of globalisation, the spread of neoliberalism and its reliance on market dynamics, the transition to a post-Fordist model of production and intermittent economic crises, among other factors, have triggered the collapse of the previous system of interdependences and given way to processes of economic and social transformation (Peck and Theodore, 2001; Jessop, 1993). On the one hand, technological innovations, the growing segmentation of the labour market and the polarisation of high- and low-skill levels, among other aspects, have characterised the ongoing transformation of work and the labour market (Gallie, 2004). On the other hand, the onset of an era of individualisation (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) and new social risks (Bonoli, 2007) have underpinned further transformations at societal and individual levels, putting more pressure upon the post-Fordist welfare state and upon the lived experience of those relying on its protection.

All in all, by the late 1980s, recurrent economic crises and the escalation of unemployment had led to economic and political national and supranational actors to question the capacity of welfare states to manage these processes with the old methods, to which a widespread reaction was the promotion of welfare retrenchment and labour market flexibilisation (Bonoli, 2010; Taylor-Gooby, 2008a; Classen and Clegg, 2006). The neoliberal critique of the welfare state, steered by leading economies such as the US and the UK, prompted far-reaching structural reforms to improve the stock of the workforce and reduce public expenditure (Handler, 2004; Bonoli, 2003; Peck and Theodore, 2000; Jessop, 1993). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) displayed a vocal influence in promoting an approach to labour and social policies that would prioritise labour market integration at different stages of the life course (OECD, 1994). This was complemented by a political emphasis on personal responsibility and against welfare dependency, which started to dominate the agenda of welfare reforms, focusing on the welfare recipient as the main “component” of welfare systems to experience adjustment (Peck, 1998; Mead, 1986, 1997). Welfare systems were set to undergo drastic reforms that would make incentives to work more compelling (Bonoli, 2007, 2010; Barbier, 2001). Gradually, the relationship between state and citizens was recalibrated under the new emphasis on citizens’ obligations, signalling the transition from a *welfare* to a *workfare* state (Peck and Theodore, 2001; Jessop, 1993) and an *active* paradigm (Dean, 1995; OECD, 1994) that replaced entitlements based on citizenship with work-related conditions at the centre of contemporary welfare systems. Hence, activation signals a major turning point that has rebalanced the relationship between

welfare systems, citizens and the labour market through reforms that incentivise paid work, tie welfare assistance to work requirements and mobilise strategies to enhance welfare recipients' employability and change their behaviour (Bonoli, 2010, 2003; Dingeldey, 2007; Lødemel and Trickey, 2000; Serrano Pascual, 2004). Nonetheless, it has been argued that the rationale driving activation reforms is not a new phenomenon but is connected to the preoccupation, since the early 20th century, with the management of unemployment and the unemployed (Fletcher, 2015).

The contemporary origins of activation are most often related to the US welfare reform in 1996 (e.g. Handler, 2004; Peck, 2001), but other authors trace them back to post-war reforms in Sweden and Denmark, which combined employment policies and social protection (e.g. Weishaupt, 2011). The US welfare reform saw the strengthening of compulsory work-related requirements for benefits aimed at “preventing dependency and incentivising ‘work first’” (Dean, 2004, p. 16). In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was introduced in the US and ended “welfare as we knew it” (Anderson, Kairys and Wiseman, 2014). A pivotal influence, especially for European countries, has been exerted by the OECD and the EU (Lødemel and Moreira, 2014; Serrano Pascual and Magnusson, 2007; Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004).

A milestone in the turn to activation was the 1994 OECD document *Job Study*, which first recommended the reformulation of the unemployment-related benefits system as to “make work pay” through limiting disincentives to work and instigating reforms to the tax/benefit systems (Martin, 2014). In 1997, the EU called for the adoption of the European Employment Strategy (EES) and for annual National Employment Action Plans (NEAP) to be developed by member countries (Lødemel and Trickey, 2000). Since then, activation policies have become a central and influential component of European social and labour market policies. Gaullie (2004) argued that the rapid propagation of activation policies across European countries showed that the policies had gained a rapid and broad support from governments of different political colours. Still, the “activation turn” has not followed a homogeneous model, and different emphases have been adopted by regions and countries, contingent on their historical and political contexts (Barbier, 2001; Barbier and Knuth, 2010; Bonoli, 2010); nonetheless, as Peck and Theodore (2001) revealed, despite national differences, the policies reflected a generalised movement toward work-orientated regimes.

From a European perspective, activation has been more often presented as a reform meeting two ends – economic growth and social inclusion – through “making work pay”; this has been a key message from the OECD since the late 1980s and also became a key priority for the EU (Serrano and Jepsen, 2006). Two archetypes of activation across Europe have been identified: (1) the

workfare or work-first type, deriving from liberal welfare regimes and aimed at reducing social expenditure and at activating individuals by providing services that can lead them to work as quickly as possible (such as in Germany, Ireland and the UK) and (2) the enabling or train-first type, deriving from the universalistic welfare regime which offers more generous benefits, less constraining work requirements and tailored services to different needs and capacities (such as in Denmark, Norway and Sweden) (Barbier and Knuth, 2010; European Commission, 2013; Dingeldey, 2007).

Activation reforms, in general terms, can be defined as policies that introduce “benefit rules and employment/training services with a view at moving unemployed income benefit recipients into work” (Lødemel and Moreira, 2014, p. 8) along a continuum between enabling and demanding measures (Dingeldey, 2007; Serrano Pascual, 2004). These policies are implemented under different names, such as activation labour market policies (ALMP), workfare, welfare to work and, simply, activation policies. Early literature from the mid-1990s discusses that liberal regimes (i.e. the US, Australia and the UK), widely uses the term “workfare”, which, as Peck (1997, p. 133) explained, can be seen as “a conflation of ‘work-for-welfare’ or as a synonym of ‘welfare-to-work’”. European countries have been reluctant to use the term “workfare”, considering it to be charged with a negative stereotype, and the single term “activation” has been widely accepted (Lødemel and Moreira, 2014). Despite the different labels, a common rationale and methods guide activation policies. For these reasons, this study uses the concept of activation policies.

In Dingeldey’s (2007, p. 824) view, activation policies include “the enforcement of labour market participation, the conditionality of rights and the placing of increasing obligation on individual workers, and on the other hand, an expansion of services intended to promote employability”. A transversal rule regarding access to welfare benefits is a demand that welfare recipients remain available to actively seek work and accept job offers; this, in turn, establishes a wider definition of a “suitable job offer” that cannot be refused, reduces the duration of benefits and limits eligibility (Knotz, 2016). The enabling notion of activation includes measures aimed at enhancing employability to make welfare recipients more attractive to the labour market, such as training, work experience and counselling. Relatedly, work-related requirements and similar demands upon the welfare recipient are of a compulsory nature; in other words, benefits are conditional upon compliance, and non-compliance can be met with sanctions such as the reduction of benefits. In that regard, the activation turn has meant a turn towards welfare conditionality grounded in the belief that welfare recipients need to be, somehow, changed in order to become active.

A critical strand within the literature on activation analyses its complex character, establishing that activation mobilises far-reaching changes in the logic of welfare; for instance, dismantling

the decommodifying role of the welfare state that defined it for many decades. Activation is considered to be a dimension of a larger reform of Western social protection systems that promote residual social policies whose priority is to produce transitions from welfare to work (e.g. Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer; 2004; Peck and Theodore, 2000). Relatedly, critical commentators stress the erosion of decommodification (i.e. a core component of welfare states aimed at reducing citizens' reliance on the market) (Esping-Andersen, 1990) that the duty of work has mobilised (Murphy, 2016; Greer, 2015; Mascini, Soentken and van der Veen, 2011).

The next section explores the activation rationale that underpins its main features.

2.5 The Activation Rationale

As depicted in the previous section, activation has multiple facets, and its implementation across countries and regions is not uniform; nonetheless, a substantial dimension of activation policies refers to the rationale that provides a justification for its architecture. These aspects have been widely discussed in the literature, and some commentators suggest that activation channels an ideological stance that, for example, charges the agency of the unemployed with a set of moral characteristics and values that justify conditionality (Boland and Griffin, 2015b, 2015c; Wright, 2012; Serrano Pascual, 2004; Dean 1995). At the same time, it is argued that the widespread adoption of activation demonstrates the consolidation of a rather hegemonic neoliberal discourse regarding the role of welfare systems and the labour market.

Serrano Pascual (2004) argued that ideology is a dimension of activation (along with methods, goals and ethics) that mobilises new justifications and representations of the welfare state and citizenship in contractual terms, and unemployment in moral rather than structural terms. Relatedly, the causes of unemployment have been reinterpreted and reshaped to make them an individual problem disconnected from structural forces and which are presented as a moral and psychological deficit in individuals (Frayne, 2019; Friedli and Stearn, 2015). In turn, this notion shapes individuals' understanding and experience of their situation. This aspect, for instance, explains the dominant supply-side focus of activation along with its interest in behavioural change and employability. All in all, while it could not be claimed that activation is pure ideology, as Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2014, p. 429) have argued, it is true that activation reforms have been very influential in producing far-reaching shifts that have embraced more or less all countries.

The next sub-section discusses the notion of activation rationale to describe the principal ideas and justifications underpinning its measures.

2.5.1 The evil of welfare dependency and the value of individual responsibility

Paz-Fuchs (2008) and Mounk (2017) have argued that current times could be described as the age of responsibility: personal responsibility has overtaken the notions of citizenship and entitlements as “more and more welfare commitments are conditional on good, or ‘responsible’ behaviour” (Mounk, 2017, p. 5). A prominent liberal principle, personal responsibility condemns welfare dependency and, accordingly, welfare benefits are criticised for being passive and a disincentive to work (Mead, 1986, 1997). Accordingly, this rhetoric against welfare dependency mobilises a moral focus on individual agency, which makes individuals responsible for their outcomes in life “even in the rare instances when structural disadvantages are acknowledged” (Goodin, 1998, p. 68). In this view, welfare dependency is regarded as a personal decision and a choice, which has fitted well with the justification for stricter workfare measures needed to demonstrate one’s work ethic (Dean, 2006).

The argument that claiming welfare benefits is a choice or a lifestyle has been disseminated in the form of myths used to justify conditionality for unemployment benefits, which, in turn, have contributed to the stigmatisation of the welfare recipient (Baumberg, 2016; Patrick, 2016; MacDonald, Schildrick and Furlong, 2014). Patrick’s (2014) longitudinal study showed how welfare recipients challenge this belief by narrating their lives on benefits as hard and close to poverty and, thus, the aspiration of getting off benefits is central to them. Patrick also warned about the stigmatising effect that these discourses have upon peoples’ self-image, which has also been supported by other studies (Batty and Flint, 2010; Garthwaite, 2013; Schildrick *et al.*, 2012). In the case of Ireland, the “vilification of welfare recipients” is identified as a scapegoating strategy used during the imposition of austerity measures, through which welfare dependency was constructed by politicians and the media as one of the causes for such measures; in turn, this strategy promoted the public acceptance of welfare cuts that would hit the “the unemployed who putatively eschew work as a ‘lifestyle choice’” (O’Flynn, Monaghan and Power, 2014, p. 925). Similarly, Deveroux and Power (2019) have analysed how the media discourse in Ireland between 2011 and 2013 stressed the idea of welfare fraud, crystallising an anti-welfare attitude in people and favouring political measures of austerity.

Fraser and Gordon (1994) explained dependency as an ideological term that has been individualised and charged with a psychological and moral sense that attributes it to a deficiency of character. Serrano Pascual (2007) identified a tendency in activation rationale to adopt a moral-

therapeutic approach. Relatedly, the idea that welfare recipients need to change their behaviour and attitude towards work is supported, as the next sub-section explores.

2.5.2 Behavioural change

Subjectivity, seen in moral and psychological terms, becomes a matter of intervention calling for the enhancement of character traits such as self-esteem or motivation, and of moral traits such as work ethic; in this context, self-regulation, responsibility and independence are deemed conditions of individual agency (Serrano Pascual, 2009). From this perspective, social problems are transformed into individual dilemmas and, as such, “explanation of behaviour, and, crucially, the very possibility of intervention and change, occurs merely at an individual level” (Crespo Suarez and Serrano Pascual, 2007, p. 45). Hence, structural reasons for causes of the so-called “deficits”, such as incomplete education or mental health problems, are not addressed as such; as Peck and Theodore (2000, p. 729) explained, “the old problems of demand deficiency and job shortage have been dismissed; policies must now focus on the motivations”.

Friedli and Stearn (2015, p. 42) critically observed the acceptance of what they call “psychological conditionality”, that is, the requirement to demonstrate certain attitudes or attributes to receive benefits and the imposition of psychological explanations for unemployment. Employability and job readiness are pivotal aims of this approach to shape welfare recipients into an attractive jobseeker. Mandatory activities such as job search, workshops and group and individual counselling are designed as sites of enhancement of personal features that can later be translated into a CV to continue with the active job search (Dean, 2003). Humpage and Ballie’s (2016) research found that welfare recipients learn how to strategically change their behaviour to adapt to compulsory requirements and avoid being sanctioned.

The longitudinal study of Whelan *et al.* (2018) showed that therapeutic approaches within an activation scheme can be beneficial for the long-term unemployed, improving self-esteem and career self-efficacy, when employing interventions that include personalised career guidance, needs assessment and regular meetings defined by the individual and the caseworker.

2.5.3 Conditionality

As briefly described, the welfare dependency rhetoric has contributed to portraying a weak agency in welfare recipients, to the assumption that they are malleable and have no will of their own, and to the idea that they rely on welfare rather than seek other options. Relatedly, conditionality has emerged as an approach and method of activation policies to monitor and regulate the behaviour of welfare recipients and to channel changes. By making assistance conditional upon work

requirements, activation rationale aims to promote people “taking control of their lives” by influencing the personal choices of welfare recipients.

As Clasen and Clegg (2007) identified, three conditions operate as inclusion/exclusion criteria to access welfare assistance: conditions of category (e.g. being unemployed, homeless, etc.); conditions of circumstance (e.g. means testing criteria); and conditions of conduct (i.e. behavioural conditions). Conditionality falls into this last category. Dwyer (2019, p. 2) explained conditionality as an approach that defines access to welfare benefits and services as “dependant on an individual first agreeing to meet particular compulsory duties or patterns of responsible behaviour” such as actively seeking a job; therefore, conditionality is a behaviour-based term. Conditionality operates through a contractualised relationship with welfare in which the welfare recipient is at the receiving end and must reciprocate by behaving accordingly (Dwyer, 2019).

Overall, European countries have adopted conditional welfare with different levels of intensity and enforcement. Compulsory job search and participation in meetings, workshops and other activities required by welfare officers are reinforced by the threat of sanctions or even the loss of benefits; this dynamic is known as a “throtter”, that is, an all-or-nothing dilemma (Goodin, 1998), or what Lødemel and Trickey (2000) have called “an offer that you cannot refuse” since accepting is not a free choice if people have no other ways of supporting themselves.

Advocates of personal responsibility see in conditionality a remedy for the wrong behaviour and choices of welfare recipients and, in their view, behavioural conditionality is “enabling, effective and ethical” (Dwyer, 2019, p. 4). Research increasingly suggests, however, that conditionality has negative effects on individuals (Ingold, 2020; Dwyer, 2019; Dwyer and Wright, 2014). The Welfare Conditionality research based in the UK showed that conditionality has a punitive character that overlooks the motivation for finding a job that job seekers already had, making sanctions unnecessary and counterproductive. Ingold (2020) has argued that the evidence offered by the literature on conditionality suggests that conditionality and sanctions are less about labour market regulation and more about punishment of welfare recipients. Critics warn that conditionality is taking a punishing turn towards coercive behaviouralism and the criminalisation of benefit receipt (Fletcher and Wright, 2017). Reeves and Loopstra (2017) found that conditionality and sanctions disadvantage vulnerable welfare recipients, that is, those with health problems and physical limitations and lone parents. Similarly, Serrano Pascual (2004) argued that conditionality becomes stricter for those further located from the labour market, who, paradoxically, face fewer chances of obtaining a job.

2.5.4 Increasing demands on the individual: active job search and employability

Some analysts coincide in their assertion that job seeking has become the actual job of the unemployed, as the active job search has become a pillar of activation and workfare (Demazière, 2020; Boland and Griffin, 2016; Sharone, 2007; Marston, 2005; Dean, 1995) and, as Boland (2015, p. 143) pointed out, “a person who finds themselves unemployed can only apply for job-seeker’s allowance”. In other words, the jobseeker is the one valid interlocutor for the welfare system. This points to the death of unemployment and the birth of job seeking (Boland and Griffin, 2016), a job search that is strictly specified within a normative and institutional context that sets the expectations and rules. Vallas and Cummins (2015) and Pultz (2018) have also reflected on the new use of words associated with activation that prefers terms such as “job seeker”, “in transition”, and “looking for new opportunities”, all replacing the term “unemployed”.

A shift in focus from a “lack of employment” to a “lack of employability” has signalled the deep effects of the turn towards activation and supply-side labour market policies, which further reflects a shift in the European policy discourse, as Garsten and Jacobsson (2003) have highlighted, from unemployed/employed to unemployable/employable. The notion of employability places a number of expectations and demands upon individuals if they want to be and remain attractive and competitive in the labour market and, again, these demands are focused on the qualities of individuals, which creates categorisations that have legitimised the understanding of unemployment as a lack of employability (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2003).

From a supply-side view, policy efforts are aimed at enabling and mobilising unemployed individuals to move from welfare benefits to paid work through enhancing “employability” and making jobseekers more attractive for the labour market through the use of interventions such as job search assistance and job coaching (Frøyland, Andreassen and Innvær, 2018). The imperative of employability takes over and suppresses a preoccupation with the macro-context, as it is no longer about introducing improvements to the labour market and creating new jobs but about improving the employability of jobseekers by managing their conduct (Dean, 1995). Rogers (2004) identified institutional discourses about “good” jobseekers, who are expected to let themselves be led in a process of self-improvement; jobseekers are given the responsibility for their success, and failure is read as a problem with their employability.

From the perspective of employability, the labour market requires soft social skills, flexibility, adaptability and the ability to continually enhance one’s attractiveness to the labour market (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2013). This emphasis on internal aspects, which extends the notion of employability beyond technical skills, has been largely addressed by the literature, mostly from a

governmentality perspective, addressing the forms of self-government upon subjectivity that are required of jobseekers to turn inwards and perform self-help and self-enhancement (e.g. Boland, 2016; Rogers, 2004; Korteweg, 2003; Dean, 1995).

2.5.4.1 Beyond the supply-side focus

Activation policies are characterised as work-centred, employment friendly and supply-side orientated (Knotz, 2016; Handler, 2006). The supply-side orientation reflects the understanding of unemployment as a failure of an individual who lacks employability and thereby plays down the shortcomings of the demand-side, that is, the labour market (Frøyland, Andreassen and Innvær, 2018; Peck and Theodore, 2000). This approach obscures failures in the labour market, for instance, regarding the quality of jobs or the institutional barriers to employment; furthermore, supply-side-oriented approaches are based on a premise that available jobs exist (Frøyland, Andreassen and Innvær, 2018).

Criticism against activation policies and their focus on the individual, from a structural perspective, points to the phenomenon of “work-welfare cycling”, which brings us to a view that has addressed the shortcomings of the labour market. Work-welfare cycling refers to the dynamic that pushes welfare recipients from welfare to unsustainable, temporary and poor-quality jobs that, in turn, push them back to welfare, cycling between low-paid jobs and unemployment (McTier and McGregor, 2018; McCollum, 2012). This situation is more likely to be found among participants affected by policies that adhere to a strict work-first approach, with the desire to move people into any job even at the expense of their skills and chances for progression (Lindsay *et al.*, 2007). While the notion of sustainable employment, as McCollum (2012) argued, has become salient in current debates, it is not clear where this topic intersects with the agenda of welfare-to-work schemes.

The work-welfare cycling approach pays attention to structural elements such as labour market disadvantage and the segmented labour market that produces a “no-pay low-pay circle” and in-work poverty (McCollum, 2012; Shildrick *et al.*, 2010). Younger unemployed, those with health issues and those having limited qualifications and experience are more likely to transit into and out of work, and these spells of unemployment can become long-term, especially at times of economic crises when there are fewer job opportunities (McCollum, 2012). This criticism also relates to the emphasis on employability rather than jobs or, in other words, the quality of the jobseeker rather than the quality of jobs; some scholars warned about this trend after the recession (e.g. Bell and Blanchflower, 2011).

The welfare system intervenes in this cycle, as in-work benefits supplement low-paid jobs to maintain people in employment as the main priority. The perspective of the segmentation of the labour market also challenges the supply-side focus of activation policies, as unemployment and low-paid jobs cannot be resolved solely through employability (McTier and McGregor, 2018). If employment is seen as the main path to social inclusion, the question about how work-first policies address low-paid jobs and in-work poverty remains.

The next section discusses the notions of agency in the field of social policies and activation.

2.6. Debates on Agency

Agency has been largely conceptualised as selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom and creativity (Emerbayer and Mishe, 1998, p. 962). The question about agency in the context of social policies has resurfaced, prompted by activation welfare reforms, austerity and conditionality (Wright, 2016, 2012; Taylor-Gooby, 2008b; Deacon, 2004; Greener, 2002); the question is not disconnected from the broader debate regarding agency and structure. In light of this debate, Dean and Mann (1999) argued that the structural constraints that particular social categories such as the poor or the unemployed face and confront in their lives was for decades the predominant focus of welfare research. Agency was frequently addressed in relation to social problem groups who were considered victims or neglected. This focus of welfare research exhibited a notion of the agency of welfare recipients as passive and dependent, as Williams, Popay and Oakley (1999, p. 6) argued, encapsulated in fixed and one-dimensional categories that “neglected the voices and lived experiences of the recipients of welfare”.

In the mid-1990s, sociological research witnessed a revival of the issue of agency, driven by the social, cultural and economic transformations amidst the historical process of individualisation. The thesis of reflexive modernisation became the most influential account of this phenomena (Beck, Lash and Giddens, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This thesis, in a nutshell, offered an explanation for the deterioration of traditional sources of identity and biography as a result of the advancement of globalisation that positioned individuals and their reflexive capacity to create their own identity and biography. Previously, individuals followed linear paths fostered by social institutions and traditional bonds that provided beliefs, norms and rules that allowed for the construction of predictable biographies; on the contrary, reflexive modernisation provokes the decline of traditional roles and produces flexible biographies. The dis-embedding of the ways of life that gave meaning to an industrial society inflicts a critical challenge on the contemporary

individual, who now faces the inescapable task of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). While individuals have freed themselves from the bonds of traditionalism, society has provided new references and limits: the welfare state, bureaucracy, education, the labour market, law systems and all kinds of modern regulations are present at every step of people's lives – an “institutionalised individualism” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argued that modern biographies have become the “reflexive biography” or the “do-it-yourself biography”, which does not necessarily happen by choice; neither does it necessarily succeed. Choice is not the same as having complete freedom or having unrestricted options; what is different now is that the tasks imposed on the individual to deliberate, to make choices about and act upon were not part of the linear biographies of the traditional society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). These tasks demand individuals that are active, which means that failure in the different realms of society is now individualised (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This aspect has become the target of criticism, which points to the reduced role of structures and to the connections between decisions, choices and the availability of resources, and inequality (Caetano, 2014; Atkinson, 2010; Brannen and Nielsen, 2005; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

In the field of social policy, the revival of the notion of agency close to the notions of choice, risks and autonomy, syntonised with the ongoing welfare reforms calling for greater personal responsibility and for welfare recipients to take control of their lives. Still, the 1990s witnessed debates between overly optimistic views about the reflexive agent (e.g. Giddens, 1998) and those questioning the extent of agents' possibilities (e.g. Bauman, 2001, 1998). As indicated earlier, the individualisation of society means the individualisation of social problems such as unemployment, which means that the assumption of individuals making reflexive choices becomes more complex, “as their failures are stigmatised and their behaviour singled out for criticism” (Dean and Mann, 1999, p. 423). This is a tendency that, in turn, has grown stronger through the behavioural focus of activation policies and the vilification of welfare dependency. Correspondingly, the focus on the agency of the welfare recipient by those with views promoting stricter forms of workfare have translated into a notion of the welfare recipient as a defeated agency who needs to be pushed by compelling measures. This supports the “politics of conduct” that would situate character and motivation as greater barriers than structural ones (e.g. Mead, 1997), as previous sections have described. In addition to this narrower view on agency, the themes of behaviour and motivation are paramount in social policymaking, and the underlying assumptions about human agency, one way or the other, permeate this process. In other areas such as housing policies, Flint (2004) has identified the influence of the politics of behaviour with a focus on personal responsibility and responsibility to the community.

Reflecting upon the views on agency transmitted by the scholarly literature concerned with welfare reforms, there is a tendency to analyse the interplay between activation and agency from a conflicted and unresolved stance towards agency. On the one hand, agency has been charged by the contested individualisation rhetoric with the notions of choice and autonomy; on the other hand, the conditions of precarity that accompany the experience of unemployment and welfare conditionality leave them living in a present-centred effort that constrains future thinking. Consequently, an ongoing challenge for research, as is the case for this study, is to think outside the box of the active, the box of the defeated or the box of the bad agencies, to explore what else is the reflexive agency of welfare recipients. In this sense, Wright (2012, p. 324) asserted that research faces the challenge of carrying out studies “that break free from the conventions of thought on behavioural conditionality to capture the more nuanced aspects of agency – neither overstating the agency of some or all actors nor understating the implications of enduring patterns and processes of advantage and disadvantage”.

Parsell and Clarke (2019) recognised what they name as a selective tendency in the literature to identify agency with accounts of resistance and counter-cultural attitudes, and the opposite, identify those who act in conformity with notions such as individual responsibility as a self-governed agency by the neoliberal mindset. Relatedly, a large body of the scholarly literature interrogates the subjective experience of being activated from a governmental Foucauldian perspective (e.g. Boland, 2016; Boland and Griffin, 2015c; Pultz, 2016; McDonald and Marston, 2005; Korteweg, 2003; Rose, 1996; Dean, 1995) and focuses on the shaping of subjectivities as a form of control through government and self-government. A foundational study is Dean’s (1995), which accounted for the forms of self-government put in place by activation, and much of the literature since has taken inspiration from this study. According to Dean (1995), activation governs and disciplines the unemployed, but, more importantly, through different techniques of the self, the unemployed shape themselves into active jobseekers. In other words, activation engages participants in their own government through practices of self-shaping and self-activation. Many studies (e.g. Demazière, 2020, 2017; Boland, 2016; Van Oort, 2015) have explored the process of job seeking as the pivotal form of self-government because searching for job “means working on oneself and exercising personal discipline; rather than finding work, it means transforming oneself to become recruitable, attractive and employable” (Demazière, 2020, p. 4).

The conflicted views on agency seem to be related to an understanding of agential reflexivity as a rational activity opposed to emotions and inactivity (e.g. Hoggett, 2001). Nonetheless, qualitative studies show that agential reflexivity is expressed through emotions, affect and through deciding not to act, which does not mean an agency that is less empowered (e.g. Caetano,

2018; Archer, 2007). These insights from the literature are relevant to frame the findings of this study and to recognise that agential reflexivity is “always there” and productive in ways that cannot be narrowed down to a rational-actor view (Archer, 2003, 2007). Caetano’s (2018) research showed that people reflexively display a “paralysis of action” as adverse circumstances lead them to conclude that nothing should be done. Pultz and Mørch (2015) identified an alternative and subversive practice among people who are “unemployed by choice” to pursue artistic and non-traditional paths; the research shows how they declare utilising the welfare system to be to their advantage, but, at the same time, they must comply with the imposed rules of welfare; they internally compensate for the pressure by feeling they are in a situation closer to something they can control.

A related dimension of the experience of activation from the perspective of welfare recipients is that of feelings and emotions, which has been more recently explored. Hochschild (2013, p. 488) argued that activation welfare reform is, at its foundation, an emotional reform that is tied “to the larger web of give and take in human life. Each ‘give’ has its framing rule, its feeling rule, its experience of feeling – and so does each ‘take’”. This is what Hochschild calls “feeling rules”, which influence how people understand they are being valued and judged and what they are expected to do and feel, and, in turn, this involves the emotional costs of coping with it (Tonkens, Grootegoed and Duyvendak, 2013). Peterie *et al.* (2019) identified forms of emotional resistance, which they assessed as under-researched. The research showed that most interviewees had internalised the activation rhetoric of unemployment as personal failure, and, as a result, they were experiencing shame and worthlessness. A smaller proportion rejected this framing and its feeling rules and instead expressed anger regarding their circumstances. Pultz (2018) argued that, in tune with the activation rhetoric and the feeling rules attached to it, the unemployed govern themselves through affective capacities, such as shame and passion. These insights into emotions as dimension of agency are very much connected to the experience of research participants (Chapter Four, Five and Six).

The next section offers a narrative account of the Irish path to activation and the role of community placement schemes.

2.7 The Irish Path to Activation

Until the early 1990s, Ireland was considered a relatively poor country characterised by a weak and low-skilled economy, and for much of the 20th century, unemployment had a persistent presence in Irish politics and policies (Breen and Honohan, 1991). Facing persistent

unemployment, the response of Irish governments was unsystematic, administering generous assistance and relying on the emigration of the young unemployed. Welfare benefits not connected to job search requirements placed Ireland at the passive end of labour market policies (Murphy, 2016; Martin, 2014). An innovative approach was the 1985 Social Employment Scheme (SES), which offered temporary work experience in the not-for-profit sector for the long-term unemployed (Weishaupt, 2011). In 1987, the government faced calls for a more efficient way to tackle unemployment and created Fás, a tripartite training and employment authority (Boyle, 2005; Weishaupt, 2011). In the early 1990s, Ireland introduced neoliberal economic reforms that produced rapid growth and modernisation, fostering a flexible labour market, deregulation and a limited social welfare expenditure (Murphy, 2016, 2012; Dukelow and Considine, 2014; Fraser, Murphy and Kelly, 2013; Kitchin *et.al.*, 2012). The so-called “Irish model” (Kitchin *et al.*, 2012) paved the way for the Celtic Tiger period (1994–2007), and by mid-2000, Ireland was considered the fastest growing OECD economy (OECD, 2009). During this period, despite the fall in unemployment, long-term unemployment persisted. At this point, the influence of the OECD and EU activation paradigm and language urged and permeated these measures, for example, introducing “soft” activation, “making work pay” through the reduction of taxes, increasing the female workforce and promoting active ageing and lifelong learning (Weishaupt, 2011). Attempting a more comprehensive activation approach, in 1998, the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) introduced more strict job search requirements to assist the unemployed under 25 through Fás. By doing this, the government wanted to implement the EU-NEAP recommendations regarding case management and contractualised action plans. However, attempts to introduce conditionality were resisted by political and civil society actors. Overall, Irish discourse on labour activation in the 1990s was described by Murphy (2012) as an “ideational battle”.

The advance of activation policies in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger period was slow (Martin, 2014). Twenty percent of the population were in receipt of unemployment benefits, and the labour shortage was managed through migration (Murphy, 2012). Benefits were practically unconditional and granted over extended periods of time and were available even if the person was not registered with the employment services (Martin, 2014; McGuinness *et al.*, 2009; OECD, 2009). Murphy (2016) argued that the Irish liberal stance towards the economy and provision of welfare could have made it a forerunner in the adoption of welfare-to-work policies. Nonetheless, in the early 2000s, Ireland was regarded as an outlier with underdeveloped activation and entered the recession with a passive approach to activation.

2.7.1 Crisis, Recession and the Irish Activation Turn

At the height of the property boom, in 2007, 13 per cent of the Irish workforce was employed in construction and the country enjoyed economic prosperity; close ties between bankers, property speculators and politicians ended in the Irish crash in 2008, which left the Irish state covering the debts of the domestic banks (Allen, 2012). In this context, the Great Recession (2008) hit Ireland more severely. In November 2008, the level of unemployment was critical, 66 per cent higher than in November 2007 (OECD, 2009). At the end of 2010, Ireland accepted a bailout package agreed by the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund), which included an €85 billion loan and the adoption of an extensive number of reforms consistent with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU signalled the reform of the welfare system and the strengthening of activation measures (Roche, O’Connell and Prothero, 2017).

Stern austerity measures started in mid-2008, and Ireland became “a forerunner of a wider European turn to austerity” (Dukelow and Considine, 2014, p. 56). It has been argued that austerity and retrenchment increased inequality in Ireland, imposing greater restrictions on welfare recipients, especially the unemployed and lone parents, but also on workers, who faced detrimental reforms such as cuts in staff numbers and, most remarkably, a pay freeze for state workers between 2010 and 2014 (Dukelow and Kennett, 2018; Fraser, Murphy and Kelly, 2013). Private-sector workers were hit by redundancies, a cut in salaries and precarised working conditions, and between 2008 and 2014, there was a 10 per cent reduction in employment (Roche, O’Connell and Prothero, 2017). Unemployment peaked at 15.9 per cent in 2011/2012 (CSO, 2018), having affected men more severely, due to the collapse of the building sector and decline in manufacturing. The situation drove many people to enter jobs requiring lower levels of education and skills than the ones they had had; at the same time, emigration was high among young people with higher levels of education; between 2008 and 2015, 610,000 people left Ireland. It has been argued that this fact relieved national unemployment (Roche, O’Connell and Prothero, 2017).

Kitchin *et al.* (2012) asserted that the crisis facilitated a deepening of the neoliberal measures that Ireland had been implementing since the late 1980s. Consequently, and politically framed by the bailout conditions and the broader transformations in the European context, activation and welfare conditionality landed in the Irish reform agenda. In 2010, the Irish government initiated the introduction of far-reaching welfare and tax reforms, aimed at providing incentives for an early exit from unemployment and budgetary savings (Department of Finance, 2010). Two of the more influential and extensive reforms were the creation of Intreo and Pathways to Work.

The creation of Intreo meant the elimination of Fás (the former employment and training authority) and the amalgamation of all employment and welfare services into a new one-stop-shop and single point of contact for income and employment support, comprised under the umbrella of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection⁵ (DEASP). The creation of Intreo was a major reform that involved monumental efforts in terms of administration and upskilling of staff (Hick, 2018; McGuinness and O’Connell, 2011). Intreo acts as a public employment service (PES); it also oversees the Local Employment Services (LES), which had been in existence since the mid-1990s delivering local services from a more personalised approach. Nonetheless, Intreo imprinted a managerial approach focused on shorter-term outcomes and rigid progression metrics (Collins and Murphy, 2016). Pathways to Work, on the other hand, referred to the creation of a single national activation policy.

2.7.2 Pathways to Work

In 2011, the Irish government launched Pathways to Work 2012–2016, the national activation policy, at a time (January 2012) when unemployment peaked at over 15 per cent, and 64 per cent of those were long-term unemployed (DSP, 2016, p. 9). Accordingly, Pathways to Work was conceived as a strategy of activation for a time of recession, and its main goal was to tackle long-term unemployment and “to ensure that as many jobs as possible go to people on the Live Register” (DSP, 2016, p. 4). It has been argued that Irish activation is modelled on the UK’s and Australia’s work-first versions of activation, which relied on conditionality, contractual obligations and sanctions (Boland and Griffin, 2019; Dukelow and Considine, 2014), and following these models, Ireland introduced conditionality and work requirement as pivotal components of its new activation services. Shortly thereafter, penalties for non-compliance increased in numbers comparable with other OECD countries, and three per cent of welfare recipients were sanctioned in 2014 for refusing to commit to active job seeking (OECD, 2016).

Intreo merged income and employment support, and it operates a PES alongside the LESs. LESs are operated by local development companies (LDCs) that operate under contract with the DEASP. Regarding income support, the main welfare benefits⁶ for the unemployed are Jobseeker’s Benefit (based on PRSI⁷ contributions) and Jobseeker’s Allowance (based on means

⁵ In 2017, the Department of Social Protection (DSP) was renamed Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP).

⁶ Another benefit is the Jobseeker’s Transition payment, introduced in 2013. This is a means-tested payment to lone parents whose youngest child is aged between 7 and 13 (previously, payment was provided until the youngest child was 18); recipients are not required to seek full-time work and can work part-time but must take part in activation activities.

⁷ PRSI (Pay-Related Social Insurance) is a social insurance contribution made by employee and employer. The value of the contribution is based on the amount of the employee’s pay.

testing), and both are conditional upon taking part in activation measures. The main secondary benefits eligible for those on Jobseekers Allowance are the medical card (free medical care), rent supplement and childcare support. Once unemployed persons “sign on” for benefits, they are required to attend an interview with an Intreo/LES case officer. According to the Intreo PES model, the management of individual cases is conducted by caseworkers who base their referral decisions on the welfare recipient’s PEX (an algorithm that stands for “probability of exit” and establishes the risk of long-term unemployment). Depending on the profile of the unemployed person, case workers define a Personal Progression Plan (PPP), and the welfare recipient is referred to, for example, an intensive job search (Job Path), community placement (CE or Tús) or Job Club to support the job search.

Pathways to Work introduced a number of compulsory conditions for receiving welfare benefits:

- being available for and genuinely seeking full-time work;
- availing oneself of any reasonable opportunity for obtaining suitable employment; (Failure to take up a work opportunity can lead to loss or reduction of social welfare benefits).
- accepting a specific offer of suitable employment;
- agreeing to participate in a course of education and/or training considered appropriate to individual training needs and personal circumstances; and
- adhering to actions agreed in the Personal Progression Plan.

As reviewed in earlier sections, welfare recipients become “active job seekers” who must engage and show proof of their efforts; the job search is monitored by caseworkers, and jobseekers must use the DEASP recruitment website, JobsIreland.ie. Moreover, the contractualisation of welfare (Lødemel and Trickey, 2000) adopted by Pathways to Work is reflected in a Record of Mutual Commitments, signed by both jobseeker and officer (on behalf of the DEASP), listing the conditions that must be fulfilled.

Other measures implemented by Pathways to Work include subsidies or recruitment incentives such as JobPlus (payments made to employers to facilitate the recruitment of unemployed persons and other target groups into jobs), and the provision of income support to welfare recipients who engage in higher education or further education and training (FET).

An important event in the trajectory of Pathways to Work was the introduction of JobPath in 2015, which meant the inclusion of a private contractor into the PES model. Long-term unemployed are randomly selected by the DEASP to attend JobPath, a 52-week intense job search scheme. JobPath is delivered by two private contractors which receive payments determined by

outcomes, an aspect that has been very controversial (LDCs, providers of LES and other schemes, are not-for-profit). JobPath has been largely criticised for employing strict and harsh measures to monitor people, and advocacy groups have denounced detrimental consequences for participants' health. Despite political pressure to terminate the scheme, the government has been reluctant to criticise it. These aspects regarding JobPath are multiple and complex and are beyond the scope of this study (for analysis see Finn, 2019).

Pathways to Work 2012-2016 was positively assessed, and its targets were successfully met in 2013 as 20,000 long-term unemployed went back into employment (DSP, 2016). However, in 2014, long-term unemployment remained a crucial problem. In order to tackle this problem, the government mandated a new Pathways 2016-2020, which was “determined to ensure that nobody should be left behind by our economic recovery” and, consequently, this second version should reflect a shift “from ‘activation in a time of recession’ to ‘activation in a time of recovery and growth’” (DSP, 2016, p. 4). In this context, efforts would be made to “increase active labour market participation by people of working age . . . so as to help ensure a supply of labour at competitive rates and to minimise welfare dependency” (DSP, 2016, p. 14).

Less optimistic views about the economic and social recovery assess that the 8.8 per cent unemployment figure of late 2015 did not include the over 85,000 unemployed on activation schemes, the 115,500 underemployed workers and the more than 70,000 per annum who emigrated from 2011 to 2014 (Murphy, 2016, p. 3). Other analyses have warned against the system of sanctions, the quality of training, and the standard and rigid case approach (Finn, 2019; Whelan *et al.*, 2018; O’Connell, 2016; WUERC, 2016).

Pathways to Work 2016-2020 has been well evaluated by the government, as the country has travelled a solid path of recovery and experienced a systematic decrease in unemployment. At the end of 2018, unemployment was at 5.8 per cent, and long-term unemployment was at 2.1 per cent, which represented an advance from the crisis peak of 9.8 per cent. By the end of 2019, 93 per cent of its actions were completed or on course (DEASP, 2019). Amidst the optimism, the government committed to the delivery of Pathways to Work 2020–2025.

2.7.1.1 Challenges for Pathways to Work 2020-2025

Pathways to Work 2020-2025 faces a number of challenges that are connected to the findings of this study. These are related to skills and long-term unemployment in the context of a changing labour market that is becoming more precarious.

As talks of Ireland approaching full employment multiplied in late 2018, the issue of the present and future of the long-term unemployed remained a challenge. In early 2019, a preliminary review of Pathways to Work into the future expressed the intention to prioritise and increase Intreo services to groups that are “underrepresented” in the Irish workforce such as stay-at-home parents, people with disabilities and early school leavers (DEASP, 2020c). Women’s participation in the labour market is another challenge relevant to this study. It has been argued that women who experience long-term unemployment are more likely to exit the workforce entirely (Byrne and O’Brien, 2017). Caring responsibilities are among the more common reasons for women not to work, and in Ireland, this is more prevalent than in other European countries. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2018) found that childcare costs in Ireland are the highest in Europe for lone parents and the second highest for couples, which acts as a barrier for women and men to access employment, and more women occupy part-time jobs.

Similarly, it has been argued that the activation strategy needs to focus on specific skills deficits such as literacy, numeracy and digital deficits that are leaving behind more disadvantaged groups (Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2018). The persistence of long-term unemployment in Ireland has been explained by OECD (2016) as related to the dynamic of skills in the Irish labour market, which rewards high skills and penalises low skills. Bergin, Kelly and Redmond (2020) showed that in 2016, the long-term unemployed in Ireland were mostly men (71 per cent), held a secondary school qualification or less (62 per cent) and had not worked in over eight years (42 per cent). The Irish occupational structure has disproportionately changed. Ireland has a higher percentage of graduates in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects than other EU countries, but it is behind in overall levels of technological literacy (European Commission, 2016). From 2017 to 2018, the share of third-level graduates in the labour market was 49.2 per cent (SOLAS, 2019, p. 29).

Another issue that has not been addressed by previous Pathways to Work is the quality of jobs into which welfare recipients are being activated. Evidence shows a growing presence of precarious work in Ireland (Nugent, Pembroke and Taft, 2019; Bobek, Pembroke and Wickham, 2018; O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2015). Nugent, Pembroke and Taft (2019, p. 49) have argued that work in 2016 was more precarious than in the years leading up to the recession. This has also meant an increase in in-work poverty, and the fact that these trends have showed little improvement since Ireland returned to growth in 2012 is “evidence of a structural change to the labour market”; it is estimated that a range from 31 per cent to 50 per cent of workers face a medium to high-risk of precariousness. The study of Bobek *et al.* (2018) identified that part-time work is one of the main types of precarious employment in Ireland, along with temporary work and solo self-employment. These types of employment in Ireland have increased during the post-recession period. Precarious

workers are more likely to receive the minimum wage or have little or no predictability of wages; also, they experience a lack of contractual security.

The next section explains the background and functioning of the community placement schemes.

2.8 Community placement schemes: background

As depicted in the previous sections, the introduction of activation in Ireland was at a much slower pace than in other European countries. During the 1981–1987 period, Ireland saw the initial inclusion of some active labour market measures, in the context of high unemployment: the Social Employment Scheme (1985) offered part-time and temporary work experience in the not-for-profit sector for the long-term unemployed as a way of preparation for the workforce (Boyle, 2005; Weishaupt, 2011). In 1994, Fás established the Community Employment (CE) scheme, and at the time, it was regarded as an innovative measure departing from previous unemployment policies (Boyle, 2005). At this juncture, the growing community and voluntary sector was to become the means through which Fás delivered its service for the long-term unemployed.

CE became rapidly popular among politicians and the community sector, but it was under scrutiny, as evidence showed its poor results in terms of progression into employment. Boyle (2005, p. 68) explained how CE placements became politically attractive to local politicians, who were approached by constituents wanting to take part, and “cronyism was a factor in deciding who received places on some CE schemes”. Boyle also described the tensions within the community sector regarding its role in sponsoring an employment scheme; the scheme was also criticised for lacking a substantive training element, for placing mostly men and for the varied quality of placements. Boyle (2005, p. 66) depicted the discussion in the mid-1990s, arguing that the voluntary and community sectors were not motivated by employment agendas. Rather, they had their own organisational goals they wanted to achieve; still, the organisations weighed the opportunities and continued their support, placing CE participants in their organisations. All in all, CE was seen as an employment subsidy for not-for-profit organisations and a measure to prevent participants from becoming chronically long-term (Boyle, 2005). This debate is very relevant since these tensions between the different actors involved in CE (and later in Tús) have evolved but not disappeared, posing challenges not only for political and community actors, but for participants themselves.

Evaluations of CE showed little progression, but as Boyle (2005, p. 71) revealed, those evaluations were not taken seriously by politicians, as the scheme allowed for other gains. By the

late-1990s, CE was seen as inexpensive and the only strategy at hand to address various social problems “from funding the arts to addressing drug and psychiatric problems”, although addressing these problems was not a deliberate government strategy. In the mid-1990s, a recommendation from the Unemployment Taskforce to make CE tiered and create sheltered employment for those least likely to progress found no support from the government. Among the reasons against this measure, according to Boyle’s (2005) analysis, were fears of future parity claims regarding wages for the same work in the open labour market. However, in 2003, CE introduced the rule that those not ready to progress to work and those over 55 could remain on the scheme for three years, as a response to the large number of older participants, thus unofficially creating sheltered employment (Boyle, 2005).

Fás ended with the introduction of Pathways to Work, but this did not mean the end of the CE scheme, which would undergo reforms and become part of the battery of activation schemes offering community placements to the long-term unemployed. The next sub-sections describe the main components and implications of CE and Tús.

2.8.1 The Community Employment scheme under Pathways to Work

With the establishment of the Intreo, CE is now administrated by the DEASP, who defines it as an activation scheme aimed at enhancing the employability of the long-term unemployed by providing work experience and training opportunities within their communities to help them re-enter the labour market (2019, p. 8). CE is sponsored by voluntary not-for-profit community organisations which offer positions that benefit the community and provide participants with work experience or skills that are transferable to the labour market. Participants are also offered training opportunities.

In 2017, reforms were introduced to CE, prompted by the changing scenario of recovery and declining unemployment figures. As the DEASP Minister (DEASP, 2017, n.p.) stated at the time, “It’s important that we make these reforms as the number of participants rose from 25,000 in 2010 to 36,000 in 2015, but dropped back to just over 32,000 in recent times and is likely to continue falling”; correspondingly, new qualifying criteria were introduced to ensure that there would be participants available to take up placements. Since 2017, the qualifying age has been reduced from 25 to 21; participants working towards a major award can seek to extend participation by up to two years; those over 55 are allowed to remain for three years; and participation prior to 2007 is not counted (overall limit of six years in a lifetime). Relatedly, the DEASP has introduced a differentiation between scheme places as either social inclusion or activation, and it ensures sponsor organisations that a minimum number of places are guaranteed. This guarantee was primarily intended for places regarded as social inclusion, which are meant

to allow older and vulnerable participants (e.g. with health problems) to stay on the scheme for longer. This initiative synchronises with the 2016 pilot Service Support Stream (SSS), which currently allows those aged 62 and over to remain on CE up to state pension age (66), subject to availability of places on the SSS (limitation of 10 per cent per scheme).

As a general rule, welfare recipients are referred to CE by their welfare officer through Intreo/LES, or they can also request to be enrolled, and CE opportunities are advertised. There are a limited number of CE places available, and each local scheme has different quotas. Since June 2018, the DEASP has allowed welfare recipients to take up placements on CE while also attending JobPath.

2.8.2 Tús

The Tús scheme was announced in the Budget 2011 as one of the new schemes of Pathways to Work, and 5,000 placements were announced later as part of the Budget 2013 (Irish Government News Services, 2013). Tús is an activation scheme aimed at providing placements for the long-term unemployed with community voluntary and not-for-profit organisations. Similar to CE, Tús is expected to provide work experience to improve a person's work readiness, confidence and motivation to return to the labour market.

Participants are randomly selected by the DEASP and contacted by letter to be referred to the LDC operating in their locality for an interview. A person may apply for self-selection, subject to conditions, and up to 30 per cent of places can be filled through assisted- or self-referral. A welfare recipient who is offered a Tús placement must accept it, and anyone who refuses risks sanctions (DEASP, 2020c).

2.8.3 Community Employment and Tús: common ground

In 2019, CE was the largest activation scheme, with 21,290 participants, while Tús had 5,482 participants (DEASP, 2019). As described above, Tús and CE share the same objectives of providing a work-like experience to enhance participants' work-readiness and motivation and to provide training opportunities as well as benefits to the community. The schemes ask participants to work 19.5 hours per week. Placement positions normally include environmental services (e.g. maintenance of walkways); caring services (e.g. childcare, care of older people); general community services (e.g. reception, cleaning, administration, groundskeeping); and heritage and cultural services. Participants in the schemes receive their Jobseekers Allowance, plus €22.50 per week, with a minimum payment of €225.50 per week. Participants may receive extra allowances in respect of a qualified adult and qualified child(ren) and can retain secondary benefits such as a medical card. Table 1 offers an overview of both schemes.

Table 1. Overview CE and Tús schemes

SCHEME	COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT (CE)	TÚS
Description and aims	According to the official description provided by the Department of Social Protection: "The Community Employment (CE) programme is designed to help people who are long-term unemployed (or otherwise disadvantaged) to get back to work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities" (DSP, 2020a).	According to the official description provided by the Department of Social Protection: "The Tús initiative is a community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people. The work opportunities are to benefit the community and are provided by community and voluntary organisations in both urban and rural areas" (DSP, 2020b).
Eligibility criteria	Two categories based on age: 1) Welfare recipient between 21 and 55 years old, and getting any combination of Jobseeker's Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Jobseeker's Transitional payment, One-Parent Family Payment, Disability Allowance for at least 12 months. 2) Welfare recipients aged 55 and over and getting any combination of Jobseeker's Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Jobseeker's Transitional payment, One-Parent Family Payment, Disability Allowance for at least 12 months.	Selection is by way of random selection conducted by the DSP based on the eligibility conditions set out below: → Have been continuously unemployed for at least 12 months and "signing on" on a full-time basis. → Have been receiving a Jobseeker's payment (JB or JA) for at least 12 months. → Be currently receiving Jobseeker's Allowance. It is obligatory to respond to the request to participate on Tús. A person may apply for self-selection, subject to conditions.
Duration	→ Since July 2017, for those between 21 and 55 years old, duration of placement is one year. However, placement can be extended by up to 2 years if the participant is working towards a major award (course level 5 or 6). → Those 55 and over can remain on CE for 3 consecutive years. → Under the Service Support Stream (SSS), those 62 and over and meet the CE eligibility requirements, can stay continuously on CE until they qualify for a State pension (SSS has limited places). In general, the maximum amount of time a person can spend on CE scheme over their lifetime is 6 years.	→ One year. → Once period ends, participant cannot participate in the Tús scheme again for 3 years.
Placement conditions	→ 19.5 hours per week. → All the work carried out must be community-based. → Participants can take up other part-time work during their placement. → Participants receive the same statutory annual leave and public holiday entitlement as other employees. Participants can have up to 2 days' uncertified sick leave and 7 days' certified sick leave. → Since March 2019 the minimum weekly payment for participants (based on 19.5 hours worked) is €225.50. That is: Jobseeker's Allowance €203 plus €22.50 (scheme), per week → Participants retain any extra benefits and the medical card, provided they are still eligible.	→ 19.5 hours per week. → All the work carried out must be community-based. → Participants can take up other part-time work during their placement. → Participants receive the same statutory annual leave and public holiday entitlement as other employees. Participants can have up to 2 days' uncertified sick leave and 7 days' certified sick leave. → Since March 2019 the minimum weekly payment for participants (based on 19.5 hours worked) is €225.50. That is: Jobseeker's Allowance €203 plus €22.50 (scheme), per week → Participants retain any extra benefits and the medical card, provided they are still eligible. → Sanctions: in cases where an individual exits Tús for reasons other than the taking up of full-time employment or education, they may be penalised by being disqualified from receiving a Jobseeker's Allowance payment for up to nine weeks

While the DEASP retains overall responsibility, at the local level, both schemes are delivered by the network of Local Development Companies (LDCs), which are more widely known as Partnership or Leader Companies. These were created in 1991 to support communities and deliver social inclusion services to vulnerable families and individuals. LDCs are also tasked with overseeing the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)⁸. Currently, there are 49 LDCs across Ireland, and 47 of them hold a contract for delivering Tús or CE, and 21 for delivering LES and Job Club. LDCs are responsible for all aspects of the implementation of the schemes, and scheme supervisors are employed by them. Supervisors' work involves profiling and matching participants with suitable placements and maintaining relationships with the sponsor organisations and identifying new opportunities.

Training has been emphasised under Pathways to Work, and the offer of training has strengthened through links with the Quality and Qualifications Ireland framework. Those progressing towards a major award can avail themselves of three years on the scheme, but participants can take only components of courses.

⁸ Currently, SICAP is in its 2018–2022 version and provides funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion through local engagement and partnerships between individuals, community organisations and public sector agencies.

2.8.4 Problematic aspects

Addressing the Oireachtas⁹ in April 2019, representatives from the LDCs estimated their annual contribution as €330 million worth of state programmes, as they annually support 15,000 community groups and 173,000 individuals (Joint Oireachtas Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2019). Among these programmes are Tús, CE and Job Clubs. Representatives also explained that despite the reduction of unemployment, their experience shows that there are groups who are far from progressing into employment, such as those with no work history, limited education, limited English language skills, low literacy levels, low self-esteem, age, transport access difficulties, lack of childcare support, ill health and, in some instances, addictions.

At the 2018 Social Inclusion Forum, Community Work Ireland (2018, p. 4) stated in their key message that sponsor not-for-profit organisations “are happy to have CE Scheme workers instead of paid employees. The agencies benefit but there are no full-time employment opportunities. Also, many receive no real training for their jobs and often have no progression plan”. The community sector, as Meade argued (2017), are co-producers of welfare and care; however, when activation was brought into community work (with SICAP), a policy shift took place, and Meade (p. 235) asked how “community organisations were recruited to host ‘workfare’ type employment placements, where welfare allowances were a substitute for real wages” (p. 235). This predicament is no different from the one that Boyle (2005) described earlier, referring to the first years of the CE scheme and how the community sector questioned their role in the scheme, though they perceived its benefits. There is a dual mission attached to CE and Tús that seems problematic: delivering services for the community and providing opportunities for participants.

A last aspect to be addressed refers to the unsatisfactory progression rate of both schemes. CE was reviewed in 2015, the report stated that CE was more active as a medium of social inclusion through the delivery of community services than as a medium of progression towards employment (DSP, 2015). Tús has not been evaluated yet. Recommendations such as the ones reviewed earlier were introduced. Referring to both schemes, the Parliamentary Budget Office (POF, 2018, p. 27) has criticised the “lack of appropriate micro-level data on programme outcomes”.

2.9. Workfare Volunteering: researching the lived experience

Irish literature on activation has mostly focused on developing critical analyses about the implications of the changes that these reforms have introduced into the architecture of Irish

⁹ The legislature in Ireland.

policies and their capacity to provide social protection to the unemployed and vulnerable welfare recipients. These analyses provide a scope of the political and economic influences at work and are critical of the influence of activation upon other areas of social policies (e.g. Murphy and Hearne, 2019; Murphy, 2016, 2012). The body of qualitative research capturing the lived experience of activation in the Irish context is small. Nonetheless, these studies are relevant as they have documented the impact of welfare conditionality in Ireland. Boland (2016, 2015) and Boland and Griffin (2015a, 2015b, 2019) have conducted ethnographic research about the experience of unemployment under Pathways to Work and have offered relevant insights into the experience of compulsory job seeking. Other research has focused on the stigmatisation of welfare recipients (e.g. Whelan and Millar, 2019) and Finn (2019) conducted the first qualitative research about the lived experience of JobPath.

My search did not identify Irish research into the lived experience of placement in the activation schemes CE and Tús in the context of Pathways to Work and post-recession Ireland. One study, Mulhall (2010), researched career success stories of CE participants and the role of the training offered by the scheme; this study was not relevant for the present research because it was before Pathways to Work, and because it focused solely on the category of career making. In order to contextualise the experience of placement and situate it in dialogue with the extant literature, I found that the notion of *workfare volunteering*, and related international research, are conversant with community placement in the context of Irish activation. The remainder of this chapter gives a brief account of the relevant international literature on this topic.

Reciprocity is a substantial pillar of workfare. As Paz-Fuchs (2020, p. 34) has explained, current workfare is not so much about deservingness as about reciprocity, a “*quid pro quo* rationale”, where those who receive have to give back. In his view, work requirements serve a symbolic role, as society demands that welfare recipients demonstrate their appreciation. The duty to work, as Cholbi (2018) explained, is based on the notion of a reciprocity between social rights and social duties that enacts the notion of duty as a prerequisite to receive rights, eroding the notion of citizenship (Paz-Fuchs, 2020; Cholbi, 2018; Paz-Fuchs and Eleveld, 2016). Doing something in return has been presented as part of producing active citizens (Newman and Tokens, 2011), and this belief has been translated into schemes that ask recipients to engage in work-related activities such as volunteering and community work (Kampen, Veldboer and Kleinhas, 2019; Warburton and Smith, 2003; Warburton and McDonald, 2002). Volunteering has usually been presented as a form of active citizenship and of social solidarity (Hustinx, Cnaan and Handy, 2010). With the introduction of workfare policies, the notion of “working for your benefits” became well-sustained by the principles of reciprocity and personal responsibility, and the early experiences

in Australia (Shaver, 2002) and the US (Krinsky, 2007) paved the way for schemes that used welfare recipients as workers.

Also called “something-for-something” schemes (Veldboer, Kleinhans and van Ham, 2015), “mandatory reciprocity” or “reciprocity policies” (Van der Veen *et al.*, 2012), this study opts for the well-established concept of “workfare volunteerism” coined by Kampen, Elshout and Tonkens (2013) to refer to the work that welfare recipients carry out in voluntary and not-for-profit organisations. The literature has argued that volunteering is re-configured into a tool to influence the responsabilisation of these groups to become self-sufficient and well-integrated (De Waele and Hustinx, 2019). Relatedly, workfare volunteering has been criticised for enforcing what historically has been a voluntary activity, and for transmitting the idea that workfare volunteers are unable to work under regular labour market conditions (De Waele and Hustinx, 2019; Muehlebach, 2011). The reception of these types of schemes by the public has been favourable, explained by the strong appeal of the notion of reciprocity as a requisite for welfare benefits (Kampen, 2020; Veldboer, Kleinhans and van Ham, 2015).

Empowering welfare recipients along with increasing employability are presented as the main goals of these schemes (Kampen, 2020, 2014). Research has shown both beneficial and negative effects for participants. The evidence suggesting negative effects argues that workfare volunteering can foster feelings of disempowerment and a loss of the sense of agency and be disciplining rather than empowering (Marston 2005; Warburton and Smith 2003; Bessant, 2000); similarly, evidence shows that it can impact negatively on employment opportunities as the experience and skills gained through the schemes are not recognised by employers (Slootjes and Kampen, 2017). Participants may also feel they are working for free and doing invisible work (Krinsky, 2007; Krinsky and Simonet, 2013). Veldboer *et al.* (2015) warned about the risk that unwilling participants can pose for the well-being of the receivers. Also, evidence shows that participants very seldom find a job at the end (Allan, 2019; Slootjes and Kampen, 2017; Kampen *et al.*, 2013).

Regarding beneficial effects, research has found that volunteering produces a sense of active citizenship among welfare recipients and that participation improves their confidence and self-esteem (Fuller *et al.*, 2008) through using their skills, feeling appreciated and having a daily purpose (Slootjes and Kampen, 2017). Research also suggests relational and affective gains, such as mutual support for people going through life-dislocating events (Flores, 2014). Similarly, Kampen, Elshout and Tonkens (2013) have argued that workfare volunteering can produce “soft benefits”, particularly gaining a sense of self-respect; nonetheless, they found these gains to be fragile. Kampen *et al.* (2013) and Kampen (2014) found that despite participants’ good

experience, they felt stuck in an unpaid position with little prospects for paid employment and, as a result, workfare volunteers lose hope in the labour market and remain stuck in volunteering.

“Soft gains”, relational and affective dimensions, are often presented as sufficient reasons for workfare volunteering being a beneficial activity for welfare recipients. However, and as Sawyer (2006) pointed out, it is worth questioning whether gains such as improved self-esteem can be regarded as outcomes of a scheme. On a similar note, Muehlebach (2011) depicted the state as allowing for the emergence of an unwaged labour regime for those who otherwise are excluded from labour market integration, thus what is offered through engaging in unpaid work is a “good feeling” and noncommercialised social bonds, which, in turn, approximate a form of social belonging that they cannot achieve through paid work. Relatedly, the gains for the organisations benefitting from the unpaid work of welfare recipients seem more tangible. In their study, Veldboer *et al.* (2015, p. 3) described the paradoxical character of these schemes, which, along with wanting to enhance employability, also “need to maintain services like elderly care and libraries at an acceptable level”, thus, participants needs are being reduced to a complementary policy goal. Paz-Fuchs (2020, p. 36) found that in the UK, local councils have benefited from more than half a million hours of unpaid labour through back-to-work schemes in areas such as cleaning, library services and parks.

From the perspective of the communities where workfare volunteering takes place, the study of Schofield and Butterworth (2018) found that volunteering compensates for, but does not prevent, negative stereotypes of welfare recipients, who are perceived more positively because they contribute to a common good.

2.10 Conclusions

This chapter offered a narrative account of the relevant literature as to contextualise and justify the aims of this research. The review of the international and Irish literature shed light upon significant dimensions of activation policies as well as the impact of the activation rationale upon welfare recipients. The findings chapters (Chapter Four, Five and Six) and Chapter Seven are in dialogue with many of the aspects addressed by the literature.

Chapter Three describes the methodological decisions underpinning the study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

The meanings that research participants attributed to their experience of going through placement, in connection to their past and future aspirations and plans, have been at the core of this study. Accordingly, this qualitative study adopted a Grounded Theory methodology committed to an inductive process of theorising grounded on and in interaction with the data. This chapter details the methodological decisions and actions underlying the study. The first sections focus on the methodological, ontological and epistemological approaches adopted by the study and the following sections present in detail the aspects related to ethics; sampling and recruitment; data collection; interview, and the data analysis process. This chapter ends with a general description of the research participants and some reflections concerning the overall methodological process.

3.2 Choosing qualitative methodology

As Chapter Two presented, research on unemployment and activation policies is vast and covers phenomena at the level of the macro-policies down to the lived experience realm; however, research based on the Irish context is less varied, and the specific setting of activation schemes operating through placements within community organisations barely has been explored. Accordingly, the study adopted a qualitative approach and methodology, which is pertinent for understanding new aspects of social reality or aspects that have remained poorly understood (Birks and Mills, 2015; Patton, 2002).

Part of the strength of qualitative methodology is to provide consistent ways of knowing the why and the how of social processes and interactions through questioning that evolves as the understanding of individuals' lives unfolds (Agee, 2009). The aims of the study were not demarcated strictly, and the study was flexible and open to encountering unexpected findings since much of what I wanted to know was to emerge from and in interaction with participants' accounts. The study had a general interest in paying particular attention to participants' reflexive processes of sense-making in the context of their experience of placement. In that sense, the qualitative methodology enables the unfolding of subjectivities and meanings about social phenomena and processes within the social and cultural contexts where they occur (Flick, 2009; Charmaz, 1996). Qualitative research provides in-depth accounts of social and cultural

phenomena, as this “reports meanings, intentions, history, biography, and relevant relational, interactional, and situational processes in a rich, dense, detailed manner” (Denzin, 2001, p.162).

The study built upon the international and Irish body of empirical qualitative research about the lived experience of welfare reforms and activation policies that has provided insights into the experience of conditionality and job seeking from the first-person perspective (e.g. Dwyer, 2019; Boland and Griffin, 2015b; Patrick, 2014; Dean, 2003) and, more recently, into the experience of workfare volunteering (e.g. Kampen, 2020; De Waele and Hustinx, 2019; Kampen, Elshout, and Tonkens, 2013). This scholarship has provided a deep and varied understanding of the different dimensions of the experience of activation. Ethnographic methods have a strong presence among the empirical evidence, and Grounded Theory studies are less frequent.

The qualitative researcher must account for their perspective but, as Butler-Kisber (2010) analyses, this is not a “clear-cut exercise” and the researcher needs to start by clarifying the ontological and epistemological perspectives that inform the research process, as the next sections present.

3.3 Critical Realism: an ontological perspective to understand agency and structure

The representation of the agency of the unemployed welfare recipient underlying social and activation policies, as the literature review explored, is problematic since this tends to be understood partially and moving between the extremes of a passive and an active notion of agency. Similarly, the literature tends to “recognise” agency when this acts in a nonconformist way and to deny it when it is seen acting within mainstream norms (Parsell and Clarke, 2019). On the other hand, depictions of structural changes affecting the labour market, welfare system and alike, tend to show these changes as overpowering upon agency and subjectivities (Dean, 1995). The reflexive individualisation thesis is an established account that put forward the notion of an individual responsible for the creation of their own biography as a matter of individual decisions and choice, while the previous guidelines offered by collective structures of meaning are considered irrelevant (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). These views on agency and structure tend to position agency or structure subordinate to the other; this tendency has been criticised by critical realists as conflationism which, in turn, underlies beliefs about the nature of reality and beings (ontology). Agency and structure are central to the unpacking of the question about research participants’ experience of going through placement; thus, I wanted to adopt an ontological stance about the relationship between both that would not reproduce unbalanced descriptions where agency or structure are subsumed one into the other. Critical Realism offered this ontological stance.

As Archer (2019, p.140) explains, ontology has a regulatory role in social sciences because it states the concepts that are deemed admissible in description and explanation from a specific ontological stance, “just as an atheist cannot attribute his well-being to divine providence”, the researcher excludes certain explanations and adheres to others. Ontology, then, “raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, p. 245). In that regard, how agency and structure would be understood, the nature of their relationship and their role in the production of social reality were essential ontological questions the study had to resolve, which in turn related to the questions as to how the knowledge about that reality could be accessed (epistemology). Consequently, the study took a Critical Realist stance that understands agency and structure as separate entities, and social reality as emergence.

Critical Realism is a philosophy initiated by Bhaskar in the 1970s, and since then it has developed strands across different fields and covering different subjects (e.g. Sayer, 2000; Lawson, 1997; Archer, 1995; Collier, 1994). Essential principles of ontological Critical Realism are as follows. Firstly, Critical Realism asserts that there is a reality common to us all “regardless of what we happen to think about it or if, indeed, we do think about it” (Porpora, 2013, p. 67). Bhaskar (1998) criticised the dominance of epistemology over ontology, which he named “the epistemic fallacy”, that is, the reduction of knowledge to being, and the “ontic fallacy”, that is, the reduction of being to knowledge. This is best explained through the difference between transitive and intransitive knowledge. Transitive is the knowledge we have about the world, which is provisional, artificial and fallible, but the world to which this knowledge refers is not a product of it (is not “the” world). This criticism was a direct attack against positivism. A second principle refers to the stratified nature of reality in three levels, empirical (i.e. our direct perceptions and experience, ideas, meanings), actual (i.e. events and happenings) and real (i.e. causal mechanisms). Thirdly, realist ontology refuses “to assign automatic priority to structure (or culture) versus agency when accounting for causation” in the social world (Archer, 2020, p. 137).

The study adhered to Archer’s (2012, 2007, 2003, 2000, 1995) rendition of Critical Realism which, building on Bhaskar’s ideas, set to unpack the mediation between agency and structure and explain the change and reproduction of society. Agency and structure are ontologically and analytically distinct, they do not conflate into each other, but they interplay and, as separate entities, they each possess causal powers, which need an agential project to act upon (Archer, 2003, 1995; Bhaskar, 1998). As a consequence of the nature of both entities, human beings act within the limits and possibilities posed by their structural circumstances and, by these actions, these circumstances continue to exist as they are, or they change (Archer, 2007). Consequently, social change/reproduction is a central motive in Archer’s ideas and Critical Realism since its

inception. Thus, and according to Critical Realist ontology, any process to be considered a trigger of change must incorporate context-dependence, human activity-dependence and concept-dependence, since the distinctive nature of social reality is, in Archer's words (2020, p. 138) "intrinsically, inherently and ineluctably 'peopled'". The meanings, ideas and understandings that people generate about social reality, through their agential powers, drive their actions and potentially cause, at an individual and an aggregated scale, change.

The epistemological implications that derive of this stance mean that theorising about social processes must approach reality assuming that, as critical realists assert, this comes in a "sac", that is: structure, agency and culture (Archer, 2003, 2007). Here, realists warn against theorisation that conflates any of the three into the other, denying the distinctive properties that each one, as separate entities, contains. For instance, assertions of the de-structuration of life or agency becoming fluid by serial reinvention are rendered conflated (Archer, 2007). Instead, critical realists portray the social order as "being shaped and re-shaped by groups seeking to advance their material interests, their ideal interests and who they are" (Archer, 2020, p. 139).

Critical Realism was initially criticised for not offering methodological guidance to conduct empirical research, besides the use of retrodution. Nonetheless, it is relevant to note that Archer's rendition of Critical Realism has generated much empirical research, using qualitative methodologies and very often adopting Grounded Theory methods (e.g. Caetano, 2018; 2017; Mrozowicki, 2011; Chalari, 2009; Archer, 2007, 2003; Domecka and Mrozowicki, 2013).

As explained earlier, defining the understanding of agency and structure was the initial step towards the development of the complete design of the study, which wanted to see both interplaying and having distinct generative powers. I wanted to take distance from the dominant post-structuralist perspective underlying much of the studies on activation and unemployment that emphasise the production of subjects and subjectivities through the influx of government and self-government.

Regarding the decision about the methodology and methods, Grounded Theory was the more appropriate option, specifically from a constructivist perspective as developed by Charmaz (2006). The next section explains these aspects.

3.4 Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology that aims at theorising inductively, that is, grounded on the data (Bryant, 2017). This task is possible through the constant and iterative

work of data collection and analysis that requires the researcher to have an active and systematic engagement with the data and a loose attachment to preconceived explanations (Charmaz, 2006). To avoid confusion, Charmaz (2008, p. 397) clarifies that Grounded Theory “refers to both the research product and the analytic method of producing it”.

Grounded Theory was first proposed by Glaser and Strauss, with the publication of their pivotal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, stating that theory could be discovered in data. From then on, Grounded Theory spread across different fields and gained an established place within qualitative research. In Clarke’s view (2019, p.6), this happened mostly because of its deeply empirical orientation that proposes a type of research not bounded to pre-determined theories but “based in abductively moving back and forth between empirical materials and efforts to conceptualize them via increasingly robust and sophisticated theorizing and sampling”. Similarly, Charmaz (2008, p. 399) argues that Glaser and Strauss democratized qualitative research, which no longer would be “a mysterious endeavour conducted by anointed elites”. This initial proposal of Grounded Theory, known as the classic variant (Bryant, 2017), was followed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2004). Bryant (2017) proposes these three variants of Grounded Theory as a “family” of systematic, inductive and comparative methods.

The different Grounded Theory variants share substantial principles, namely: observance to the “grounded” nature of research, capturing and explaining context-related processes and phenomena, pursuing theory through engagement with data, and pursuing theory through theoretical sampling (Timonen, Conlon and Foley, 2018). Grounded Theory research process is defined as “strategic, specific, and systematic” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1999) and taking place through the specific strategies of coding, memoing, theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation. Most notably, data collection and analysis co-occur and, from the early process of analysis, categories begin to take form, which is to be pursued through systematic comparison and further sampling as to refine these categories and arrive at a theoretical proposition of the main processes (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012; Charmaz, 2006). Thus, Grounded Theory studies aim at theorising through the conceptualisation and theoretical integration of data grounded in the first-person account, providing novel theories about specific phenomena (Charmaz, 2003). However, Grounded Theory can also aim at deepening existing theoretical knowledge and frameworks where it is needed, based on its premise of remaining open to and grounded on the data (Timonen, Conlon and Foley, 2018).

3.4.1 Constructionist Grounded Theory

The study adhered to the strand of Grounded Theory proposed by Charmaz (2006) from a constructivist stance. Charmaz (2008) identifies the key assumptions of her constructionist approach to Grounded Theory, such as assuming that reality is constructed, but under certain conditions, and that interactions underpin the emergence of the research process which must integrate the researcher's and participant's positionality; therefore, the data - as a product of the research process - are co-constructed by both actors. From there, the analysis aims at an interpretative understanding of subjects' meanings.

Constructivism is regarded as a fundamental perspective in qualitative research (Flick, 2006; Crotty, 2003) Charmaz (2008) argues that Glaser and Strauss' original proposition of Grounded Theory adhered to a social constructionist approach, but "more limited" to the one she assumes. Charmaz's development of Grounded Theory asks how the researcher affects the research process and the production of data; thus, while the classic strand of Grounded Theory focuses on objectivity and generality, Charmaz's Constructionist Grounded Theory focuses on reflexivity and relativity (Charmaz, 2008).

Constructivist Grounded Theory adheres to the core principles of Grounded Theory methods, as mentioned earlier, and brings to the fore the engagement of researcher and participants in the process of generating knowledge. This means that their interaction "*produces* the data, and therefore the meanings that the researcher observes and defines" (Charmaz, 1995, p. 35; emphasis in original), with attention to the temporal, cultural, and structural contexts that accompany the data (Charmaz, 2000). Understandably, adopting this stance involves for the researcher an active exercise of reflexivity throughout the research process to be aware of one's assumptions and positions. This recommendation connects to qualitative research in general and its interpretative stance, and in particular to critical stances of qualitative enquiry (Charmaz, 2008).

I chose Constructivist Grounded Theory because it connected to the broader epistemological and ontological stance of the study. The knowledge I was interested in had to be produced in interaction with those who experience the phenomena at first hand, and both, I and the research participants were active in this process of knowledge production. The study is based on the premise that reality is emergence and that meanings are construed in interactions, but also that structures are real, that these have been created by anterior agential powers; thus, as social beings, researchers and research participants interact within contexts they have not chosen. Charmaz (2011, p. 362) asserts that Constructivist Grounded Theory is well suited to researching social issues because it recognises and incorporates "context, positions, discourses, and meanings and actions" which are relevant to establish the doings of power and how individuals and groups are

differentially affected by inequalities. Complementary, Charmaz's research (1980, 1991) has produced valuable theories concerning the self, the experience of change, dilemma identities, specifically in the context of chronic illness.

3.4.1.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Charmaz (2014) situates her Constructivist Grounded Theory within the realms of Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism is a theoretical framework that argues that society is emergent and created through meaningful and continual interactions among individuals. Symbolic interactionist research focuses on social processes of identity, interactions and relations with symbolic objects (Scott, 2015). Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory share a strong affinity as they both focus on processes, meaning and action (Bryant and Charmaz, 2017). Charmaz recognises in G.H Mead a key influence, particularly in his works about the self, and the vital interconnection between meanings and actions (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2015).

Selves, according to Mead, are the seat of human agency, and as such, we act based on meanings and, as we act, we give meaning to our experiences in the social world (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2015). The self is created in social interaction and has a reflexive nature since self can be subject and object for themselves (the I and the Me). Interaction and intersubjectivity in the conformation of selves shape the notion of an agentic self that plays a significant part in their own making (Carter and Fuller, 2016). Within this framework, the change of self is understood as a social process, which captures much of the attention of Constructivist Grounded Theory that aims at focusing on meaning-making processes and action to understand how personal experience and social structure come together (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2015; Charmaz, 2005). As the findings will portray, the experience of going through contextual and internal changes, as a tension, emerged as a central process of participants' experience.

Key principles of Symbolic Interactionism assume that, firstly, the meanings that social objects hold for people underpin their actions; secondly, these meanings emerge from social interactions; and, thirdly, these meanings are not static but continuously recreated through interpretations and interpreting processes which occur in social and cultural contexts (Carter and Fuller, 2016; Scott, 2015).

As the data collection and analysis process progressed, and I developed a clearer insight into how research participants were narrating their experiences and the meanings they were attributing, internal processes related to self and identity were gaining preponderance. Constructivist Grounded Theory and its specific understandings of the self from a Symbolic Interactionist view provided substantial insights to support the engagement with the data.

3.4.1.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory and Archerian Critical Realism

Critical Realism and Constructivist Grounded Theory underpinned by Symbolic Interactionism provide much potential for social research. In particular, both provided sensitising concepts to the study along the research process. The interplay between agency and structure, and reflexivity as mediation, were sensitising concepts coming from a realist stance since the beginning of the study; at the same time, the notions of self and identity were informed by the Symbolic Interactionist view, emerging throughout the process.

As Charmaz (2008, p.409) asserts, her constructivism assumes the existence of a real-world that may be interpreted in multiple ways; thus, she does “not subscribe to the radical subjectivism assumed by some advocates of constructivism”. Charmaz’s and Archer’s positions share insights about social reality to guide research and this study, and they offered to this research ontological, epistemological and methodological ground. Both stances give attention to agency and self and their sense-making processes, also devoting attention to the temporal dimension of human experience, structural powers and social change. In a few words, I believe that both stances assert the irreducible nature of agency and the agential drive to make sense of the world and to devise ways to find fulfilment amidst the constraining power of stratified enablements and constraints.

The study adopted a Critical Realist ontological stance and understood agency and structure as separate and relatively autonomous entities; from this stance, participants accounts are their reality of placement and their way of experiencing it, and from this stance it is valid as knowledge. Participants accounts reflected a common reality that I identified upon saturation of the data.

3.5 Ethical principles and strategies

Before initiating the fieldwork and before having any contact with research participants, I sought ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, which was granted in November 2017. The study was committed to the respect of the ethical principles for social research: informed voluntary consent, limitation of risk, confidentiality and anonymity (Trinity College Dublin, 2014).

Prospective participants were given an information sheet explaining the main aspects of the study, and explaining participants’ rights such as confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any point. I informed participants that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that this was in no way related (positively or negatively) to their welfare benefits. Considering the use of gatekeepers, as section 3.6.2.1 will explain, it was necessary to reaffirm this aspect and

give participants the possibility to refuse despite having informed the gatekeeper that they wanted to participate.

I recorded the interviews with the explicit consent and permission of the participants. Participants retained a copy of the signed consent form, and I informed them of their right to contact the researcher to access transcripts or the final copy of the thesis. Personal data was anonymised to ensure that the identity of research participants was kept anonymous. Pseudonyms were used to disguise the identity of participants. At the same time, the names of localities and the community organisations where participants were doing placements were omitted, and only the general area of work was mentioned. The names of the agencies implementing the schemes were also omitted.

3.6 Research design

3.6.1 Sampling

The study started with purposive sampling and later adopted theoretical sampling. Purposive sampling guides the selection of research participants based on specific criteria that enable the exploration of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2011). Theoretical sampling is a key feature of Grounded Theory studies that sample participants who are considered to have the potential to contribute to the progress of the theoretical constructs proposed by the earlier stages of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). In tune with the simultaneous nature of data collection and analysis in Grounded Theory, the design of the sampling is flexible and attentive to the data, and so, the sample must further the construction of concepts and theorising (Morse and Clark, 2019). Sampling was a central aspect of the study and presented challenges, possibilities and limitations, as I will present later.

Purposive sampling means choosing participants with a purpose in mind (Bryant, 2017), and this purpose is delimited by what the study wants to know. As established earlier, the leading focus of the study was to understand how participants made sense of their experiences of unemployment, job search and placement in an activation scheme, in relation to their past and future aspirations and plans. Building upon this broad delimitation, the baseline criterion was to sample from the two activation schemes that operate through community placements. As explained earlier in greater detail (Chapter One and Two), Tús and Community Employment (CE) are presently the two activation schemes in Ireland that require long-term unemployed on receipt of Jobseekers Allowance to take a 19.5 hours per week placement in a not-for-profit local community organisation.

Since research about the experience of placement in Ireland is scarce, I was interested in sourcing a diverse sample that would portray different profiles of participants, that could be revised later through theoretical sampling. In that regard, I intended to recruit men and women of different ages, diverse occupational backgrounds, and at different stages of their placement, in order to follow participants through the experience (Morse and Clark, 2019).

Another important aspect was the interest in sampling participants living and based on schemes outside Dublin, and to include rural and urban villages and towns. It has been reported that localities outside Dublin have been less impacted by the effects of the economic recovery and that long-term unemployment figures have remained higher than in the capital, exposing a regional deficit (Social Justice Ireland, 2017; O'Donoghue, Kilgarriff and Ryan, 2017). Based on pragmatic considerations (knowledge of the territory and informal contact with a potential gatekeeper), I decided to base the sampling in county Meath and county Louth. In the end, recruitment in Louth was not possible, and county Cavan was later included. Meath is a Mid-East county, and Cavan is located in the Eastern border with Northern Ireland; both counties comprise urban areas along with rural and agrarian communities.

Summing up, the criteria for sampling were: (1) men and women; (2) age between 25 and 64 (the minimum and maximum participation age established by the schemes) ; (3) doing placement with CE or Tús; (4) at any stage of their placement term; and (5) living and doing placement in Meath or Cavan.

Sampling evolves in relation to the analytical purpose of a Grounded Theory study and, at the initial stage, as Morse and Clark (2019) explain, the sampling tends to be focused on “grasping the phenomenon”, and for that the researcher samples for “maximum variation” in terms of process and demographic. The study followed these initial criteria through purposeful sampling. At this initial stage of “grasping the phenomenon”, it was useful not to have a strict delimitation of age, for example, as well as sampling for participants at any stage of their term, as important processes would emerge linked to both.

3.6.2 Sourcing the sample

Both schemes, Tús and CE, are part of the national activation policy Pathways to Work and are overseen and funded by the DEASP. As described in Chapter Two, the local implementation of the schemes is mostly in the hands of Local Development Companies (LDCs), which are not-for-profit multi-sectoral partnerships that implement social programmes. Schemes can also be delivered by CLG (Company Limited by Guarantee) with a charitable purpose. In general, LDCs

implement Tús, and CLGs and LDCs implement CE. Hereafter, I will use the generic “agencies” to refer to these entities.

Early in the research process, and to identify potential sources to recruit research participants, I mapped the agencies delivering the schemes as well as other institutions providing services for unemployed persons and jobseekers in Meath and, at that initial point, in Louth. Shortly after I started mapping and making first contacts, I realised that the use of gatekeepers would be essential since it seemed very difficult that I could, firstly, identify, and secondly, approach participants without the mediation of a gatekeeper. I had informally met a member of the staff of one of the agencies in Meath, and through this person, I gained insight into the schemes’ scene in this county. I formally requested this agency’s support to recruit research participants. At this initial point, I had hopes that I could reach participants through parallel circuits, such as Job Clubs; however, this way proved extremely difficult. I approached three Job Clubs, and one allowed me to place an informative leaflet in their office (which did not provide any contact); however, I could not negotiate support to identify potential participants. I approached three other agencies, but they declined to provide support, giving as reasons their workload and, consequently, not having time to engage as gatekeepers. I also approached the NOUI (National Organisation of Unemployed in Ireland) and one advocacy group; they also declined to help me to publicise the study among their clients. As this brief account exposed, the process of sourcing the sample took several months and at times seemed inauspicious. All in all, identifying and reaching participants outside their “natural environment” - the schemes – and through other related institutions or informal channels was not possible. In the end, the sample was sourced from four agencies across the two counties, Meath and Cavan.

Communicating the research and presenting its relevance and the potential benefits agencies could gain from it were important learnings along this process. I also learned that agencies and institutions are protective of their clients and some are suspicious of whether research could involve, although not explicitly, evaluating their work, and that the results could portray them in a negative light. The agencies that gave their support were interested in the findings since they had never carried out research themselves or had been approached by another researcher. These agencies were also interested in the qualitative perspective of the study as to account for the processes “behind the numbers”, since, as they explained, the DEASP asked them only for quantitative information about the schemes and participants. However, none of them had the resources to carry out or commission research.

3.6.2.1 Gatekeepers

As explained above, avenues to contact participants outside the realm of agencies proved unsuccessful, and the access to the recruitment sites through gatekeepers was the only way to reach participants. A gatekeeper, also known as a mediator, is an individual whose formal or informal position enables them to facilitate contacts between a researcher and potential research participants (Kristensen and Kvan, 2015; Wanat, 2008). Gatekeepers hold a relevant role because they can facilitate or block access to recruitment sites and potential research participants.

I initiated the fieldwork through my contact with the agency implementing Tús in Meath. Despite conversations, the agency in Louth opted not to support the research, explaining they had too much work and a small team, and additional commitments were not possible. Later, I secured access through two other agencies in Meath and, finally, at the stage of theoretical sampling, one large agency in Cavan. The sample of 30 participants was sourced through access granted by these four agencies across two counties. Two agencies were implementors of Tús, and two were implementors of CE.

Working with gatekeepers was a learning experience and presented challenges. The main challenge was to negotiate the recruitment strategy and to define how much freedom I would have to approach participants. A constant aspect I was reflexive about was the weight of gatekeepers' influence in the conformation of the sampling and to what extent this would impact the inclusion/exclusion of the voices heard and the voices silenced (Kristensen and Ravn, 2015). Negotiating with gatekeepers was not an easy process, especially considering the unsuccessful attempts at reaching participants through alternative avenues. Waiting was also part of the process, being proactive but at the same time patient, knowing that in forging a relationship with a gatekeeper one needs to have a long-term vision. In the end, I evaluate that I reached a balance between one agency with a strict protocol to approach participants, and, on the other end, one very open that let me spend time with potential participants, and, in between these two extremes, the two other agencies that wanted to have control but were open to negotiate and be flexible. The gatekeepers were staff with a higher rank within the agencies, such as the supervisors' manager.

3.6.2.2 Scheme supervisors

Throughout the process of the fieldwork, I had informal conversations with some of the scheme supervisors. These conversations helped me to have a broader scope and understanding of their work and the agencies' struggles and standpoint. As the findings will portray, the supervisor was a key figure in the making of the experience of placement and, even though the study did not consider formally interviewing them, these conversations were reflected upon in several memos. The scheme supervisor was the direct counterpart of the scheme participant, acting as a kind of

caseworker. Each supervisor was responsible for between 20 to 30 participants, depending on the size of the agency and the total number of participants. Supervisors' occupational background was varied, some of them had worked previously in retail or office work, a few had a college degree, and most of them had years of experience working in the community sector. Most supervisors I had contact with were women between 35 and 55 years old.

3.6.2.3 Recruitment

Recruitment took place following negotiations for access with each of the four agencies, over ten months. I present a brief narration of the arrangements I had with each agency as to depict the process of formation of the sample. I have numbered agencies from one to four in chronological order as I was working with them, and in brackets is the specific scheme they implemented.

With agency one (Tús) we agreed that participants would be contacted by letter including the information sheet I had prepared, and a cover letter from the agency introducing the invitation to take part in the study. Participants who were interested could contact me personally, or they could tell their supervisors they wanted to be contacted by me. Initially, this letter was sent to approximately 40 participants, men and women of different ages. At that moment, I aimed to reach 20 of these participants. I recruited the first participants through both channels, some contacted me directly, and I also received the contact details of others. When I made direct contact with them, I went through the details of the research and voluntary participation. Considering that the letter sent by the agency could have given these potential participants the impression of an obligation, I wanted to stress that participation was voluntary and anonymous and by no means tied to obligations with the scheme; I also stressed that I was an independent researcher not working for the agency. After recruiting five participants, and no signs of new ones, the agency agreed to send out letters to additional participants and supervisors also informed participants personally. I had conversations with the gatekeeper discussing the reasons for the poor response and what could be done differently. The gatekeeper was of the opinion that the information sheet could be shorter and simpler; they were also of the opinion that scheme participants were reluctant to participate for two main reasons: they did not feel comfortable sharing private information since they felt this could be made known to the welfare system; the second reason they assessed was apathy and lack of interest. I simplified the information sheet without compromising the topics it needed to inform. I recruited 15 participants through this agency.

Recruitment with agency two (CE) took a different form. This agency managed a smaller number of participants and, overall, had a less bureaucratic and protective approach to facilitating access to participants. The gatekeeper invited me to spend time in the community centre, where a number of participants were doing their placement. This was a large building composed of extensions

accommodating different community projects, a creche and sports facilities, and participants had different positions there. This was also the place where scheme participants, placed elsewhere, attended appointments and went for breaks during the week. I visited for a couple of hours during a week observing and chatting informally with participants, the supervisor and other members of the centre not related to the scheme. The gatekeeper had told participants about the research and that they were free to choose to talk to me or not. After this week I recruited a number of participants, while others politely refused. After several weeks I repeated the process to recruit new participants. In itself, this was a very insightful experience as I gained a different insight into the “daily life” of the scheme participants. I recruited in total seven participants.

Recruitment with agency three (CE) took place when I was deliberating to pursue some theoretical leads and to pursue theoretical sampling; thus, I was interested in a specific profile of participants, as well as participants from a new agency. The strategy negotiated here was that, after explaining what type of participant I wanted to interview, the gatekeeper gave me the details of those they thought would be suitable. Previously, the gatekeeper had spoken with these participants, who had agreed to be contacted by me. As far as it was possible, I recruited three participants of different occupational profile. I was interested in the characteristic of the participants, thus, three participants matching that criteria were considered sufficient at this stage.

Recruitment with agency four (Tús) happened in the context of theoretical sampling (section 3.6.3). This agency was located in county Cavan which introduced a variation that was necessary to explore specific categories. I recruited five participants whom I approached in a similar fashion to agency two.

Overall, the process of recruitment allowed me to gain on-site insights about the functioning of the agencies as implementors of the schemes.

3.6.2.4 Stressing voluntary participation

As described in the previous sub-section, two agencies (two and four, as per description above) facilitated more direct contact with participants, and I was able to talk to a number of them directly. With these participants, I was able to go through the details of the research and answer questions, face to face. Still, a number of the scheme participants I spoke to declined, and in these cases, I thanked them for their time to listen.

Specifically, with agency one, which had great control over the process of reaching potential research participants, I was concerned about the way the invitation was being received by participants and whether the voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality had been

stressed by the agency (despite this information being contained in the research information leaflet). The gatekeeper provided the details of 23 participants who had agreed to be contacted. As it was agreed, I made contact with these potential participants to explain the details, answer questions and gave them time to consider. When I first contacted them, I stressed the rights of research participants and the uses of the information; out of these 23 participants, 15 participants confirmed their will to participate, and 8 declined.

Taking into consideration the role of gatekeepers, it was important to preserve the right to voluntary participation. I cannot say that gatekeepers did not stress this aspect with potential research participants, but the nature of their relationship could be seen exerting that effect. I did not want to reproduce the situation of compulsory requirements that conditional welfare had placed upon participants as welfare recipients, for example, having to accept to take part in the scheme. I made clear that the research was independent, meaning having no links to the agencies or the DEASP, and explained why their views and experiences were relevant. I wanted to persuade participants to take part, but above all, I wanted them to feel respected and free to choose.

Sarah's case illustrates some of these aspects. Sarah attended the interview as we had agreed over the phone (I contacted her first, followed this protocol and gave her time to consider) and expressed her feelings of distrust. Despite understanding the strategies that the research was taking to protect her rights to privacy and confidentiality, Sarah explained how the DEASP had shared her personal data without her consent. She had been requested to join two schemes, JobPath and the current one, and both schemes had received her personal data from the DEASP without her knowledge, which she resented strongly. I explained we should not have the interview if she did not feel truly reassured, but, in the end, she was the one insisting on giving the interview to share her experience and views. Sarah's situation gives an overall impression of participants' background as welfare recipients as to why it was important for the study to stress voluntary participation, confidentiality and privacy. At the same time, Sarah's experience shed light upon a possible reason why scheme participants were reluctant to take part in the research.

3.6.2.5 Inviting participants to take part in the research: interview and follow-up interview

Participants were invited to take part in an interview to talk about their experience of unemployment and placement. A follow-up interview was discussed with most participants, which would take place approximately four months later. The follow-up interview wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the evolving experience of placement as the end of placement drew closer. The possibility of a second interview was discussed with research participants at the end of the first interview when I briefly explained that knowing how their process of placement

evolved and their ideas about the future would be an important aspect. I asked 21 participants to take part in a follow-up interview. Some of the second interviews were theoretically sampled. As the process of interview, theoretical sampling and analysis became more focused, the invitation to a second interview also became more focused; therefore, in the later stages of the research, not all participants were invited.

Among the 21 participants who were invited to take part in a second interview, seven participants said no, and in these cases, I did not try to persuade them. The other participants liked the idea, and we agreed that I would confirm with them closer to the time of the interview. Follow-up interviews materialised with nine of these participants; in contrast, others declined because of different circumstances that had occurred in their lives during those months (e.g. illness, moving to another county, pregnancy), while some were not interested anymore. With participants who did accept, we signed a second consent form.

The research design was flexible about the possibility of follow-up interviews. Considering the difficulties during the recruitment process, I was aware that a second interview could be difficult to materialise in all cases. When second interviews took place, these were very insightful about the trajectorial process of going through placement and to advance categories, especially when these second interviews were theoretically sampled.

3.6.2.7 Limitations of the sampling

The decisions and strategies underpinning the composition of the sample hold a central role in the overall research process and directly affect the data that researchers have access to and, therefore, the dimensions of the phenomena that are illuminated or obscured (Charmaz, 2006). As discussed in the earlier sub-sections, the process of recruitment was challenging and required the deployment of different strategies and time. Kristensen and Rvan (2015) observe how recruitment through gatekeepers does not reach some voices, while the individuals who accept to participate could be those more engaged and inclined to have mainstream views. Equally, they recommend researchers to reflect upon what motivated those who accepted and how these motivations may be reflected in the data.

Undoubtedly, gatekeepers exerted influence in the recruitment process. In conversations with gatekeepers and supervisors, I learned that there was a type of scheme participant which they saw as difficult, mostly because they were not reliable, were not motivated or had additional problems (especially addictions). It is possible that the study did not have access to “difficult” clients as a result of gatekeepers’ filter. Two gatekeepers explained they would not contact participants with problems related to addictions, because they were already monitored more closely, and they did

not want to overburden them with the invitation to take part in the research. One gatekeeper explained that participants under 25 were categorised as a sub-group of participants with specific barriers (e.g. unemployed without work experience, motivation issues) that were not comparable to the rest of the scheme population, mostly because they lacked employment experience. This was a way of telling me that I would not get access to these participants. The youngest participant in the sample is 28 years old. This aspect needs to be addressed as a limitation. However, it can be argued that, as the literature suggests, youth unemployment presents singularities and it is regarded as a distinct phenomenon within the broader topic of unemployment.

Through stressing voluntary participation, I tried to counteract part of the gatekeepers' influence. Some participants who had agreed through the gatekeepers declined to take part when I spoke to them directly. Regarding research participants' motivations to accept, it could be argued that those more engaged in their placement process felt more inclined to share their experiences. However, cases such as Sarah's mentioned above, and other participants with mixed views and feelings about their placement, suggest that those who acceded to take part in the study were not only satisfied participants, and that diverse views were represented in the sample. I consider that the use of four different agencies, with different degrees of involvement in the selection and recruitment of research participants, generated a balance between gatekeepers' influence, participants' will to participate and my influence.

Another limitation can be related to the geographical delimitation of the sample. As it will become clearer through the findings chapters, some dimensions of participants' experiences were connected to the symbolic and material characteristics of the locations where participants were based (13 in total); for example, some villages possessed a rural ethos and other places were tensioned by their role as Border-towns. The geographical dimension is a relevant aspect of the experience of research participants, but it might not be directly conversant with the experience of those based in larger urban towns.

3.6.3 Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling is a central feature of Grounded Theory. As Charmaz (2014, p. 197) asserts, "initial sampling in Grounded Theory gets you started; theoretical sampling guides where you go". This also acts as a guide for the researcher to identify when the data has produced enough meaningful categories, and so to conclude the data collection process (Bryman, 2008). As Charmaz (2006) observes, theoretical sampling is often confused with other forms of sampling in qualitative research but presented as such. Researchers need to account for their use of theoretical sampling, which in turn provides substance to the Grounded Theory proposed.

As the process of interviewing, transcription, analysis and memoing was taking place simultaneously, I started to identify emergent themes that had a more prevalent and consistent presence across the large and rich corpus of data emerging. These themes were indicating that “something” was happening at the level of internal processes of embracing or resisting internal and contextual change. These and other emergent themes were actively followed while others started to gain or to lose significance as the process continued. This process towards identification and conceptualisation of central processes recalibrated its scope as I moved on to theoretical sampling with the help of abductive and retroductive reasoning. Consequently, hypothetical explanations were proposed to the data, while, in other cases, I went back to the literature to follow or discern conceptual uses.

Memos were key in sourcing this process, through which I convened the concepts I needed to explore further or those that were absent and were relevant to explore (e.g. the experience of end of placement) through collecting new data focused on these aspects. Interviews with new research participants and follow-up interviews with previous research participants were used to supply this data.

To illustrate the use of theoretical sampling, I present two leads I actively pursued through its use.

Firstly, I hypothesised the interconnection between the initial notions of *losing* and *regaining*, as two correspondent processes, which I explored through interviewing new participants. Despite the length of unemployment, participants’ accounts contained strong similarities which became more evident during the coding processes. The theme of losing and its different expressions became “repetitive”. Since unemployment was a topic I had researched in the literature before starting the data collection, I recognised many aspects echoing the literature. At the same time, meanings attributed to placement were referring to aspects that seemed to correlate with losses, especially in the codes speaking of doing and identity. Then, the focus of interest would be the relationship between the meanings attributed to unemployment and placement and how the intensity of the former (as captured in the category of losing) could be interconnected to the meanings given to the latter. I tentatively proposed that the codes about placement were matching as the reverse of losing. These codes seemed to speak of functions of placement, and they were broadly thematised through the question posed to the data: “what is placement given them / doing for them?” The category of *regaining losses* was tentatively proposed as comprising much of the meanings attributed to the experience of placement. To explore why this was happening, I needed to identify other relations and categories underlying this process. I explored this category and the suggested relations, during second interviews with some participants who had expressed strong feelings about “losing”. I found that losing was consistent in its connection with regaining when

referring to aspects of the self (e.g. self-esteem, self-worth, purpose). However, it was not consistent with the notion of regaining the lost financial stability and security.

A second example to illustrate the use of theoretical sampling was to explore the nascent concept of *co-production*. Building on my initial category of “synchronising participant and scheme needs”, I started to see what was emerging as another “pillar” to explain why placement was being construed as beneficial. It was not only the regaining of losses, but there were other processes acting in interconnection. The data were suggesting an emerging process occurring as a productive interaction between participant and supervisor. I conceptualised this process as *co-producing the experience of placement*, taking the idea from an earlier memo as well as using memos concerning conversations with different supervisors. These memos were vital to developing the category. I saw this concept having theoretical potential, but the concept needed to be explored further. I needed to theoretically sample to contextualise the concept, bearing in mind that data from different schemes was necessary in order to “test” whether the co-production was applicable in a scheme with different supervisors and community organisations, and therefore different styles of relationship and communication. Contacts made in parallel to gain access to a new scheme were successful, and five new research participants were sampled to explore the concept along with conversations with two supervisors. Interestingly, data obtained here was consistent with the proposed concept and contextualised it beyond the limits of the already sampled schemes. Shortly after, I theoretically sampled four previous participants in a second interview to *fill the gap regarding the experience of end of placement*. Together with obtaining some insights about this experience, I realised that there was a link with the notion of co-production that I had not considered: the end of placement meant a discontinuity of the co-production because it happened unilaterally. These data were meaningful since they added complexity to the understanding of the experience, which would be incomplete without this event.

3.7 Data collection

3.7.1 Qualitative interviews

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The interview is a central and well-established data collection method in qualitative research and, as such, the interview is “a knowledge-producing activity” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.47) that seeks to understand the social world from the person’s point of view, and to comprehend the meanings of their lived experience (Kvale, 2011). Correspondingly, the interview was the appropriate data collection method to access research participants’ standpoints, meanings and interpretations of their

experiences, and, at the same time, to pay attention to the two-way influence between interviewer and interviewee. Indeed, as the researcher engages with the interview from a constructivist viewpoint, the interview knowledge is actively produced and co-produced by interviewer and interviewee through the relational, contextual and narrative process of questions and answers (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Charmaz, 2006). The researcher's stance, from this perspective, should be open and active, and not be oriented to confirmation of pre-determined assumptions about the experience and meanings of interviewees. Nunkoosing (2005, p. 702) states this point when asserting that "not knowing is itself an important stance for the interviewer to take".

The result of the interview, the intensive interview as Charmaz (2006, p. 27) points out, is "a construction – or reconstruction – of a reality", people bring experiences back through the questions and see them in a new light, reinterpreting them from the specific outlook framed by the event of the interview. I gave this aspect much thought when asking myself, what are participants telling me? Are they composing a narrative, as they speak, taking some elements they think are more interesting than others, or that show them in a better light? As participants answered, they were taking my questions as triggers for this process of construction, while my questions and probes were (re)created as they were talking. The interview as a co-construction of meanings by participant and researcher was very much how I experienced it.

3.7.2 Designing and conducting the interviews

I designed a flexible semi-structured and open interview guide, composed of open questions and a list of topics to discuss. Interviews did not follow the same order every time, and each interview introduced new topics as participants' answers elicited further new questions. After each interview, especially during the first ones, I modified the guide, and so the interviews became gradually more focused as emergent themes started to take form. This was useful to identify and explore the emergence and evolution of topics. As interviews advanced and specific topics appeared to be giving form to defined patterns (e.g. the experience of unemployment), my role as interviewer became more focused on pursuing the emergent lines that were developing as core categories, and as theoretical sampling developed.

Open-ended questions, follow-up questions and probes were important to elicit reflexivity and to give participants control, as these questions invited them to define the scope and depth of their answers. For example, when I asked, "tell me about your life before joining the scheme", participants decided differently how far back "before" was located, and many would go back several years prior. This development was interesting, as the exploration of the "distant past" became a pattern among participants that allowed for the inclusion of dimensions of their life

experience that I had not considered, such as the notion of “the future in the past” (Chapter Six). This “flexibility and control” that characterises in-depth interviewing syntonises well with the aims of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28).

Interviews took place in a time and location agreed with participants in advance, and according to their preferences. There were three main locations where interviews took place: hotels lounges, which proved to be quiet settings as I usually secured a discreet place; when possible I booked a study room in local libraries and, in other occasions, I was able to use spaces in community centres. The selection of suitable locations was a matter of much consideration for me, as in advance I needed to map possible venues in the different towns and villages I would cover (13 in total), so I could offer participants a few options when we were arranging the interview; I always asked them first where they would prefer to meet. When using public libraries and community centres I needed to present my request in advance and the result depended on availability. Interviews usually took place early in the morning or early afternoon after placement hours. On three occasions, the person did not attend without previous notice.

Before starting the interview, an informal chat about all sorts of random topics would take place; this was spontaneous, and I actively tried to make participants feel comfortable. Before the interviews, I would go through consent and participants’ rights, stipulated in the consent form, which I would read out and ask if they had questions. Normally, participants did not have questions. With participants’ consent, interviews were audio-recorded, except for one interview at the request of the participant. During one interview, the participant asked to stop recording to disclose a sensible topic (welfare fraud) and then consented to resume it. The duration of the interviews ranged between 38 minutes and 1 hour and 24 minutes.

I consciously approached the interviews in a way that it would not appear too inquisitive. I wanted participants to distinguish the research interview setting from previous experiences they had had, especially their experience as welfare recipients. Similarly, open-ended questions are said to promote a less asymmetrical relationship as they allow interviewees to propose topics through their answers (Oakley, 1981).

The initial question “tell me something about yourself” invited participants to introduce themselves, which sometimes motivated a concise answer and others a lengthy summary of their lives. From there on, interview questions would follow the conversation rhythm. Ending questions inviting the participant to add or ask something they thought was important to be included, and many times participants used this time to summarise the main point they wanted to stress. Once the interview concluded, I checked with participants how they felt, thanked them and emphasised

the importance of their views and experience for the understanding of placement. Sometimes I provided information about some practical issues that may have arisen during the interview, such as access to other schemes or local resources. Finally, I reminded them of the confidentiality issues and their right to access the transcript or, indeed, the thesis. I always wished them well in the specific future endeavours they had mentioned. The possibility of a second interview was talked about after ending the interview, as mentioned earlier.

Before each interview, I prepared myself to familiarise well with the interview guide, as I would never have it visibly with me because I thought it could be disruptive. I practised active listening, to the best of my ability, and tried to be attentive to silences, participants' non-verbal language and emotions. Within a constructivist scope of Grounded Theory, what is said and how it is said are relevant (Charmaz, 2006). In a few occasions, some participants became upset recalling specific events in their lives, and I stopped to check with them if they wanted to continue. Memo writing followed each interview.

3.7.2.1 Reflection upon the interview process

The "interview" has permeated different realms of society; it has become a component of everyday experience, seeing the telling and enquiring about people's lives as a feature of our current society (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Silverman, 1997). The interview culture, as Silverman and Atkinson (1997) argue, has developed within a broader emphasis on the production of the self. Thus, interviews become a tool to achieve that, as particularly illustrated by the use of interviews in media and marketing. This insight points out that "no method of research can stand outside the cultural and material world" (Silverman 1997, p. 249), thus, research participants carry meanings and experiences with and about the interview, which the researcher must consider. Research participants' familiarity with the setting of the interview and the idea of "being interviewed" derived mostly from their experiences as welfare recipients and jobseekers. As Chapter Four, Five and Six will show, participants brought the topic of the welfare and job interview into the conversation, and they problematised it as they narrated their experiences with welfare officers, supervisors, and prospective employers. More often, these experiences spoke of feeling interrogated and not heard, and participants depicted themselves as summoned by welfare case officers, construing their position as an interviewee in that setting as alienated and objectified (Oakley, 1981).

My internal conversation was active when reflecting upon my position as an interviewer. Especially during the first interviews, I could see myself tending to "assess" participants' narrations. Here, I could see the influence of my experience as a social worker conducting interviews from a more directive and judgemental stance, where a client's narration is to be

dissected looking for specific aspects as to inform actions. It was interesting for me to observe that as a matter of self-reflexivity, and also because it helped me to understand participants better when narrating their experiences in similar settings within the welfare system, because I had been in similar settings, although from a completely different position. I actively tried to avoid an inquisitive approach to the interviews. Memos were very helpful to reflect upon throughout the interview process.

Research participants were active interviewees who not only answered questions but actively shaped the process of interviewing by introducing new topics or asking back what my position was about the issue I had just posed to them. The interactions between research participants and myself as researcher were dynamic and enabled a process of co-production of the data. Each interview was very much a shared venture; as participants were composing their narrations, emergent themes arose in the conversation, demanding from the researcher the active crafting of follow-up questions as well as attending to the emotions accompanying them. Some participants acted surprised and said, *“nobody asked me that before”*, *“let me think, I have not thought about that”*, while others, such as Violet, would establish a limit by saying *“I hate those type of questions”*. Some participants were very open and shared sensitive and intimate aspects of their lives, which was something I did not expect; however, as it turned out, the interviews became a site for participants’ telling many details of their lives, incorporating a trajectorial view that became very important to understand the findings. On some occasions, I decided not to ask further about topics that were delicate for participants and were not essential for the study, because I did not want to upset them unnecessarily; for example, when one participant spoke about his wife’s health.

Some participants asked me back questions during the interviews and integrated my answers as a point of reference to develop their answers. Dan was one participant that asked me a few personal questions during the interview, for example when he was telling me about his youth, he suddenly asked me if I was married, and then if I had children, I said no, and he replied *“Thanks God for that one”*, later he explained to me that not having “kids as quick” would be something he would have done different in his life, and he used my case as a point of reference:

Why is that?

... I think having kids at that age when you get married, it kind of slows you down... look at you! you don't have kids and you can go everywhere, you know what I mean, you have no one to slow you down, no kids to look after, you can go and you enjoy your life...when you have kids at that age you can't really enjoy your life (Dan, 61)

Other interviewees asked me the question back, which I answered because they were addressing me directly. Adam was an interview that did that a few times; for example, when he was elaborating his answer about feeling anxious about the future:

... I mean there are times when...you, do you feel anxious about the future? (Adam, 45)

Mmm, yeah, sometimes I do, and sometimes I trust things will be okay.

I think that's the same for everybody, you know, sometimes you do, sometimes you don't, depends on your mood or what is happening on the day or mmm, you know, what's coming to your life... (Adam, 45)

These brief examples illustrate the active involvement of participants during the interviews, and the place these participants gave me as researcher and interviewer from what I see as a more symmetrical position that did not prevent them from interacting.

The result of the interviews was a narration of the past, present and future of participants' lives, with an emphasis in their experience of work, unemployment, welfare and placement. Participants seemed to be actively composing a narration according to their notion of consistency, adding events, decisions and post-evaluations of the results of those decisions. Participants composed accounts of their lives portraying chains of events that gave them, alternately, "heroic" and "victimic" roles (Ezzy, 2001). Participants shared a sense of talking about issues which normally are not shared in regular conversations because they tell of failures and difficulties. Many would have been wary of the negativity surrounding unemployment and welfare recipients and would rather not be identified as such. Nonetheless, they spoke openly about these experiences during the interviews; they shared very intimate events and feelings, and many told me that they did not speak about these issues with other people, even close relative and friends. My position as an outsider, that is, someone who did not belong to their immediate world, may have helped to make participants feel freer.

The process of interviews occurred simultaneously to the data analysis, as the next section presents.

3.8 Data analysis

In Grounded Theory, data analysis involves comparative methods throughout the entire research process (Charmaz, 2019). Given the inductive character of Grounded Theory, the analysis and data collection advance in tandem, informing each other and keeping the researcher engaged and actively coding and identifying emergent categories while collecting new data. As the process of continuous comparison between empirical data and emerging analysis becomes more focused, the analysis gradually adopts a more theoretical form (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). As mentioned earlier, from a constructivist view, grounded theorists understand that their data are co-constructed, that is, between researcher and research participants and, therefore, the data are grounded in the specific situational context where the data were produced (Charmaz, 2019).

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. I started the analysis by coding line-by-line, which means assigning a name to each line of the written interview transcripts. I conducted this process by hand. This method enables the researcher to stay focused on and close to the data, and, as Charmaz (2006) recommends, codes should look for actions and code data as actions, that is, using gerunds to name what the data *is doing*. These first codes are provisional since the process of analysis is ongoing and open to finding codes that better fit the data. Coding line-by-line was extremely useful for the study since the number of transcripts was quite large; thus, this exercise allowed me to familiarise with the data, have control over what actions were arising to approach the ongoing interviews.

The use of gerunds, as Charmaz (2006) recommends, asking the data what is happening there, was useful to avoid making assumptions or assigning codes that are abstract and unhelpful. Coding fosters the researchers' reflexive involvement with data, and, at the same time, coding is "an explicit strategy for theory construction" (Charmaz, 2015, p. 1615).

Emerging codes are to be compared within the same data and across the dataset, allowing more focused codes to emerge as meanings and processes become clearer, and their properties are identified through the process of constant comparison. Focused coding, the process that follows line-by-line coding, helps to conceptualize the data into broader segments that incorporate several congruent codes together (Charmaz, 2006). The overall coding process aims at achieving fit and relevance, as proposed by Charmaz (2006, p. 54), it means that codes and categories should fit the empirical world and "crystallize participants' experience", which leads to relevance when categories can offer an "analytic framework that interprets what is happening and makes relationships between implicit processes and structures visible". The study's process of analysis, from line-by-line coding up to more refined categories, went back and forward, as patterns

emerged categories were discarded or reworked as dimensions of others, and relations between them were revised through numerous diagrams. The fit and relevance of the analysis reach a crucial point when identifying the core category or categories.

Another essential component of the analysis process is memo writing. Memos are a key method in Grounded Theory that initiate the analysis of data from the start of the research process. Writing memos means stopping to analyse the interviews, field observations and coding process, keeping the researcher engaged with the data (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Bryant, 2017). I engaged with memo writing since my first conversations with gatekeepers, and it became more active as the interviews began. Memos have helped me and guided me in different moments of the research process, more notably when defining categories and discerning the start of theoretical sampling, and later during the writing of the findings through the sorting out of memos. Many of the memos became central pieces in the definition of categories. Memos also kept me grounded on the process of narrowing down the scope of the analysis, mostly because I managed a vast corpus of data. Another relevant function that memo writing had for me was recording the process of the research itself since through reading the memos in chronological order I could, and I needed to do it many times, remind myself of the logic of the process and how it progressed.

3.9 Research participants

Table 2. Research participants

Pseudonym	Age	Unemployment duration	Placement position	Sponsor organisation area of work	Time on the scheme	Background
Steven	42	3 years (with intermittent temporary jobs).	Ground keeping and gardening.	Education.	5 months	Steven was single and had two children. He was from a European country. His background was building sites.
Tamara	28	4 years.	Admin.	Promotion of local producers.	6 months	Tamara had a long-term partner and two children. Her background was childcare.
Bob	43	5 years approx. (with intermittent temporary jobs).	Reception, information desk.	Promotion of local tourism and local businesses.	5 months	Bob was single with no children. Bob had experience in several different jobs, and also self-employment experience.
Jack	54	3 years approx.	Ground keeping and gardening.	Sports.	2 years	Jack was married with three children. His background was driving and various other jobs.

Dan	61	6 years approx.	Reception and security.	Sports.	2 years	Dan was married with six children. He had a long employment trajectory with experience in factories and various other jobs.
Anne	57	5 years approx.	Reception and cleaning.	Community centre.	1 year and 6 months	Anne was single. She trained as a bookkeeper but had no experience. Her background was retail. Anne suffered from a chronic illness.
Thomas	44	1 year.	Care assistance.	Health.	4 months	Thomas was single. He was a self-taught musician. He had had several different jobs.
Gwen	50	4 years.	Shop assistant.	Charity.	4 months	Gwen was single and had one child. Her background was retail.
Peter	35	1 year and three months approx.	Graphic design.	Local heritage.	5 months	Peter had a college degree. He was single. His background was arts.
Adam	45	1 year and 2 months approx.	Information desk, administration of organisation social media.	Local tourism.	10 months	Adam was married and had two children. He was from a European country. He had a diverse employment trajectory. His background was management, retail and tourism.
Sarah	29	10 years.	Shop assistant.	Charity.	5 months	Sarah was single. She had a short work experience in retail.
Claudia	37	4 years and 6 months.	Admin.	Community services.	1 year	Claudia was married with two children. Her background was admin work.
Violet	47	13 years.	Cleaning.	Culture.	5 months	Violet was single and had three children. She had worked in a factory.
Timothy	56	3 years (with intermittent seasonal work)	Ground keeping.	Community services.	2 years	Timothy was single. He was a baker. He had also experience in ground keeping and security jobs. He suffered from a chronic illness.
Geraldine	56	3 years.	Cleaning, housekeeping.	Community centre.	2 years	Geraldine was married. Her background was retail. She suffered from a chronic illness.
Andrea	38	2 years.	Befriending service.	Older citizens.	1 year	Andrea was divorced and had three children. Her background was hairdressing and secretarial work.
Mark	64	6 years approx.	Gardening.	Community common spaces.	4 years	Mark was married and had six children. His background was farming and ground keeping.

Rose	38	2 years approx.	IT instructor.	Older citizens.	1 year	Rose was single and had one child. She had a college degree. She was from a European country. Her background was social work and hospitality.
Henry	61	4 years approx.	Ground keeping and various tasks.	Community common spaces.	3 months	Henry was a widower with three children. His background was farming and related jobs.
Carol	64	5 years approx.	Administrator of website. Community newsletter	Community services.	11 months	Carol was married and had two children. Her background was admin work.
Leo	37	8 years.	Care assistance.	Health.	10 months	Leo was married with six children. His background was self-employed. He went back to education and studied care support. He was from a non-EU country.
Alan	60	2 years (with intermittent seasonal work)	Caretaker.	Community facilities.	3 years	Alan was married and had three children. His background was farming and ground keeping.
Ronan	61	5 years approx.	Environmental instructor.	Community.	4 months	Ronan was divorced with two children. He had a college degree. His background was education.
Celia	47	1 year.	Admin.	Community centre.	10 months	Celia was married and had two children. Her background was admin and secretarial.
Joan	37	2 years.	Youth worker.	Community centre.	2 years and 10 months	Joan was married with two children. She had a master's degree. Her background was youth work.
Joe	62	1 year and 6 months.	Reception.	Community centre.	6 years	Joe was married and had three children. His background was retail.
Michael	59	4 years approx. (with intermittent temporary jobs).	Maintenance of common spaces.	Community.	3 months	Michael was married and had 3 children. He was a trained carpenter. He had experience in various jobs.
Breda	28	1 year.	Admin.	Community facilities.	1 year	Breda was single and had two children. Her background was admin and management.
Luke	49	6 years.	Maintenance of common spaces.	Community.	6 months	Luke was single and had three children. His background was building sites.
Lucy	55	10 years approx.	Admin.	Community centre.	6 months	Lucy was single and had one child.

						<p>She had a college degree. Her background was youth work. She suffered from a chronic illness.</p>
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3.10 Conclusions

This chapter has explained the methodological decisions that gave form to the research process, which was guided by Constructivist Grounded Theory and Critical Realist ontology. The co-production of the data and the mutual influence between research participants and researcher were essential aspects of the research process. Through closely following the methods and outlook of Grounded Theory, the findings were generated through a process of grounded theorising that aimed at explaining the experience of placement in connection to the past and future of research participants.

The next three chapters present the main findings of the study. Chapter Four focuses on the experience of unemployment, located in the immediate past of research participants. Chapter Five offers a detailed exploration into the experience of placement, while Chapter Six focuses on the ways in which participants were deliberating their future after placement, in connection to their past and the inputs of the placement experience.

CHAPTER 4

CHANGING BY LOSING. THE EXPERIENCE OF LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT

4.1 Introduction

This first chapter of findings focuses on participants' experience of unemployment, which largely meant going through contextual and internal changes. Three intertwined processes emerged as unemployment unfolded - losing, becoming a welfare recipient, and dealing with new rules - composing the threefold character of participants' experience of unemployment. Facing contextual transformations meant that some of the essential foundations of their selves, such as identity, self-concept and self-esteem, were put to the test, and some participants found it particularly challenging. For instance, participants narrated a process of realising how their repertoires for searching and securing a job seemed ineffective while facing a conditional welfare system that demanded from them to search for work actively. By the time participants joined the schemes, as the next chapter will present, the three-fold experience of long-term unemployed had had a significant influence in their lives.

Every participant I interviewed wanted to explain how they "got there" in the first place, and they actively shared their explanations as to why they had become unemployed and why they have not found another job since. Explaining what was to blame for their unemployment was important, and often the event of the Great Recession acted as a trigger and a chronological marker to pinpoint when things started to change around them. The first section of this chapter presents participants' accounts about this matter; the following section focuses on the experience of unemployment and the de-structuring effects it had upon participants' daily lives. The subsequent two sections describe the interactions with the welfare system and with the labour market, focusing on participants' realisation of "changes" and so, having to deal with new rules and facing the demands that the welfare reform had strengthened upon welfare recipients. The last section takes a closer look at the overall experience of settling into unemployment and the unsuccessful job-search, and the unsettling effect this had over participants' inner sense of who they were and what they were capable of. As a whole, this chapter depicts participants' circumstances before their incorporation into the activation schemes.

4.2 Becoming unemployed

What the experience of long-term unemployment meant for research participants is better introduced when illuminating how the loss of work, in the first place, came to be. Unemployment, as many participants told me, had given them time to look back and reconsider events and decisions in their lives. Some, like Steven or Gwen, told me about the conversations they had with themselves, asking and answering why they had done things in their lives the way they did it. Participants dwelled at length on the decisions and circumstances that had shaped their work trajectories and, focusing on the aspects underlying the occurrence of unemployment; these were depicted as a constellation of personal decisions and contextual events.

Far from a linear image of routes into unemployment, participants' narrations depicted trajectories that were influenced by contextual aspects, such as the Great Recession, and by personal decisions based on family or personal priorities. Joan loved her work but was struggling to keep the balance between this and her family life; she was commuting every day and feeling guilty when her children asked her for more time. Despite economic pressures, Joan decided to give up her work, in the hope that she could, eventually, find something locally. Thomas had had different jobs which he described as "meaningless", which he took "to get by" while struggling with the stress this caused him. After quitting his last job, Thomas did not want to go back to the same situation and thought he could make his hobby profitable and get what he wanted: "create my own work situation". Without much guidance, he set up his own business, and a year later, this was hit by the recession. He was unemployed again. Joe, Celia and Steven had long-term jobs, something, they agreed, "does not exist anymore". Joe and Celia were made redundant during the height of the recession, while Steven gave up work because of his health.

As these brief insights into participants' trajectories portrayed, participants have taken and discarded jobs for various reasons and according to what they thought was best for them at that point in their lives, and according to the degree of freedom and restrictions they have had. Participants have also been taken by surprise by contextual events out of their control. Joan, Thomas, Joe, Celia, and the other participants, experienced long-term unemployment, but how they got there cannot be unified under a single route. As I learned from participants' accounts, becoming unemployed was not an isolated event; it was rather imbricated within a life-course trajectory that expresses the evolving negotiations with oneself, with others and the context, about priorities, needs and commitments.

Different motives, triggers and circumstances were argued by participants to explain the occurrence of unemployment at that point in their lives, as the next sections show. Understanding

how participants explained their “becoming unemployed” emerged as a relevant dimension to explore the agentic and structural aspects in the making of participants’ trajectories, in a specific time and place. Moreover, this dimension was relevant to understand the emotional baggage that participants carried when arriving at the experience of placement.

4.2.1 Blaming the Great Recession

A majority of participants lost their last job as a consequence of the Great Recession. Carol and Claudia, for example, were made redundant in 2008 and 2009, respectively, as part of the downsizing of the companies where they had worked for several years. Similarly, self-employed participants became officially unemployed after having to close down their businesses. Leo had established a successful food business in Dublin; he was even interviewed by a newspaper as a successful non-Irish entrepreneur, as he proudly showed me the piece of newspaper he had kept. Unfortunately, the economic crash made it impossible for his six-years-old business to survive. Similarly, Andrea had to close her business and Peter saw the end of his short-lived design business. Other participants had employment trajectories characterised by moving between more informal and seasonal jobs, which also meant low wages and little saving capacity. Henry, Alan, Mark and Dan, for example, moved between gardening, ground keeping and farming work. However, in the aftermath of the recession, they saw vacancies “drying up” up to a point when it was not possible to get a job.

A common trigger underlying these experiences was the economic downturn that hit Ireland in 2008, causing redundancy, termination of businesses and scarcity of jobs. These participants explained their redundancy or closing-down of their businesses as an event beyond their control, and independent from their aptitude and will to keep their businesses going, like Andrea, who kept her beauty parlour open for seven days a week, burning herself out, in an attempt to save the business. A widespread sense of crisis and fatalism was depicted by participants, who had seen not only theirs, but many other jobs and businesses collapsed. A scenario marked by “no jobs, nothing, nothing at all”, as Martin emphatically expressed, was the norm at that time, also affecting family and friends.

Compared to the other participants, this group had a more straightforward explanation as to how they became unemployed. Additionally, the high rates of unemployment during the crisis gave them a feeling of having been affected by something beyond their power. This stance was consistent with what has been conceptualised as a “narrative of crisis” (Knight, 2012; Jessop, 2012) to refer to the making of an experience of crisis, such as wars or economic crisis, into a narrative that frames personal catastrophes within those macro-events beyond individual control.

Interestingly, and echoing participants' accounts, a narrative of crisis creates a sense of collective tragedy, where blame is located outside the individual and directed towards political and economic institutions. Seeing the occurrence of unemployment not as "their" fault but as an event linked to the actions of institutions and, moreover, an event that affected many others, seemed to have given participants a sense of relief. The problematic knot for these participants, as for the large majority, would be the obstacles to regain a new job in a post-crisis context that gradually started to be rephrased as economic recovery. At this point, when "everybody but me" seemed to be finding a job, the collective sense of "we" (the many others losing jobs and businesses) that was predominant during the recession, started to disappear. This, as the chapter explores later, provoked internal dilemmas for some participants, who would gradually relocate blame *inwards*, feeling disjointed and left behind amidst a context that was changing rapidly.

4.2.2 Giving up work as a result of different arrangements of life priorities

For some participants, unemployment emerged intertwined with decisions they had made based on a prioritisation that situated other concerns, such as family and personal plans, in the first place. At some point in their family lives, some participants - mostly women - decided to give up work in favour of commitments related to parenthood or the care of an ill family member. These participants had regarded this decision as temporary. The decision of staying at home, which had been taken mostly by women, made it difficult for them to find their way back to the labour market. Paradoxically, the longer they stayed at home, because they could not find a job, the more the gap between them and the labour market widened.

Violet, Carol and Celia, for instance, decided to give up work to take care of their young children, while their husbands would work to support the family. Violet explained this agreement with her husband, who then assumed all financial responsibilities:

I gave up work when I had my middle child, she was only about four or five months when I gave up work, and we agreed I'd stay home, and my husband then would go to work and support us all. (Violet, 47)

Violet's marriage broke up a few years after this decision, and she became a lone parent. By then, however, she could not find a job and, when I interviewed her, she had been unemployed for thirteen years.

Gwen, a lone parent for many years, had to take care of her mother when she was diagnosed with cancer, while also being in charge of his young son at that time. Ronan and Adam, in agreement

with their partners, became stay-at-home fathers. Tamara gave up a stable and secure job to emigrate with her partner, who was unemployed and going through an emotionally difficult period. A constellation of complex considerations accompanied these decisions: the triad between the cost of childcare versus the cost of going to work versus doing meaningful work, as Adam explained to me in detail, powered his decision along with the security of his partner having a stable job. Or, in the case of Tamara, for whom her relationship and her ideal of family have meant the core of her life-plan.

Other participants, hit by the recession as the direct reason for their unemployment, such as Andrea and Leo, decided to take a different route as they, once unemployed, rearranged their priorities. Aware of the severity of the recession and assessing no possibilities of finding a job, Andrea decided to have her third child:

I know for social welfare you're supposed to be seeking full time work, but I decided then to try for another baby, it was the recession, there were very few people getting jobs, so, mmm, yes, that was when I decided then to try for a third child. (Andrea, 39)

Andrea's decision may seem counter-intuitive, considering the uncertainty that the extent of the recession posed at that time and the financial stress of extending the family. However, Andrea's scope of priorities was rooted in family, as she had previously quit a job when commuting from outside Dublin left her with very little time to take care of her two young children. Andrea decided then to open her own business, close to her house, hoping she could have the best of both worlds, but the downturn crashed her business. Priorities, nonetheless, evolve and change, and I will go back to Andrea in the next chapter, to explore her current motivation for going back to work.

Leo represented another example of rearrangement of priorities. After closing down his business, he suffered from depression and saw no point in trying to find a job at the peak of the crisis. Affected by a macro and a personal crisis, Leo reflected deeply on what he wanted to do, in the long-term, and decided not to search for jobs that were not available, but instead, he decided to go back to education to change career and reinvent himself.

4.2.3 Facing illness

Physical and mental health was another reason given by a smaller number of participants to explain how they became unemployed. A few participants recalled becoming unwell because of the conditions and nature of their jobs, up to a point when they felt unable to cope. Steven described very long shifts, physical work and a stressful environment that became unbearable:

When I decided to leave my job after nineteen years, that was just that (flicking fingers) and gone (...) I was...how do you put it...I just wasn't well at that time, so it just, it affected my head, "I'm going, and I can't get no more", and, it was a long time there and long hours, I was tired, and I had enough. (Steven, 42)

Geraldine represented an extreme case. She became ill after experiencing harassment in the workplace. Unable to quit her job for economic reasons, she tried to cope with the situation while being treated for anxiety with medication. Reaching her limit, Geraldine suffered an emotional breakdown that kept her in hospital for a few months.

Unrelated to working conditions, three participants had faced the diagnosis of a chronic physical illness which demanded different degrees of emotional and physical adaptation. While their illnesses did not make them, as deemed by the DEASP standards, "unfit for work", these participants struggled with the limitations of their new health situation. Anne, who defined herself as an active and sociable person, had a difficult time adapting to severe tinnitus and arthrosis. Among other things, she could not cope with noise, for example, loud music or hoovering; thus, she had to stop socialising in pubs and could not take on more cleaning jobs that involved hoovering. Lucy had arthritis and saw herself restricted in physical activities. Additionally, Anne and Lucy suffered from mental health issues they labelled as anxiety and depression. Timothy also struggled with mental health issues for many years, which he treated with medication and periodical medical appointments. Still, at times, these issues have kept him out of work.

Two participants could not be easily located in one of the three categories depicted above since they had faced more specific difficulties that interplayed with their unemployment. Michael had been in prison for two years and, after his release, he found it very difficult to find a job, besides some personal problems that took much of his energy. He had attempted self-employment endeavours with little success. Luke, on the other hand, had been homeless and sleeping rough for several years, working sporadically in building sites. When I interviewed him, he had recently moved to a house and was trying to adapt to this new situation.

This brief exploration portrayed the occurrence of unemployment in participants' lives interwoven with a combination of contextual and personal circumstances. While some participants had made peace through a narrative of crisis that freed them from individual blame, others took ownership of the meaning that their prioritisation had for them at that specific time. More problematic was the attribution of meanings by those affected by illness, since they were going through a more profound process of coming to terms with the restrictions imposed by it.

The next section focuses on the experience of losing, which emerged as the first dimension of the experience of unemployment.

4.3 Losing what work gives

Throughout the data, participants' experience of long-term unemployment construed as *losing* emerged as the first and more prevalent concept to define this experience. The *experience of losing* integrated the *loss of doing*, the *loss of social interactions*, and the *loss of income and autonomy*. These losses emerged from the experience of "not having a job", and they mobilised disruptions and changes in aspects as varied as the weekly budget, daily routine and self-concept. The experience of losing deepened as time went on and unemployment settled into participants' lives, affecting their interactions with themselves and their context. Not all participants would mourn these losses with the same intensity. For example, participants with a stronger attachment to work as the structuring point of their identities would see their personal and social identities much challenged.

The following sub-sections explore the findings regarding the different dimensions of the experience of losing.

4.3.1 Losing doing: inside *versus* outside and doing *versus* nothing

For those participants who had been systematically working and faced redundancy, the most instant and shocking loss was the loss of activity. The phrasing of the everyday experience of unemployment as "doing nothing" and "being stuck inside" acquired an intriguing presence across participants' accounts, especially among older men. Doing nothing was despised and dreaded by men who identified themselves as breadwinners and doers. Dan, Jack, Mark, Henry and Alan started working at a very young age, formed large families and their wives did not engage in paid work. They described their "doing nothing" as doing domestic work and being inside the house longer than usual. Henry would tell me that he was doing "*things that the ladies should be doing*", and Dan would make jokes about hoovering and making beds. Being inside was an asphyxiating and uncomfortable situation for those men who were used to working "outside" doing ground keeping, farming work, building or any kind of manual work available. As Alan and Dan expressed, doing nothing incited boredom and the need of keeping busy:

I don't like it, very boring, just cleaning, cutting my lawn at home and doing a little bit of painting, keep my mind...not the television, no, no, clean the gutters (...) if I had to go inside make beds, mmm, I do that. (Alan, 60)

Just going around the house, looking after the kids...Boring, boring yeah, just wanted to go and do something. (Dan, 60)

Steven, who was in his mid-forties and single, was used to doing things for himself, such as cooking or cleaning, but like the older men, he was also used to working outside and keeping busy. He experienced the loss of activity with discomfort:

I'd see myself sitting watching telly all day and rubbish, doing nothing, doing nothing (...) I used to work all day, all night, all week, you know, and suddenly nothing. (Steven, 42)

Among these men over 50 (and Steven), very few adopted a more positive approach to the loss of doing. They complained, told anecdotes about domestic work, made it clear they were not happy and, according to their stories, their wives dreaded their presence “inside” interfering with the balance at home. Joe, who was 61, was one of the very few who adopted a different approach to being “inside”, while his wife – the only among this group - was working “outside”. Joe tried to keep a routine and dedicated daily to a manual hobby that kept him occupied as a way of maintaining equilibrium:

I became the house husband (laughs) (...) the routine didn't change because I felt that I was working in the house now, while she was out at work, and as well as that, with the hobbies I have I was doing an awful lot of woodcarving, woodturning and that type of thing, and it gave me more time to do that (...) I used to get up in the morning, every morning at, about ten to seven, quarter to seven to start work, to this day I still get up at quarter to seven, you know, so it didn't, it didn't put me out of sync because I always believed...by occupying yourself you occupy the brain. (Joe, 61)

Joe displayed self-discipline and managed to occupy his day and feel content about it. The loss of routine that derived from the loss of a systematic activity proved arduous for those who needed the structure of routine. For Celia, who identified herself as a structured person, this loss was met with a feeling of distress and discontent:

To be at home all day and not to be used at being at home, because when you're working you're more structured, you have a routine, everybody knows what they're doing, you know, and especially when you have older children, because they're, well, they're able to look after themselves in a way. (Celia, 47)

The daily routine structured around work seemed to act as the backbone of a constant quotidian experience where, as Celia put it, everybody knew what they were doing. Then, the disjuncting effect of the lost routine altered not only the organisation but the experience of time. Time was no longer measured by the clock but became long blocks of hours to be endured, making days slow and heavy, as Rose described:

But the worst part is for the...mmm...is wake up in the morning and you have no work, that's the worst part, the day is so long, so long. (Rose, 38)

Women with children experienced the loss of doing differently, and they talked about filling their days with domestic and care responsibilities as “business as usual” since these tasks were their responsibility regardless of their employment status. They would, nonetheless, point out the limits of filling a routine around domestic tasks, especially when having older children. Among them, I found women like Celia and Claudia, who lost their jobs in the recession; and others, like Gwen and Violet, who were lone mothers and had initially decided to stay at home for a short period. All women in this group felt “fed up” with being inside, as Violet put it. Interestingly, Adam, who had been a stay-at-home father for nearly two years, shared a similar feeling.

Paradoxically, the lack of purposive doing “inside” the house, as experienced by these women, fuelled their desire of getting a job. Despite having “things” to do, and, accordingly, these women did not speak of “doing nothing”, these tasks had become routine and did not demand the “full” use of their skills. They felt unchallenged and increasingly uneasy, as Celia expressed:

I couldn't sit all morning and watch TV because I'm not used to it, so I found it very, very difficult, I found...Oh my God, at times I felt I was depressed (...) I felt I was brain-dead because my mind wasn't active, when you're active you're more alert of what's going on in the world and society and, like, I wouldn't even be interested in watching the news when I wasn't working. (Celia, 47)

Andrea highlighted the temporary nature of mothers “being needed” inside the house, and how as children grew older, their skills would erode:

You can't do that forever, your children will eventually grow up and then, what? You're just good at being a stay at home person when your children are old enough. (Andrea, 39)

In comparison, most male participants presented themselves as active breadwinners who “loved” being outside and expressed more intense feelings about losing doing. Since they resembled a more traditional masculine identity, these men’s accounts expressed that, by being out of work - inside, doing nothing - they were losing a key source of this identity. Similarly, most women with children seemed to have a strong identification as mothers since, for instance, many had decided to give up work to take care of young children. Thus, the cultural assumptions about gender and work were exerting a strong influence upon these participants’ experiences of losing activity and tended to resemble more traditional arrangements regarding the responsibilities of care, inside and outside the home.

The loss of doing construed as a loss had an interesting exception. Thomas was the only participant who did not mourn the loss of doing. Thomas’ work experiences showed the other side of the coin, meaning how the “doing” can be damaging, as it was for him. Thomas described his past job, as a chip-tester, as aimless and mind-numbing:

It was long days, you know, and long nights as well, you know, twelve-hour shifts, so, I mean you didn't, the machine did all the work, and you were just sitting there for twelve hours so...it messes with your head. (Thomas, 44)

Thomas’s dream was to be his own boss. Despite the boredom or loneliness, Thomas did not experience the loss of doing as undesirable but as a benefit:

To be honest, it was okay...no, again, there was no, there was no stress you know, I was, like, I didn't have to, you know, get up early in the morning to report for work to do 8, 12 whatever hours in a place and, come home and that's it, that's your life, you know what I mean, it wasn't stressful, it was just boring at times and kind of lonely because you're not meeting people, but I was okay. (Thomas, 44)

Participants with health problems, on the other hand, spoke of the loss of activity as something they missed, but that was necessary for them to get better. These participants, such as Anne, Lucy or Steven, had left their last jobs amidst a health crisis.

The loss of doing emerged throughout participants' narratives as the more immediate dimension of the experience of losing. Except for Thomas, participants experienced the absence of the systematic activity provided by a job as a loss. While most men focused on doing nothing and being inside, women with children were occupied but felt unchallenged.

4.3.2 Losing social interactions

As most participants expressed, the experience of unemployment took place very much "inside", which incited a gradual reduction of social interactions. Not only relationships with co-workers would vanish as days went on, but one's presence in society seemed to go unnoticed when not engaged in employment. This, again, could be read through the distinction outside / inside. Violet expressed how her world grew smaller, and interactions with the "outside" became dependent on her children's routine and needs. At the same time, not having help or money to arrange alternative childcare made it impossible for her to go out:

I was fed up of being at home because I didn't see anybody from one end of the day to the next, just the kids when you're going up and down to the school that was it (...) Well, a few times I did [considering joining a volunteer group], but then there was nobody to mind the kids so it wouldn't be worthwhile going out for something and having to pay a babysitter. (Violet, 47)

Mark and Claudia expressed their frustration and the growing feeling of isolation, using both the metaphor of the walls to state the limits of their world. In Claudia's case, this experience had a damaging effect on her mental health, which echoed other participants' feelings. "Being inside" appeared here complementing its presence in the experience of *losing doing*, to express isolation and detachment from the social world, as Mark and Claudia narrated:

You crack up in the house, you're talking to yourself, you're talking to the walls (...) what am I gonna do? and that, and no one answered me [laughing]. (Mark, 64)

You get depressed in the house all the time, the walls closing in on you, so then up to the doctor, I was on anti-depressants then for those couple of years as well, not right in the start, but say maybe close to a year in, it was pretty bleak. (Claudia, 37)

Jack touched another aspect of losing social interactions, that put men in a more confined situation because of cultural norms, of a more traditional type, that saw men as less social or collective than women:

...if you're a man and you're unemployed, there is very few other men to talk to, and if you talk to a woman you're having an affair or that kind of crack, whereas if you're a woman, it's straightforward, it's a social thing, and they can go out and have a coffee or whatever, but if you're a man you're at home just on your own and then...so it's, it's different...yeah it's more lonely. (Jack, 54)

Some participants expressed having little contact with family members and others preferred not to ask for help. These aspects impacted upon the feeling of isolation during unemployment. For example, Claudia expressed that despite feeling depressed and overwhelmed by financial responsibilities, she never asked her parents or siblings for help; or, in the quote above, Violet mentioned the lack of close networks to help her with the care of her children. Some, such as Claudia and Tamara, did not want to upset their families because they were not in a position to help (mostly related to financial help); on the other hand, some participants had sporadic contact with family members, or no contact at all. In the case of older participants, such as Mark, Aidan or Carol, the opposite situation arose, as they felt they were the ones having the responsibility of providing emotional or financial support to their adult children (e.g. Carol babysitting her grandchildren daily, Aidan and Mark having adult children living with them) and they would not ask for help. Peter was one of the very few participants that relied on family support when he needed accommodation after losing his job.

The loss of income, as the next sub-section presents, involved drastic changes for participants.

4.3.3 Losing what income-money gives: losing security and losing autonomy

The loss of a permanent income meant the loss of the material and subjective security that this brings. Most participants had to introduce rapid changes to their lifestyle, such as moving to more affordable accommodation, selling the car, not taking holidays abroad or changing dietary habits. Steven expressed this “downsizing” and drastic change in his life conditions:

When I was employed, I had a car, I was renting a house on my own, no problem, I had money, if I needed money, I was earning good money, [laughs], then, to go suddenly from that to no car, no house, now a room, not a house, a room! (Steven, 42)

Especially those participants who provided the household income, because they were lone parents or their partners did not work, experienced the constant worry of this responsibility as a heavy burden. In most cases, participants had not been able to save money when they were working, mainly because their income was not enough, or because they did not consider making provisions

for the future. The receipt of welfare allowances (Jobseekers' Allowance in all cases, and additional ones in some cases, such as Child Benefit) acted, somehow, as a safety net that prevented participants from falling into a situation of deprivation. However, as Mark stated, the welfare allowance was not enough, and he felt constantly worried:

It affected me bad, big time, because I was struggling, because...for the money, it's very hard to live on the 157 a week. (Mark, 64).

Having young children added extra pressure, especially for lone parents, like Gwen and Violet, who put their children's needs first, as they expressed:

...(the) downs (of being unemployed) are not having enough money to do what you want to do, or to, mmm, support your child the way you'd like to do in different ways, like, you know, when his friends are going out and say, well, there is extra money for you to have when you're going out with your friends, or birthdays that come up, and you can't buy what you know he wants you to buy, even though he understands he's still a kid. (Gwen, 50)

(...) budgeting your money, you know, from one end of the week to the next, what the kids wanted to do, and the school activities, you get their priorities first before yourself. (Violet, 47)

Introducing changes to adapt to the restricted budget sometimes meant big changes, as Peter's situation illustrated. Coming from a small village, living in Dublin was an important achievement. Renting an apartment in Dublin was, Peter told me, something he had dreamed of, and living there helped him in the pursuit of his art career. However, after losing his job and not being able to find a new one, he had to move back to his parent's house. Despite the frustration that this move had caused him, Peter framed this "personal tragedy" in the collective "we" of the narrative of the housing crisis affecting many people of his age:

I mean, there is obviously a little bit of, a little...twitch when you think "oh, I'm living with my parents", but then a lot of people are living with their parents these days, 'cos it's crazy, the rents, crazy. (Peter, 35)

Lucy had to sell her car, which left her in a complicated situation for someone who lived in a rural area poorly served by public transport. Sarah had planned to emigrate to the United States, which was her long-cherished dream, and counted on her job to save money; however, losing her

income, as she said, “*killed my dream*”. Income-money provides more than the spending-power that money holds. The reduction of the money available was strongly experienced as the *loss of autonomy and choice*, as Gwen expressed, “*to do what I want and when I want it*”. These restrictions, as Gwen clearly articulated, affected different aspects of one’s life that provide fulfilment:

You look at your friends, and they’re going out and there they’re buying new clothes, they’re buying new cars and things, and you’re lucky you’re going to the second-hand shop to get second-hand clothes, and that’s not the way you used to, like, you used to be able to go and buy whatever you wanted, or, I went to get my hair done whenever I wanted, when now it’s the one-euro colouring deal that I’m putting in my hair! (...) I can’t do what I want to do, even though I can do my own hair and cut my own hair, blow, colour it up by myself, it’s just the fact that I can’t go. (Gwen, 50)

As Gwen so openly expressed, the core of her complaint was not about the clothes or whether she got her hair done in the hairdresser or at home, but what bothered her was *not having the option*, it was feeling constrained despite her wishes, it was losing something that had provided her with autonomy and contentment when she was able to afford it with her wages. These, and other changes to her lifestyle, were for Gwen restrictions and sacrifices.

Participants’ worries and frustrations related to the loss of income took a different form through the experience of *becoming a welfare recipient*, since the replacement of income-money by welfare-money brought a whole new set of restrictions to participants’ sense of autonomy.

4.4 Becoming a welfare recipient

Ultimately I’m glad we have that system because it benefits me, mmm, it doesn’t benefit everyone, you know, but as I said, I’ve been to places in the world where nothing like that exists, and I wonder how life would be like there, you know, so, I do recognise we’re very lucky to have it. (Adam, 45)

Indeed, as Adam reflected, the Irish welfare system provides economic support for the unemployed, a measure which - in principle - prevents them from facing severe deprivation. Nonetheless, the conditions of the exchange that this help involves for recipients is far from idyllic. As Chapter Two depicted, the Irish welfare system has undergone reforms which increased the level of conditionality attached to claiming Jobseekers’ Allowance. Thus, receiving

welfare benefits meant for participants *becoming a welfare recipient* which is the second dimension of the three-fold experience of unemployment.

As welfare recipients, participants were requested to comply with specific conditions, such as actively seeking for work, being available to accept jobs offers, and attending appointments and workshops as scheduled by their welfare officer. Participants had problematic feelings towards these demands, and many struggled to make sense of these new rules and the pressure. Equally relevant throughout participants' narrations, becoming a welfare recipient meant being labelled and carrying specific expectations and obligations upon themselves (e.g. being deserving, showing motivation and will to work). Becoming a welfare recipient meant receiving financial support; but it also meant being given a label and all that came with it: socially produced beliefs about the character and worth of welfare recipients. Then, seeing oneself and being seen as a welfare recipient involved dealing with the weight of this label. Many participants dealt with this mostly negative stereotype by setting themselves apart and highlighting their will to work. In contrast, others found it very difficult to deal with it and experienced feelings of shame.

These problematic knots for participants, namely making sense of the rules and pressure, and the ways of dealing with the stereotype, are explored in the following sub-sections.

4.4.1 Making sense of the rules and feeling controlled

The mechanics of the relationship and interactions between the welfare recipient and what most participants called “social welfare” (to denote equally the physical place, whom they spoke to, and the overall system), consisted of attending appointments with a welfare officer as often as requested by the officer, showing material evidence of their job search, and attending the workshops or job fairs they were sent to. These encounters took place in the local Intreo office. As stipulated by Pathways to Work, those not complying with these rules risk sanctions (e.g. reduction of welfare allowance). These mechanics and rules were criticised by participants, who described them as tedious, having unclear objectives and, at the end of the day, having little effect on their situation.

As consistently expressed by participants, the more problematic aspects of being a welfare recipient within a logic of conditionality, had to do with making sense of the rules, in other words, seeing a causal connection between compliance and results, feeling pressurised and controlled, and feeling overlooked in their singularity and preferences. In a few words, and as Bob explained, it meant that “*they put you in a yes or yes situation*”, which was experienced by participants with different degrees of conformity and resistance. Bob explains this dynamic:

If you're on social benefits, it'll affect your payments if you don't go to an interview, so that's basically it, they put you on a yes or yes situation, they put pressure on you to go to, it says is not compulsory, but it is really. (Bob, 43)

Very few participants, such as Steven, conformed with the rules without explicitly complaining about them. In Steven's view, the exchange was fair:

The condition for the jobseekers is that you have to look for work, that's a condition, that's proper (...) when I go to my case officer, I have to show him my efforts looking for work, I emailed here, I emailed there, I made contact with such a such, I have everything written down. (Steven, 42)

The large majority of participants, however, had far more negative comments, describing a dynamic of encounters with social welfare that caused frustration and upsetting feelings. As Celia and Adam expressed, echoing other participants, the format and the content of the appointments were pointless, inefficacious and - a recurrent phrase - "a waste of time":

You have to go to the social welfare office every month or every whatever, and sit in the social welfare behind a computer, I can do that at home...I just felt...it was all time wasted, and I was just so angry. (Celia, 47)

They weren't really of any use to me, I consider myself reasonably intelligent, mmm, my CV isn't bad, I kind of know what I'm doing in terms of looking for work and...so those sorts of interviews weren't helping me as such. (Adam, 45)

The imprecision of the purpose of the monitoring appointments, as Celia pointed out above, was a common complaint, as Sarah also expressed "you're going in and you're already looking for a job at home". This experience resembled what Chapter Two exposed regarding the disciplining character of compulsory job search requirements, which focuses on the behaviour and work-ethic of welfare recipients; finding a job becomes secondary. These negative feelings would build up further, as the job search proved unsuccessful and draining, as the next section explores.

Sarah, who had been previously referred to JobPath¹⁰ (activation scheme focused on intense job search) and completed 52-weeks of monitored job search, summarised her understanding of the functioning of the system:

¹⁰ A number of research participants had been referred to JobPath, which is known for using harsh measures to pressurise participants to find any job available. Using her black humour, Sarah told me that she thought JobPath was

They signed me with what they like calling a job-seeking assistant, who no really gives a shit (...) they were just trying to get people out as quickly as they came in. (Sarah, 29)

Claudia recalled having had high expectations of the help she could get from the appointments monitoring her job search, but soon she felt let down:

It was really bad, no, so, you have to go in and fill in all your forms, and say you're gonna come back every two weeks, and they're gonna look for jobs, they're gonna find you a job, that they're gonna get you into courses and everything, but that never happened...and then I started calling every two weeks and then turned into once a month, and you're really going in to sign your name and then leave again, so really nothing happened for the year. (Claudia, 37)

Lucy exemplified the rigidity of the system and the will to impose a “one-size-fits-all” solution. She saw no flexibility regarding her health problems, which limited the type of jobs and the hours per week she felt able for, leaving her in a very difficult situation as she could be seen breaching compliance and risking sanctions:

I also tried to claim disability, but I couldn't because I didn't qualify for it, so it was being stuck in that place where social welfare was telling me that I was gonna have my money stopped, but also, I knew physically I couldn't work full time so, mmm, that was frustrating. (Lucy, 55)

Tamara experienced an unreasonable situation when having to comply with the job search requirement while being pregnant:

I had to be there every two weeks at the same time, and I had to show them a list of all these places I'd been applying to, and I had to give them the responses, and that was draining, because when I was pregnant, I wasn't well, I couldn't, like, the last thing I could do was apply for ten jobs a week! (...) it brought a lot of stress, and then jobs wouldn't take me on because I was pregnant! (Tamara, 28)

very smart, because they had their office right beside the river, so people coming after their meetings could go straightaway and throw themselves into the river. Accounting for participants' experiences on JobPath goes beyond the scope of the study. However, Sarah's anecdotal account synthesises well the tone of the experiences narrated by research participants who did time on this scheme, experiences that echo what has been researched elsewhere (e.g. Boland and Griffin, 2016b; WUERC, 2018; Finn, 2019).

Becoming a welfare recipient meant realising that one was expected to be accommodating and to let oneself be conducted and steered, regardless of one's wishes and circumstances. The predominant feeling of "being pushed" was well illustrated by Thomas:

They kind of push you into a situation where you don't wanna be (...) they don't really help you, is kind of pushing you into directions where you don't wanna go, it's not you, you know what I mean (...) I did it a lot of times (apply to jobs) to comply with the rules of being on social welfare but...(...) For me it's a waste of time, you know what I mean, doing these interviews and showing that you've applied for jobs and stuff like that but it's, it's a waste of time because they're not, they don't really wanna know you, mmm...it's like "just look for jobs and show us what you've been doing", that's it, it's a waste of time (...) I don't wanna be under pressure to get into something which I know I won't care about. (Thomas, 44)

Thomas' account gave voice to important aspects also mentioned by other participants. He addressed the constant tension of being in a "yes or yes" situation, not a dialogue where he could give his views, but a matter of giving evidence of the job search. Thomas also addressed the perceived disconnection between, on the one hand, who he was and what he wanted, and, on the other hand, how he was seen - or not seen - by social welfare. Here, he recalled being seen as one more version of a static profile. "*It is not you*", "*they don't really wanna know you*", "*I know I won't care about*": Thomas' words expressed the sense of a self that struggled to remain unified - not fragmented by the external demands - a self that held an awareness about his singularity and resisted being standardised. In the next chapter, I will go back to the experience of the welfare recipient in the light of the experience of placement.

The next section presents another dimension of being a welfare recipient, represented by the stereotype that accompanied it.

4.4.2 Dealing with the stereotype

Welfare-money was attached to problematic meanings regarding the deservingness of the recipient and their contribution to society. While the well-established notion of the centrality of work in society defines the contributing role of a worker and the wage as part of the exchange, the loss of this material and symbolic relationship with society meant for participants having to endure the stigma attached to those receiving welfare assistance. Participants expressed different levels of discomfort with the idea of being seen as such and displayed two ways of dealing with

the stereotype: by actively setting themselves apart; in contrast, others struggled to deal with it emotionally.

Being a welfare recipient was a public form of appearing in society, which interacted problematically with participants' personal and social identities. Most participants actively expressed opinions and judgements to set themselves apart by expressing negative comments about "other" welfare recipients. Steven, for instance, criticised the "sense of entitlement" some recipients felt, somehow blocking the "proper" feeling of gratitude pointed out by Adam earlier:

Nowadays young people, unfortunately, they don't want to work (...) I think it's a sense of entitlement, that they've gone on the dole and that they stay on the dole. (Steven, 42)

Alan, similarly, criticised the lack of will to work and perceived laziness, while establishing that he acted differently:

There are people out there, they don't want to do anything, just sit at home and tic, tic, tic, play games and drink in the pubs and, you know, at least I'm doing something, you know. (Alan, 60)

Both Steven's and Alan's comments were common, especially among older men. Gwen referred to well-known television programmes exposing the lives of the "welfare recipient", and so she spoke as a member of the audience looking "at them" shocked by their lifestyle:

I remember watching programmes about...are you still on the dole and things like that, and you look at them and you're looking at their houses (...) they have their dole money, and they're spending it in this, and the other, and you kind of go "hang on, they got the dole money yesterday but they can't afford to put twenty pound into their ESB? But yet they can go out and buy a games console?" (Gwen, 50)

These participants illustrated a stance that set them apart: they were talking about other people; the abuser of the system and the undeserving was "the other"; it was not them. The figure of the welfare recipient was *othered* when this was portraying a negative type from whom participants wanted to detach. Contrastingly, the positive version would be the active one, the welfare recipient who wanted to work and was doing something for others, as the next chapter notes.

More subtly, Peter expressed his reluctance to tell people about his participation in the scheme and rephrased it in a way that appeared as paid work. He spoke of "*things you hear*", or, "*there*

is something there” to refer to the notions, he preferred to leave unspoken, about welfare recipients:

Sometimes when people ask me what I'm doing, I don't say "I'm on Tús", I'd say "Oh, I'm working with the [organisation] and I'm designing some stuff for them", so, I know that obviously there is something there, that I'm sort of...conscious (Peter, 35)

In contrast, a smaller number of participants were emotionally affected by the inescapable reality of being a welfare recipient: they needed the welfare-money, yet they felt undeserving and ashamed, bringing the negative stereotype upon themselves. Claudia dwelled largely upon her feelings; she was in her mid-thirties, and by the time she started placement she had been unemployed for nearly six years:

It was pretty miserable, you feel like...it's so horrible having to go down to your local social welfare office, and there would be queues over there, and you think everyone is looking at you, you have to go nearly half in disguise, you know, to hood up and, it was horrible having to go in, and you feel you're scamming them in some way and, it's just how you feel, like, you're getting something that you don't deserve...I hated going down every month to sign on, it was a big deal, like, I wouldn't probably sleep the night before, "oh gee, I have to go again", and everyone would be looking at you and knowing, but there were so many of us in the same boat. (Claudia, 37)

As unemployment lengthened, Claudia's feelings of shame made her avoid social interactions, confining herself to the house, where she could not be seen. Claudia felt underserving because she was not a contributor, a producer, like the people who were working:

I didn't really wanna be around the family and maybe extended family at that stage, because you're not in the same position as them, it's like their tax money is paying for you, and you just feel like a fraud kind of. (Claudia, 37)

What seemed to be happening, at the deep level of self and identity, was a process of sense-making, adjustment and coming to terms with becoming unemployed and a welfare recipient. Both experiences entailed facing ways of *being seen* and *seeing oneself*, other than as a worker. For many participants, becoming a welfare recipient introduced a *discontinuity* in their trajectories that challenged their inner sense of who they were - for themselves and others - since the label of welfare recipient was a very public one. Ronan, for example, used all his savings before signing-on for welfare benefits; as he told me, after decades of working as a well-educated professional,

he was conscious of how people would see him and tried to manage his finances by cutting down expenses the more he could; however, as his job search produced no results, he had to use this last resort.

Other aspects of this dimension, very much tied to the notion of contributing to society, came to light when participants analysed their experience of placement in a not-for-profit organisation and the adoption of a new, more positive, temporary identity as a volunteer-like person. Chapter Five will explore this aspect.

4.5 Job seeking: dealing with new rules

Participants had foreseen unemployment as a temporary situation; they imagined it would not be too difficult to find a new job, based on previous experiences for those who had been unemployed before. However, as I learned from participants, finding a job, this time, proved very challenging. The reasons that participants gave to themselves to explain this difficulty were very much related to their understanding of the post-recession context, which involved having a strong sense that things were changing around them and, somehow, without them. The notion of *dealing with new rules* captured this process.

“Why is that I cannot get a job?” “Is it me? Am I the problem?” Interviewees actively brought their questions into the conversation, which very much reflected their internal conversations, and I realised that there was a common feeling of perplexity, of finding things changing and struggling to fit in. What exactly was happening at the level of internal deliberations? How were participants reading what was taking form before their eyes: the more they failed to find a job the longer-term unemployed they became. From there, the notion of *dealing with new rules* emerged as the third dimension of the three-fold experience of long-term unemployment, along with the experience of *losing* and *becoming a welfare recipient*, reviewed in the previous sections.

The notion of dealing with new rules gained ground as participants drew distinctions between a “before” and “now” when talking about the Irish labour market, marked by the event of the recession. Almost all participants had experienced, at different moments in their lives, periods out of work. “Before”, however, obtaining a job was somehow easier and straightforward. The rules outlining the tasks of getting a job were perceived as clearer and adjustable to one’s circumstances; people knew what to expect and what was expected from them. “Now”, participants have been encountering what they signified as “new rules” of the job search process

and recruitment, which also meant that their own profile and skills-set was being assessed differently.

Participants identified these new rules deriving from the labour market; at the same time, they saw themselves, “now”, the same as they were “before”, in terms of what they had to offer to a labour market with changing preferences and conditions. The match, on the one hand, between their profile and the prospective worker, as they saw it, preferred by the labour market (e.g. younger, more educated, more experienced) and, on the other hand, the widespread use of the CV, job search websites and online applications, as ways of doing the job search, comprised much of the difficulties that most participants faced. Additionally, the new rules for welfare recipients asked them to search for work actively and to do it through specific mechanisms that were to be monitored, such as creating online accounts and using specific job search websites.

4.6.1 Searching through informal networks: “who you know” versus the CV

Younger and older participants recalled having obtained most, if not all, of their previous jobs through acquaintances and word-of-mouth search. Especially in the context of small towns and rural villages, where most participants were based, “who you knew and who knew you” was the key to success, which mattered more than qualifications. Gwen summarised this very well:

The job in the travel agency, my dad knew the manager in there, and they were looking for somebody at that time, I went and I was interviewed, and I got the job, and the same with the electrical company, my dad again knew one of the people that worked in there...so, at that particular time was who you knew, not what you knew or what you were qualified, it was who you knew, it was fantastic! Really was. (Gwen, 50)

After finishing school, and with no plans for further education, Violet told me what she did to get her first job:

I was staying at home for a few weeks, and then, I just picked up the phone and rang [a local food factory] and I was told to come in that evening, so that's how I got my first job, I didn't have any interviews, I just came straight in and started work straight away. (Violet, 47)

Mark and Alan recalled similar experiences of “just” approaching the right person, who would have known them or heard about them through common acquaintances. These rules could be regarded as tacit and imbricated within cultural norms tied to the functioning of local economies.

More likely, formal and structured systems of recruitment were, indeed, in place during the decades depicted by participants as “before”; nonetheless, they were able to navigate the labour market through their face-to-face, no-CV-needed strategies. This was their repertoire, especially for men working in manual and farming jobs, and it worked for them. Nonetheless, “now”, they had to walk a long and unknown route: writing their first CV and searching through formal channels, as the welfare rules asked them to. Now, participants saw the job search activity more formal and structured by a set of recruitment and hiring strategies that, in the past, were not as widespread and standardised as they were now. This did not mean that these procedures were not used by businesses before, but, as participants’ narrations showed, jobseekers had a wider margin of action to play within their own rules and, still, succeed.

The CV replaced the “who you know”; Gwen summarised this change by saying: “*nowadays, it is not who you know anymore*”. It was intriguing how much participants dwelled on the topic of the CV, for instance, to complain about its use or to express fear and anxiety for how it depicted them as prospective workers. The CV and job interviews were described by participants as devices whose crafting needed a level of expertise that was not intuitive.

Dan, 61, and Jack, 54, wrote their first CV when their welfare officers asked them to; previously, they had obtained jobs mostly through word-of-mouth. Dan and Jack recalled asking their children for help as they did not know how to approach the task. Interestingly, younger participants also felt insecure and did not know how to deal with the CV, like Tamara, who was 28 years old:

One of my friends, he’s great at putting CVs together, so he helped me with my CV (...) it’s because it changed since when I first did it in the school, you know, little changes have come in since then, so, cover letters, things like that, I never had to do it (...) and personal profile, and all these new little things, I know they’re little things, but for me they’re big because I’ve never done them before. (Tamara, 28)

Steven, who had spent most of his working life in the same job, had no experience dealing with the CV or job interviews:

I’m not great at interviews, I’ve never done any interviews, my two jobs I got, one for 19, I was actually there for 19 years... it was just can you do this, can you do that, yes, fair enough, start Monday, and I was there for 19 years. (Steven, 42)

Participants, as welfare recipients, were told to use specific job search websites. The job search happened now in a virtual space, replacing the walk around town asking if something was available, as Dan and Mark told me. Mary, a CE supervisor, told me about the dilemma they faced as supervisors, since they were asked to make sure participants were systematically using the websites promoted by Intreo. The dilemma posed by Mary meant dealing with scheme participants whom she knew had basic or no IT skills and who, moreover, were sceptical about the online job search. Some participants told me that they had difficulties reading and writing, and some were not familiar with computers.

Doing the job search as most used to do it before did not seem a feasible option, since participants were expected to go online; still, some continued to use their “old school” strategies, like Sarah and Mark, both from different generations:

Old school, dropping CV around town, all around, and I went to a few of the other areas.
(Sarah, 29)

I just go in, I'm not in the computer (...) I used to go to these places, is there any work? No, no work, I went all around, no work, went straight and said “is there any work?”, “is there any work?”, and they said “no work, no employment here”, you know what I mean...now, I had to do that because the social welfare, they were on my back. (Mark, 64)

Other participants expressed concerns about the content of their CV and how this made them look. The CV represented much more than the paper itself; it was a materialisation of who they were as prospective candidates. Some, such as Thomas or Adam, disliked the idea of being defined by a static CV that did not capture their evolving aspirations; others, like Violet, were too conscious of their gaps and how “little” they had to fill in their CV. Others, such as the men over 50, were suspicious about the efficacy of the CV, after long trajectories having never needed one. Participants knew that the CV was an evaluative device, and they reacted to that. The CV, then, was problematic in terms of its efficacy, but mostly in terms of its content and its potential ability to highlight weak aspects. In that regard, participants identified three “barriers” limiting their chances as jobseekers: experience, qualifications and age. These are revised in the next two sections.

4.6.2. Experience and qualifications as barriers

Participants described a labour market which favoured jobseekers with degrees and formal qualifications, while many saw themselves coming from a time when qualifications were not considered a must to obtain a job. Interestingly, not a small number of participants - from different ages and backgrounds - were early school leavers and had managed an effective integration into the labour market. Among the early school leavers, as Chapter Six will explore, many had decided and chosen not to pursue further education, while others had been limited by financial problems. In the current labour market scenario, nonetheless, many of these participants felt at a disadvantage. Gwen explained this situation from her own experience:

It's very different, very different, because when I left school, I left school when I was fifteen and at that time you could walk into any job, you didn't need to have qualifications, it was so much easier, these days now they're looking for your Leaving Cert, what courses you've done, whether you went to college or not, all these type of things. (Gwen, 50)

Sarah identified a chronological marker to signal the moment, in her view, when degrees started to be highly valued by employers:

Probably it changed around two thousand...and five maybe, where college degrees were all up. (Sarah, 29)

Michael spoke of qualifications as a “piece of paper” and observed how employers were taking their recruitment decisions based on this criterion:

As times goes by it becomes more and more important, especially now in Ireland they do like to see those piece of paper (...) they say yes we take you because you've got this bit of paper, and we don't want you because, you know what I mean, they can pick and choose who they employ, so the more bits of papers you've got the more likely, the higher the chances to get in the job. (Michael, 59)

Michael had taught himself computer programming but did not have a certificate; he was conscious that employers would not recognise this skill without the “piece of paper”, and he was hoping to take a certified course soon. Tamara had a qualification in childcare, but after a couple of years out of work, she was disappointed to learn that this qualification was now deemed outdated. Bob regretted his unfinished degree in photography and explained how he could not

compete with fully qualified photographers. For many participants, as these brief accounts depict, qualifications and certified skills meant a disadvantage.

Many participants explained that before, experience and having a trade were valued by employers. Older participants regarded their years of experience and knowing their field as their main assets. Some of them proudly told me how they had learned on the job and had taught themselves different skills. Now, however, some of the sectors in which these participants worked (e.g. farming, paper factories) were facing transformations and offering fewer vacancies. For low-skilled jobseekers, the official discourse was about retraining, but many were reluctant and did not see themselves doing it at this point in their lives, as Steven expressed:

He [welfare officer] even said to me a computer course, like, I'm 42, I'm too old and I don't want to be, I don't want to be inside learning computers you know, it's...I have no interest, like, I drive machinery, I have all my stuff for machinery, you know, my licences for the machines. (Steven, 42)

Jack reflected on the little importance that employers gave to “life experience” as if this accounted for a barrier related to age:

They don't seem to take into account like, life experience when they're going for this, because I have more life experience than some twenty years old going in, but...they don't seem to, they don't want to know that. (Jack, 54)

Sarah blamed her short working-experience as she was told several times that she “lacked” the experience required, even when applying for jobs asking for “no experience”. The logic that Sarah expressed below was shared by other participants, asking why employers did not provide on-the-job training that would allow jobseekers with little experience or no degrees to progress, as it used to happen before:

I got a few interviews and they said “we need someone with more experience”, even in jobs I applied with no experience required they would take the ones with more experience for the job, whereas in my opinion if they went for the ones with no experience and train them up the way they needed they would have better loyal staff (...) [before] they hired the ones with least experience, the ones with no degrees, the ones that didn't go in to college and they trained them from the bottom up. (Sarah, 29)

In general, participants depicted a changing labour market that favoured a type of jobseeker different from their profiles. *Not getting responses* for their applications was a sort of answer from the labour market that caused much disruption, as the next section presents.

4.6.3 Not getting responses: age as a barrier

The persistent experience of “not getting replies” was highlighted by all participants, but it was more acutely felt among those over 45, men and women. This was a recurrent topic that participants brought into the conversation, some of them noticeably upset, explaining how they could not get over the fact that they were doing a job search trying to reach a silent interlocutor, the labour market. Dealing with new rules also meant having to deal with the *feeling of rejection*, which was largely how participants construed the absence of replies and defined it as “draining”, “upsetting” and “diminishing”.

The feeling of “being unwanted” deepened as each submitted CV was followed by “no replies”, no acknowledgement, no answer. Participants actively asked themselves *why*, “why I do not get replies”, and it was the silence what they resented the most. Dan expressed his frustration and loss of confidence and motivation along the way:

If people reply to you, there'd be no problem then, at least, at least they let you know you're trying, but when you don't get a reply, what's the point of trying anyway...your confidence is gone. (Dan, 60)

The predominant answer that these participants gave to themselves was, plainly and solely, that they were old, or not as young as the labour market wanted. Some participants, such as Jack, 54, was directly told that their age was an issue:

Difficult, difficult...like, they told me straight to my face “you're too old”, “you're not wanted, we're looking for someone younger (...) They just want new, fresh faces, you know, that's it...I suppose they're better looking, and younger and more agile and probably move a bit quicker [chuckles] (Jack, 54)

Jack identified that his age had “become a problem” when he turned 45, which in turn depicted a worrying panorama for younger participants:

A few years ago, like, when I got over sort of...45 plus it became a problem, you know (...) 47, 48, and I was getting that "you're too old, you're too old" at that stage so...I'd

say that when you get over 40 (chuckles) It's hard, it's hard...because, I spoke to several people about it, men and women, and once you get over 45 heading towards 50, it's a problem. (Jack, 54)

Gwen, who had worked in retail all her life, illuminated the assumptions that employers might have about age, gender and the physical appearance required for specific jobs:

My partner, he spent 27 years in the army, he was able to walk into a security job because he had the experience of that type of job, and age in that type of job doesn't come into it, whereas the job that I do, your age does come into it, because you have to be standing, you have to look well (...) so people think "well, she is 50, she's going to look old, she's like this and that" (Gwen, 50)

Carol also felt that her age was the reason behind getting no replies and, at some point, she lost hope. As Carol explained, one way or the other, the process of recruitment was targeting her age:

...at the beginning I used to go to the trouble of sending, posting CV or whatever, but sure, you know, that cost a fortune, they're not even looking at them, you know, and again, because my daughter had said "you don't have to put your age, you don't have to put your date of birth" but I say, "[daughter's name], they know", you know, through the CV they go back, they can add up and they know. (Carol, 64)

Younger participants, such as Peter who was 35, also felt the pressure of competing with younger people, especially in fields such as his (illustration and animation) which were highly competitive:

There're guys coming out right now, like better, like, ten years younger, and they, like, you can tell they've learned from everyone's mistakes and from their successes, they're coming up strong. (Peter, 35)

As the experience of not getting replies became repetitive, most participants turned to themselves looking for answers and asking what was wrong *with them*. This practice turned into *self-doubt*, and as time went on, fostered the loss of self-confidence that made some participants doubt their abilities. In the end, thus, some participants, like Celia, felt that they were *not worth a reply*. Celia presented her internal conversation trying to make sense of the silence:

"Why am I not getting responses from these jobs?", like, "what's wrong?", "is it me?", "am I missing something", "what did I miss in life", like, you know, I mean, I didn't have

any, I went to school, I've done my leaving cert and I've done my secretarial course (...) I did think it was me, my age, my qualifications, what was it?, you just, you don't know, you'll never know! [agitated] because you don't get replies! (...) I felt I can't do this, I'm useless, like, I'm worthless. (Celia, 47)

For many participants, a dynamic of *accumulation of disappointment* and *diminishing expectations about the future* started to build up at this point. For them, this was a crucial point in their trajectories of unemployment: *the realisation that something had changed, deeply, and that they did not fit*. In turn, this dynamic would prompt internal changes, as the last section of this chapter explores.

Dealing with new rules emerged giving a coherent form to the tentative explanations and feelings that participants had regarding their efforts to regain employment. Participants had the internal drive; they wanted to work, they were doing the job search; however, their position as welfare recipients made these efforts somehow externally directed and continuously assessed, while the interlocutor that mattered for them - the employers - kept a silent and invisible face. The experience of not getting responses took, for participants whom this dynamic hit harder, the form of demotivation and frustration. *Paradoxically, intense job-search - as activation policies propose - was fostering the opposite effect.*

At this point, it is worth looking at how participants were assessing the structural conditions underlying their job search, as the next section briefly portrays.

4.6.4 Assessing the context: “no jobs here”

As this chapter initially pointed out, the event of the Great Recession was central to participants' experiences, for instance, causing their redundancy. Theirs was far from being an isolated experience, and the far-reaching effects of the recession allowed for the emergence of a narrative of crisis to frame their personal troubles within a macro-crisis that created a sense of “we”. This collective sense of “many others” being in the same situation, started gradually to disappear while a narrative of economic recovery was becoming dominant in the political and media discourse. I asked participants their opinions about the news we were all hearing and reading about more jobs being created and unemployment falling dramatically around the time when the interviews took place (between May 2018 and March 2019). What did they make of it in the light of their situation? Most participants expressed distrust and told me that, if that was happening, it was somewhere else.

Paul was 49 and lived in a small border-village, not far from where Henry, 61, lived. Sarah, 29, lived in an urban town. They shared, as many other participants did, pessimism and disbelief about the rhetoric of economic recovery, which seemed to be concentrated in cities and specific industries, as they expressed:

There is no jobs around here...I know a lot of people who haven't got work, there are no jobs, and they're a lot younger than me and probably have more prospects than I have and if they can't get jobs, so, what's for me. (Paul, 49)

(...) it's not in rural areas like these, is in cities that they're, you know, talking about that unemployment is going down, yes it's definitely going down in cities but not in rural towns, you know, like (name of village) here, no, no, no, definitely not, you know, no. (Henry, 61)

I don't believe that because it's nowhere, like, if you go looking for [jobs] you cannot find them. (Sarah, 29)

Steven talked about his friends who were also unemployed, referring to the struggle to find a job that low-skilled men over 40, like him, were going through:

A lot of my friends are just...they're unemployed, around [town where he lives] there're a lot who are unemployed, some of them are working part-time the same as myself but not with [scheme] my older friends are, most of them would be unemployed at the moment, same as myself they've been in and out of jobs for years now, driving trucks or whatever, mmm, down the same line as myself, mean, it'd be manual work. (Steven, 42)

The precarious scenario of temporary and part-time jobs was also assessed by many participants as something that was becoming normalised. Henry lamented the short-term nature of jobs:

(...) and then, it's only part-time work, it's not full-time work, so, in other words, you can be maybe only two or three weeks in the job, and then they have to let you go again, so that's no good. (Henry, 61)

While the recession was becoming part of the past, some participants identified new threats, such as Brexit, for those leaving in border-towns (border with Northern Ireland), such as Lucy:

There is not a massive amount of work available, I mean, the population in (town) in quite big (...) I think Brexit, we're so close to the border now, people are scared, companies are scared, they don't know what's gonna happen, are their businesses gonna close? How is that going to impact on them? So, everybody is holding their breath at the moment waiting to see.
(Lucy, 55)

The geographical location of participants was underpinning an important part of their experience of unemployment and their assessment about their chances of “things getting better” for them. Despite the public discourse emphasising job-creation, participants would explain to me that “those” jobs that were being advertised were not for them, meaning that these were above their qualification or belonged to different fields (e.g. pharmaceutical, food industry, IT-related).

Once the exceptionality of the crisis started to disappear, participants' experiences of long-term unemployment seemed to disentangle from the mainstream path of economic recovery and decreasing unemployment figures, leaving them as a minority. The next section explores the internal experience of change that emerged as the unemployment period extended.

4.6 The sum of all the losses: changing by losing

As times passed and participants faced the failed attempts at finding a job, something deep inside unsettled. The requirements tied to receiving welfare assistance were difficult to ignore, adding an extra layer of pressure to their experience. As time went on, as I learned from participants' accounts, they started to see themselves in a new light, a dimmed light. “*This is not me*”, Celia expressed when re-playing her internal conversation feeling deeply affected by not getting replies; Claudia told me “*I could not recognise myself*”, expressing a sort of growing awareness of being uncomfortable with oneself.

As Celia and Claudia - among many others - explained, at some point in their unemployment trajectory, they had an awareness of *changing by losing*. An intensified emotional tone gave form to these narrations marked by the loss of self-esteem, self-worth and disruptions to their personal and social identity. Carol had a deep longing for a job as well as financial worries; while she was taking care of her daughter's house, she recalled thinking:

I remember thinking to myself “is this it? You're a cleaner, this is what you accomplished now in your life, you're a cleaner”, and I thought, I could feel myself starting to go down...and I got myself caught in “ah, you're a cleaner”, not that sounds awful but you

know what I mean, that I wasn't, I was, that's it, you're just gonna go, that's what you get up in the morning and look forward every morning, you go and clean (daughter)'s house, you look after the kids, you do that, "oh God, is this it?", and I could feel myself going. (Carol, 64)

As much as Carol wanted and tried to find a job, she felt trapped in a situation that made her unhappy and was putting herself down through her self-talk. Sarah brought up, once again, the distinction inside / outside, to express a gradual internal change:

[I was spending] more time at home than I had in the whole lot of my life, I was never an indoor person, I was always outside and then, now I hate being outside and I love being inside [chuckles] (...) I used to be the most out-going, bubbly, craziest person out of anyone I knew, and the more I was out of work the less I was that person. (Sarah, 29)

Celia and Claudia also expressed the realisation of not being themselves, and disliking the self they were experiencing, a sort of strangeness with themselves:

I was just angry the whole time, I was angry, I was shouting, I was ...in bad form, crying (...) I went to the mindfulness because it was, that was not me, I'm not that type of person. (Celia, 47)

I was happy-go-lucky and confident and kind of self-assured and, just confident and happy, and then being unemployed knocks down all that out of you. (Claudia, 37)

These participants accounted for the uneasy awareness of not being the same as before, of changing as a result of the losses and frustrations that started to build up at some point as their time unemployed extended. That decisive point seemed greatly influenced by the experience of dealing with new rules and not getting responses. The accumulated disappointment of not getting responses, the loss of activity and autonomy, the weight of the welfare recipient identity, were reported as active elements *disarming the self-image* of many participants, predominantly women and older men. The sense of being unwanted by the labour market was one of the more damaging feelings throughout the experience of unemployment and job search, producing a sort of fatalism and loss of motivation.

Realising *contextual changes*, and somehow failing to catch up with them, to fit, together with the realisation that personal features - that before were not problematic, such as age and work experience - were being negatively evaluated, they all seemed to prompt *a shift inward*. Claudia

saw herself as less capable and started to doubt herself, which echoed the experience of other women:

You definitely lose your confidence, you think “I’m out of the game now, I can’t do it anymore” (...) you lose confidence in yourself, you don’t think you’re able, you know, “I can’t go on a job interview” because there are people there who were coming straight from another job or who haven’t been unemployed for as long as I have. (Claudia, 37)

Complementary to the unsuccessful job search, comparing oneself to others – real or imaginary ones, who were progressing in finding jobs - gave them back a sense of being stuck and immobile. Sarah illustrated this experience when comparing herself with the “successful” stories displayed on the welfare office’s wall, which affected her already weak self-image after several years unemployed. These stories told her what she had not achieved, *whom she had not become*:

When you’re sitting there at the computer, if you look, on the wall, you get...[sighs] they make you feel like you’re even more shit because they have the success stories, they have three boards along the wall with the names of the people that got a job, and you just look at them like, “they got a job”, and then you look up, and you’re like, “yeah, because that’s supposed to make you feel better” No!, if you’re going there for a year, and you see how many names are being added, and you’re like, and I still haven’t got one, that’s nice! (Sarah, 29)

The experience of losing aspects of oneself such as confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, emerged as the corollary of the three-fold experience of long-term unemployed for those participants who have had a more intense experience of losing and rejection, as well as those whose identities and/or life plans were more intimately rooted in work. As participants’ emotional accounts expressed, changing by losing was a difficult and upsetting process.

The experience of placement, as I will present in the next chapter, also emerged as a three-fold experience, conversing with the processes reviewed in this chapter.

4.7 Conclusions

This first chapter of findings portrayed the meanings that the experience of long-term unemployment had for participants, focusing on their interactions with relevant structural and contextual elements, such as the welfare system, the labour market and the event of the recession.

The experience of unemployment emerged three-fold and composed by the experiences of *losing*, *becoming a welfare recipient* and *dealing with new rules*. The combination of these experiences built up gradually, challenging participants' identity, self-concept and self-esteem.

Being unemployed was construed as a challenging and uncomfortable experience, well depicted by the metaphor inside/outside: it meant being confined within "four walls" and "not seeing one person from one end of the day to the next"; it meant doing domestic work to keep busy and active, which for most men meant an alien experience and for most women meant "business as usual". Men who had a stronger attachment to work structuring their identities suffered the most the loss of doing and the loss of income; younger participants were affected by having to introduce changes or cancel plans, while women missed being challenged beyond the domestic realm. There were, nonetheless, exceptions; participants such as Thomas and Adam, who did not want to go back to pointless jobs, or participants with health issues, who needed flexibility and time.

Paradoxically, unemployment was also a very public experience through the label of the welfare recipient, which meant being requested and demanded to act in specific ways. Becoming a welfare recipient and a jobseeker - unfortunately, an unsuccessful one - put participants in a visible position and many resisted being identified with the undeserving recipient. Participants' narrated being pressurised into a job search that was unsuccessful despite their efforts, and put them in a situation of failure, in which they also felt ignored by the labour market; these feelings echo the experience of "being activated, but stuck" narrated in Laliberte *et al.*'s (2016) study, referring to the sense of being stuck and repeatedly failing despite meeting the expectations of behaving as active jobseekers. Complementary, what participants perceived as "new rules" created a conflict for participants. What participants signified as "dealing with new rules" was their realisation that something changed about the functioning of the job search activity, over which they had had more control in the past. The rules, then, referred to the repertoires most participants had displayed to build up their employment trajectories and which they reckoned less effective amidst the changes in the labour market which "manifested in the appearance of novel mundane problems for which past wisdom is of little help" (Al-Amoudi, 2017, p. 70).

The recession was frequently used by participants as a chronological marker to establish a point where things started to change for them. The narrative of crisis was helpful for participants as they tended to locate the blame of becoming unemployed, outside. Seeing their unemployed as "beyond their control and will", as many assessed, challenged part of the assumptions accompanying the activation rationale that blames the unemployed as responsible for their situation. The comforting effect of the narrative of crisis, nonetheless, weakened as the competing narrative of economic recovery became dominant, but were participants out of the crisis? The

macro crisis had moved on, but the personal troubles and crises that unemployment and, especially the unsuccessful job search, were producing in participants' lives were their present-day. The experiential dimension of a crisis tends to be overlooked by the chronological and political definition of its termination; however, "the time frame of any crisis may look very different, depending on who is experiencing it" (Runciman, 2016, p. 5).

What sense-making processes were participants accounting for through their narratives? Participants were becoming aware of changes; they were making sense of them from different scopes, and, so, many experienced that they were *changing by losing* since the three-fold experience took form as *a chain of unfortunate selves*. The unemployed, the welfare recipient, the jobseeker; these selves challenged participants' identity, self-concept and self-worth, among other aspects, threatening to replace a comfortable sense of knowing who one was, how one was perceived and what one was doing, with a feeling of disentanglement that deepened as the failure to regain employment became repetitive. At this point, as participants expressed earlier, they started to doubt themselves, they began to accumulate frustration, and those more affected by these processes began to feel strangers to themselves. It was by losing aspects of their selves, by losing contact with themselves, by feeling disengage or ashamed, by asking themselves whether they had made the wrong choices, whether they were truly too old, whether they were ever to get out, that they were *changing by losing*. The person that would arrive at placement had been through this experiential route, as the next chapter will explore.

CHAPTER 5

THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACEMENT: CHANGING THROUGH REGAINING

5.1 Introduction

Positive evaluations and feelings about placement were manifest throughout the data. Referring to their on-going placement, or looking back to a recently completed placement, research participants narrated this experience as a “needed” change in their lives that appeared “at the right time”. Coming from a draining experience of long-term unemployment, as the previous chapter discussed, participants endured a process of losing that affected not only their income but the way they felt about themselves. Becoming a welfare recipient introduced not only obligatory requirements but also a new label that unsettled their identities. Applying for jobs for which they got no answers cultivated self-doubts and a feeling of immobility as time passed and nothing changed for them. At some point of this trajectory, research participants were requested by the welfare system to join the scheme, which meant doing a placement of 19.5 hours per week in a local not-for-profit community organisation.

Participants’ initial expectations were modest and charged with the apprehension of complying with a requirement as well as the prejudices surrounding these schemes. Why and how, then, were their modest initial expectations transformed into enthusiastic declarations depicting placement as a positive and beneficial experience? The positive assessment of placement was intriguing. Findings showed that participants were construing their experience of placement as a *counterpoint* to the experience of long-term unemployment, as if placement was the good side of the coin. In dialogue with that experience, placement - the same as the experience of unemployment - emerged as a three-fold experience, sustained by the dimensions of *regaining*, *coproducing* and *helping others*.

Regaining signified placement in its function of giving participants back some of the essential things they needed to regain, such as sense of self, control and hope. How was that possible? As it would emerge as an unexpected process - unexpected for participants and for me - the experience of placement enabled participants to temporarily break away from the prescriptions of the welfare recipient dynamic by emerging as a *co-produced* experience and by offering a “positive” identity, now, as a volunteer-like person helping others. Doing placement in a community organisation meant *helping others*: the welfare recipient taking from taxpayers, as

some participants expressed in the last chapter, would be now doing good and *giving back*. The three-fold experience of placement provided participants with new points of reference to see themselves and to interact with others, and gradually a sense of *changing through regaining* started to take form.

The next sections portray the dimensions of the three-fold experience of placement: co-production, regaining and helping others.

5.2 Co-producing the placement position

As participants learned, becoming a welfare recipient was, at least for them, an unavoidable dimension of being unemployed. Unable to resort to alternative sources of financial support, they had to rely on welfare. Framed by the activation rationale, benefits for the unemployed were tied to conditional requirements, of which most participants struggled to make sense (Chapter Four). Participants' encounters and interactions with the welfare system were charged with the uneasy feeling of *having to do as told*. Still, as unemployment extended, following the rules of searching for a job and attending appointments, job-fairs and workshops did not produce a change in their situation. All in all, most research participants seemed to have no reasons to believe that joining Tús or CE schemes could offer them something different. This was the emotional place where the invitation to join the scheme found most of research participants. However, as the findings revealed, *co-production* introduced a new kind of experience into their relationship with welfare, which participants had imagined as pre-determined, one-sided and ruled by a self-fulfilling prophecy of no-change in their situation.

Co-production referred to the process through which participant and supervisor - the latter as the embodied manifestation of the scheme - brought the placement position *into being through dialogical interactions* that allowed *both parties* to express, discuss and negotiate their interests, priorities and limits. Specifically, co-production took place during the first encounters between participants and supervisor, and its main content and goal was to arrive at a consensual selection of "the position", meaning the organisation where the participant would be placed and the tasks they would perform.

Emerging from participants' accounts, co-production was portrayed as an organic dynamic that developed and took form *live*, or, in other words, as conversations between participant and supervisor were happening. Thus, this was not experienced as a standardised process. Co-producing meant for participants: *being asked and heard, expressing preferences and off-limits*

options, negotiating (saying yes and saying no, letting themselves be convinced), to finally, making themselves available for the agreed position. These are the different “moments” through which co-production took place; they could occur over a number of meetings between both parties (more likely between two to four encounters). From the supervisor’s side, they displayed a welcoming, open and non-threatening attitude; they motivated, encouraged and collaborated, and many used themselves as an example to show progression (e.g. having become unemployed during the recession and overcoming it); they also made it clear that they were on participants’ side and that they were not employees of the DEASP. This depiction of the supervisors’ attitude was dominant throughout the data, but it cannot be taken as a general representation of all supervisors in both schemes and in all the agencies. Interestingly, as it will be explored in the following sub-sections, this encouraging and dialogical attitude of supervisors faded as participants settled into their positions, and supervisors, more likely, became focused on new participants. Co-producing the placement position can be seen, from the supervisors’ position, as a strategic way to deal with discouraged welfare recipients.

The following sub-sections discuss the moments giving form to the process of co-production.

5.2.1. Receiving the call: initial expectations

Most participants received a letter from the DEASP informing of their referral to the scheme. The letter outlined the components of the scheme and stated that, in case of refusal, their benefits would be affected. This letter was the route that most participants followed. Sarah’s account illustrated this collective experience:

I got a letter in the post saying I was chosen to take part in the scheme with [agency], and they sent me the day of the interview. (Sarah, 29)

When I asked Sarah whether she had pondered about attending or not attending the interview, she replied: “*No, you can’t, you refuse you get no money, you get no money you cannot live*”. The compulsory requirement was not easy to overlook, despite the inviting wording of the letter. The reception of the letter, as most participants recalled, provoked modest expectations. Bob, for instance, was sceptical about anything changing for him, and foresaw being put in a disadvantaged position:

I didn’t think anything was going to come from it or...I just thought it was gonna be, you know, they just want to get free hours working, you know, that’s what I was looking at, you know, taking advantage of you, basically. (Bob, 43)

As with the stereotypes surrounding the figure of the welfare recipient, these schemes were also charged with preconceptions and “stories”, such as working for free or having to do menial work. Participants’ initial expectations were mediated by these notions, their own prejudice, and the fear of doing something they disliked without being free to refuse. Claudia and Peter’s quotes exemplified these fears:

Before I started, I was terrified at the unknown, and I've heard all these things about Tús, like they make you clean floors for 19.5 hours a week, so I was worried about coming in.
(Claudia, 37)

I was a bit apprehensive, like, I, I was afraid like, for example, I was going to have to do something, mmm, in my old secondary school here, the idea of that wasn't great for me [laughing], of coming back here after more than ten years being a janitor or something.
(Peter, 35)

Similar to Peter and Claudia, there were other participants who expressed their prejudice and fears, which always materialised through the idea of “cleaning” or “manual” tasks as their worst scenario. Stories heard from acquaintances were also mentioned as an influence for their initial expectations. Sarah recalled what she learned from friends:

They were kind of not happy where they were placed, and it was kind of, they did it because they didn't have a choice, so I kind of thought that was gonna end up being me as well. (Sarah, 29)

All in all, the fear of being made to do something unpleasant or even humiliating, and not having the control over the position they would get, haunted participants’ reception of the letter and the time prior to the first interview.

While the large majority of participants was in a “yes or yes position”, a few participants followed a different route¹¹. Violet was feeling “in a rut” and did not know what to do to find a job; when she was requested to attend a job-fair she approached a stand of the scheme, her eligibility was checked, and she was enrolled. Four participants were doing placement on the scheme for a second time (specifically CE), which is possible in both schemes but under different waiting-time rules (these participants had been on the scheme between six and eleven years ago¹²). They recalled having had a positive experience and knowing what to expect. Two other participants,

¹¹ Tús and CE have quotas for self-referral. A person’s self-referral is assessed in terms of eligibility and capacity.

¹² This was before the reformulation of CE under Pathways to Work, in 2012.

Joan and Celia, had heard about the scheme and saw it as a good chance to increase their possibilities of getting a job. Celia was frustrated at not getting responses and approached the supervisor in charge to explore her chances; while Joan had an idea of the type of position she wanted and contacted the scheme directly.

5.2.2. Entering into a dialogical selection

Most participants recalled going to their first interview with the supervisor carrying these modest expectations. Until then, as welfare recipients, participants interacted with a welfare officer (based in Intreo or LES) whose central role was to monitor and supervise their active job search. At the very first meeting, the scheme's supervisor reframed this balance by presenting the *co-production* of the placement position.

Co-production took shape through external and internal dialogical processes. Gwen brought to the present her internal conversation before the interview, in which she gave herself reasons to attend. Later, she found herself infused with a positive feeling about her supervisor:

I went "aaagh" [sound of disgust], I thought about it, uggg "I really don't want to", so I said "look, I go and I see, at least if I go I can see what it is and my money won't be affected", so I went and I met [supervisor] and...the minute I saw [supervisor] I said "right, she's going to, like, do good things for me", and she said she was in the retail aspect of it, so we talked and that, and then two weeks later she said that a vacancy has come up in the [non-for-profit organisation] shop. (Gwen, 50)

Thomas was critical of what he described as a machine-like attitude of welfare officers, who showed no interest in his singularity and interests. Accordingly, Thomas and fellow participants spoke of being surprised when they found themselves *being asked* by the scheme supervisor to *express their preferences*. As they expressed their preferences, some participants saw their worst fears dissipate. Claudia would not be asked to clean floors, Peter would not see himself "humiliated" by being placed as a janitor in his former school. Steven and Jack would get what they liked the most: working outside; while Andrea, Carol and Tamara would be challenged with something new, just as they had wished for. Claudia juxtaposed her fears of doing something she disliked, with the joy she felt when finding out there were options that were meaningful to her:

I was a bit apprehensive, because I thought I'm going to be maybe cleaning somewhere, making you work for the money you're receiving every week, and I thought I'd be doing something I don't like, or don't want to be doing; so, when I came then for the interview,

and they said what was available, I bit my hands up nearly, I was delighted I was coming back into an office, because there is where I wanted to be. (Claudia, 37)

As participants were asked about their preferences, supervisors replied with the options available, among which there seemed to be, more often than not, something that participants liked or could be steered to. There were limits to this choosing, and not everyone was one hundred per cent satisfied. During the first interview with his supervisor, Bob disliked most of the options; however, after further conversations, he was willing to settle for one option, though not “the perfect one”:

When I went first, I think I was offered six different options, I basically told them I wouldn't do five of them, no way, you would've to fine me, I wouldn't have, I would've gone off the dole at that stage (...) It was the area that I was probably better suited for, you know, out of six or seven options, that was the best option, wasn't the perfect one, but it was the best (...) it was also an area I had an interest, I've done so much travel and so on, so tourism would be the area. (Bob, 43)

Peter recalled the initial conversations with his supervisor, who found out about his interests in a friendly rather than interrogative manner. Peter also pointed out the supervisor's willingness to find him a suitable match for his very specific set of skills:

I know in some schemes can be a sort of, like, you have to do this and it mightn't be something you really wanted to do, or that you wanna do at all, but no, it was good, we sat there and we discussed different possibilities (...) we had a conversation which found out my interests and my skills, and she was able to tailor a position for me. (Peter, 35)

During these first encounters, then, participants had their pre-conceptions about the schemes challenged. *Being part of the selection* was an aspect of this dialogical experience that most participants recognised as significant, speaking of their positions as what *they* had chosen among the available options. Being part of the selection took the form of a negotiation with the supervisor and with oneself. Rose had a college degree, but since moving to Ireland she had been working in restaurants and retail. She knew that this experience gave her a profile, which she wanted to change. Like Gwen, Rose had played the conversation in her head beforehand, deliberating with herself the outcomes she imagined, to later negotiate with the supervisor:

They give me a list of jobs, and it was like, it mentioned electrician, IT, retail, kitchen, I told them “I'd like to do electrician”, they were laughing, they said “why? do you have

any experience?”, “no, but I’d like to gain experience and just to do electrician”, they said no, no (...) they said “look, there is IT”, and then, yeah, okay, I wanted to. I was thinking “they’ll ask me to do kitchen, and I’ll tell them no, I don’t want to do kitchen, I want to do something that I haven’t done”. (Rose, 38)

Co-production involved greater degrees of supervisor’s guidance when participants did not have clear preferences. Violet had been unemployed for thirteen years after having one job in her life. She was not sure what she wanted to do and felt, as she expressed, very insecure of being out again. Violet was willing to take her supervisor’s advice, who presented different options and, somehow aware of her feelings, steered her gently:

She, [supervisor], came up with a few solutions, if I wanted to work in a crèche, I said no, and with people who had brain injuries, but I didn’t think that would’ve been for me (...) the charity shop in [nearby town] and I said yes, but then it wouldn’t have worked out, I would’ve have to do two or three days until four o’clock, so then she said that for the extra money that you’re getting you’re going to be spending that on bus fares, so she asked me would I work in the [community organisation] here in [where she lives], and she went and spoke to the chairperson. (Violet, 47)

While some participant did not have clear preferences, others, such as Tamara, wanted to try something new. Tamara, however, felt insecure and had transport and childcare limitations. Tamara’s supervisor presented an offer that accommodated her needs:

[Supervisor] had seen that I don’t drive, I have kids at home mmm... so, she, she said “this is the perfect placement”, because it’s working from home, and you can work during your own hours, and because I had experience working in the tourist office, I had a little bit of tourism background so, mmm, she thought it was a great placement, and I was happy enough with it, because I didn’t have to work out lifts or anything to these places. (Tamara, 28)

The effort that some supervisors showed to accommodate personal circumstances was also a relevant aspect for Claudia, as it was for other participants with young children:

I was doing five mornings a week, which suited me perfect because I have kids, and I was still able to take them to school, drop them off and pick them off, so my life really, their lives, weren’t affected by it. (Claudia, 37)

The cases of Violet, Claudia and Tamara illustrated supervisors' disposition to pay attention and incorporate participants' circumstances into the process of co-production, which seemed to contrast sharply with the experienced that participants had had with welfare officers (Chapter Four). This disposition is not to be taken as an act of goodwill, as if the scheme supervisor was somehow a superior and more humane type of professional within the architecture of activation policies. I believe supervisors displayed a *different role* within this architecture, and, consequently, displayed different strategies aimed at the main assets they needed from participants: *willingness* and *motivation*. While welfare officers were to enforce discipline through the active job search (regardless of results), supervisors were to foster willingness to go and work for 19.5 hours per week for the same welfare-money they were already receiving. Putting things in perspective, then, theirs was not an easy task. Supervisors were *motivating and stimulating cooperative behaviour* by allowing an atmosphere of negotiating participants' preferences and limits. Positively stirred by this atmosphere, participants were *letting themselves be persuaded*, to ultimately *make themselves available*. As section 5.4.1 will present, the fact that placement positions were in community not-for-profit organisations, *helping others* and *doing good for the community*, exerted a captivating power that would strengthen participants' motivation to take part.

Predominantly, participants portrayed their supervisors as individuals who cared about their circumstances and took into consideration their experience and skills. Some participants also referred to the effort made by their supervisors to match them with the best available position, which sometimes took several weeks, conversations and supervisor's negotiations with community organisations. Peter's case made the matching-skill of the supervisor more real to me. Peter was an illustrator and was placed in an organisation where he would incorporate visuals in publications they needed to produce. This was not the type of organisation that placed participants since its own work was as specific as Peter's skills; nonetheless, the supervisor was able to see the potential collaboration, proposed the match to both parties and made it possible. Peter was impressed, and happy, because the agreement resulted in a very lax schedule which allowed him time to focus on his own portfolio. All in all, quite far from his fear of being placed as a janitor in his former school.

As Peter's case showed, supervisors needed to have precise knowledge of the local map of organisations, knowing their goals and needs, and grasping opportunities that would benefit all parties. Strategically, from the scheme's point of view, placing motivated participants helped the scheme to maintain good relationships with the organisations and open new positions when needed. In conversation with supervisors, they mentioned the importance of keeping positive

relationships with organisations for the sustainability of the scheme; therefore, a “difficult” participant (e.g. apathetic, uninterested) could risk this balance.

For older men, their only preferred option was to work “outside”. These participants had a fixed idea of what they wanted to do and what they were good at and were not open to being persuaded otherwise. Consequently, they got the positions they wanted, exemplified in Steven’s words:

I said I wanted a job outside, that was the only thing I wanted. I don’t want to be stuck inside, so that’s what I got. (Steven, 42)

Interestingly, this match was not a problematic one since the positions these men wanted are among the more frequent positions offered by the organisations through the scheme (e.g. ground keeping, gardening, maintenance). At the same time, as explained earlier, these positions were despised by other participants.

Another facet of the dialogical process of co-production was illustrated by a few participants who had a plan of what they wanted to do. These participants displayed a proactive role as they had a clearer notion of what they wanted to get from the scheme and, accordingly, approached the supervisor with that attitude. Sarah had started to volunteer in a charity shop a few months before receiving the letter; she was aware that the organisation worked with the scheme, and so, she met the supervisor with a solution that was attractive for both:

I was volunteering in the place for a few hours a week, but since October, and I got the letter at the end of March, so when I got the letter I went in and I asked my boss instead of doing the few hours could I make it into Tús, because they often take Tús and CE participants, and she said yes (...) I went, and I knew where I wanted to go, and I had already sorted it out, so it took more off them and they had one less person to place, so kind of worked out for everyone. (Sarah, 29)

Celia was determined to change her situation and approached the scheme directly:

I’d known about Community Employment, it’s been here for a long time and I thought, well...and the eligibility was twelve months unemployed and seeking employment please contact, so I did, and I approached them myself, I rang [supervisor] and I said “you have a vacancy, I’m twelve months unemployed”, and I said, “to be honest with you, I’ve been knocked back, I don’t know what’s wrong, I said, but I need to get back into any way of working structure environment”. (Celia, 47)

Co-producing the selection of the placement position seemed to give participants a sense of *owning the choice* and being placed where they had chosen, within a limiting situation, rather than being placed regardless of their opinion. Then, co-production fuelled a positive attitude and mood in participants when they, finally, had to start placement and deal directly with the community organisation and their specific tasks.

5.2.3 The supervisor

A related aspect of co-production was the positive image of the supervisor. Throughout the data, most participants had positive words for their supervisors, a few of them had opinions that were neutral, and a couple of participants expressed criticism. The supervisor was mostly depicted as “helpful”, “flexible” and projecting the image of being someone who cared. Some participants manifested stronger feelings and attachment to their supervisors, like Celia and Tamara:

He's brilliant, he's brilliant at his job, he's just, he's probably...his personality would be like mine, you know what I mean, he's very approachable, [supervisor], he's very, and he sees life, the logic part of life, like that, you know, people get sick and people have their own lives. (Celia, 47)

(...) She's been great, she, she'd contact me and she kind of goes around my schedule to meet up to handle my time sheets, she'd always ask every so many weeks if there's anything I need, or how am I finding it, so, even when I started it, when I first start where I am...every week she'd ask am I getting on okay, do I need help, she'd say she's only one phone call away if I do need help. (Tamara, 28)

I shared with supervisors some of the insights suggesting a “different” approach to the relationship with participants. I wanted to understand whether this attitude was an active part of their institutional approach and how they saw it from their side. Supervisors differentiated between the official description of their functions and what they actually did. The formal description asked them to interview people, place them and make sure that they completed the process, not causing detriment to the community organisations (sponsors). When “meeting the people behind the names” they received from the DEASP, as one supervisor put it, they realised the array of problems these persons had, and without knowing it they would find themselves doing “counselling”. This type of approach, as the supervisors I spoke to told me emphatically, was neither asked nor encouraged by the DEASP, and they received no training in areas concerning the social or psychological problems participants presented. Nonetheless, they saw these aspects as potential barriers to a successful placement, and so they addressed them the best they could.

Somehow, it seemed that supervisors were co-producing their own work, at their own expense, as they would refer to the extra work and emotional costs this effort meant to them.

Supervisors were realistic and knew that getting a job after placement was very unlikely for some participants. They focused on what they named as “internal” aspects, such as low confidence and self-esteem. They transmitted strong beliefs in motivation, work-ethic and personal effort; and so, they tacitly expressed a preference for proactive participants and criticised those who were not. These were some of the topics that supervisors brought to our informal conversations. This extract from an informal conversation (based on my notes) illustrated their approach to placing participants:

I say to my participants and my sponsors, “there is a right person for each job”, you just have to find it, not just place them because you have names. (Supervisor 3)

I cannot delve further into this aspect, since the focus is on participants’ experiences; nonetheless, in this brief section I wanted to offer some insight into the supervisors’ views, as dialogical partners of the co-production experience.

5.2.4 Synchronisation

A recurrent theme among participants, that conversed directly with co-production, was their assessment of placement happening at “the right time”. Participant and supervisor represented two different sets of needs and goals, and synchronisation described the process of meeting these needs and goals under a common compass that, to a large extent, worked for the benefit of both parties. On the participants’ side, a distinct sense of urgency emerged, as narrated by many of them, such as “reaching a limit” and “running out of options”. Bob, for instance, had struggled to keep his photography business going and he could not invest more money, at the same time, he did not want to do “anything”:

I was running out of options, you know, I didn’t want to go to festivals and being told what to do, I didn’t see myself doing weddings for the rest of my life, I was trying to push myself to the next level, even though I have some college behind me, I don’t have enough college behind me so, I was kind of...I suppose you can nearly call it between a rock and a hard place. (Bob, 43)

Coming from the draining experience of not getting responses and losing confidence, as Chapter Four showed, many participants felt *needing help and not being able to do it alone*, as Claudia and Violet clearly expressed:

I definitely was at the stage when I needed help (...) I needed help, I needed somebody to get me the interviews because I wasn't able to do it myself, it wasn't happening for me, and maybe I would've needed a bit of interview training as well because I didn't have the confidence back then. (Claudia, 37)

I felt for me, personally, it was time to go out and start looking for work. I knew I had to go back to work, but I just didn't know what I want to do (...) It did come at the right moment, because I was stuck in a rut and I didn't know what to do. (Violet, 47)

Geraldine, who had suffered an emotional breakdown and was still on treatment, illustrated the notion of synchronisation from a different kind of urgency:

Oh God, it was the best thing that happened to me, I needed something because I was very, very depressed, I was in a bad place, you know, I just...I was starting to really give up. (Geraldine, 56)

Participants with young children also experimented a sense of synchronisation, feeling that they had received the news about the scheme at the right time in their lives, to help them get “out of the house”. Andrea and Adam were both stay-at-home parents. Andrea expressed her need for an external “push”:

I was gonna get out of the house! (...) I needed someone to give a push out the door, I wouldn't have done it on my own, so, I needed a bit of a push, that's really what I needed, I needed someone to come to me and say, “you have to do this”. (Andrea, 39)

Adam expressed the right timing to meet his need for social interactions:

They suggested there was a scheme available where I could work 19.5 hours a week; to me that seemed fantastic because, not only from a personal point of view, it got me out of the house, because as a man looking after my children, you know, and it's the same for women as well, there comes a stage where you crave for a different kind of contact, you know, so to me it was a fantastic opportunity. (Adam, 45)

Joan was one of the participants that approached the scheme voluntarily. Joan had a professional degree and wanted to do something within that field; she identified the needs of a local organisation which could not afford a professional, and started the process by presenting her case to the scheme's supervisor:

...It is as a combination of everything, so it was the supervisor, because I definitely needed the support of the CE, and the [organisation] needed, they needed to take me on under the CE to see if it'd work, you know (...) a lot of it was because of the skills I had from the work I'd done for many years before, so I was able to bring all of that. (Joan, 37)

Synchronisation facilitated participants' disposition towards placement by providing a sense of the "right time", a sense of obtaining something they needed, which, at the same time, eased the urgency of the *now* that many felt.

The next sub-section interrogates the limits of the concept of co-producing the placement position.

5.2.5 Limits of the concept of co-production

The first codes concerning co-production started to emerge throughout the first interviews (involving participants from two out of the four agencies), and these codes referred initially to "synchronisation"; from then on, a category built up sustained by numerous codes and memos, giving shape to the notion of co-production. Despite initial findings being eloquent, they needed to be examined further. At that point, I questioned whether the influence of gatekeepers in the composition of the sampling was at work here. To examine co-production further I theoretically sampled participants from two other agencies, which were also located in a different territory. I wondered whether I would find discrepancies, and co-production would not be applicable in schemes with different supervisors, approach and styles of communication. The new data from these interviews were consistent with the proposed concept and contextualised it beyond the limits of the already sampled schemes. These findings, and the systematic comparison throughout and within the entire dataset, showed that *co-production was restricted to the initial process*, that is, the co-production *of the position*. Once participants started placement, the centrality and presence of the supervisor decreased, in most cases, and reached a critical point at the exit of placement (Chapter Six). However, this aspect did not weaken the explanatory potential of the concept to illuminate the meanings of placement and why and how participants construed this experience. Overall, the co-production of the placement position was consistent across the sample, showing the influence that this experience had upon participants' initial motivation and engagement.

The next section focuses on regaining, which was the second dimension of the three-fold experience of placement.

5.3 “It gives me...something”: regaining

Regaining emerged in contrast to the experience of losing that the previous chapter depicted. Early in the process of analysis, a narrative referring to placement as “it gives me...*something*” gained ground and continued to build up. While the experience of long-term unemployment had emerged anchored in the notion of losing, the meanings that participants attributed to placement seemed to be expressing a sense of *getting back* some of the aspects they had lost. Placement, then, was performing a relevant function in that particular moment of participants’ lives; placement was “working” for participants at a deep level, acting as a counterpoint to the experience of unemployment. Unpacking this *something* that placement gave them, findings pointed out to three main dimensions: doing, the benefits of training and gaining experience, and regaining aspects of the self that were felt lost, such as confidence and self-esteem.

5.3.1 “It gives me something to do”: regaining doing

When narrating their experience of unemployment, the phrase “nothing to do” and “doing nothing” was recurrent among participants. Interestingly, the phrasing “something to do” became equally common among participants when referring to placement and how this was giving them back a sense of doing that, to some extent, resembled a job. In the case of men over 50, together with regaining activity - whose loss had confined them “inside” - placement was giving them - at last - the chance to get out and do. Steven expressed this view, echoing other participants:

It gives me something...something to do, I go to work, I know it’s only a few hours a day but it’s something to do (...) It gives you back a sense that you’re doing something, you know, you’re not sitting at home. (Steven, 42)

Recalling the feelings that being inside provoked, placement was giving them a chance to recover their place outside; having a purpose was welcomed as a positive change, as Jack and Timothy expressed:

It gives you a purpose to get up and get out, and do something, you know, rather than sitting at home looking at bad television [chuckles]. (Jack, 54)

I've actually found it very helpful, mmm, it helps you to do something during the day instead of sitting around, watching telly just doing nothing. (Timothy, 56)

Sarah expressed a sense of regaining purpose, after ten years out of work, as well as a new outlook:

If I, let's say last night, I knew I was coming in today, I go to bed and I actually like getting up in the morning. I hate mornings, they shouldn't exist, but I like getting up to go to work. (Sarah, 29)

Some participants brought up the issue of the “proper” job, when they spoke of doing “something” (meaning placement) while waiting to get a proper job. When I asked these and other participants, then, whether they considered placement as a proper job, more likely they said yes. Although being temporary and unwaged, as some of these participants pointed out, it was the element of doing, of having a routine, knowing where one would be each morning, that delimited *their* definition of placement as “a job”. Similarly, seeing their placement as a job meant seeing themselves as “employed”, as Jack, Danny and Anne expressed:

...that's what I say when I get up in the morning, "I'm going to work". (Jack, 54)

Well, at the moment I account myself as employed, as employed, you know, and I'm happy to say that. (Danny, 61)

I don't see myself being unemployed...I mean, I call it employment, the scheme, it's employment to my eyes. (Anne, 57)

Placement provided structure and purposeful activity. However, “something to do” needed to be unpacked further since *the content* of the doing, and how this connected with *participants' circumstances and needs* emerged as key components of the experience. In other words, *it was not “any” doing*, but one that interplayed with participants' wants, needs and circumstances, that would be deemed meaningful. Thus, not just doing, but *what* they were doing, gave participants what they construed as *regaining*. Breda's words exemplified it well:

I was motivated because of the work that I was doing, for me it was meaningful and that's the important balance, that you get something that makes the person feel like motivated and that it's meaningful, it's not just doing something. (Breda, 28)

In that regard, some participants felt happy doing what they knew, a doing that had provided them with a continuous sense of identity. These participants wanted to regain *continuity*. For this group of participants, doing the type of activity they were used to, and they liked, was what they wanted; remaining in their “comfort zone” was a source of contentment and peace-of-mind. Alan explained this situation very well: he did not see himself having the skills for a job different from what he had always done; moreover, it was regaining *that activity* and no other that gave him back the whole experience: talking to people, being outside, being seen doing a good job. Alan pointed out here an important aspect concerning the *relational and social nature of work*: Alan was not cutting his grass, as he was doing in his house before to keep busy, but he was cutting “everybody’s” grass, a public space which he was taken care of and *through which he reappeared and re-entered the public realm*. In Alan’s words:

I love the scheme, I, but, I didn’t go to college or any of that like other people, very brainy, you know that, I’m not brain, but I’m not too bad, I can read a little bit but I can’t... you know (...) I love cutting grass, I don’t know why it is [chuckles] I love working outside, you meet people, you’re cutting grass and keeping the place clean and talking to other people, “how’re you getting on”, “great”, “oh, you have the place looking well”, you know, keeping the place nice and clean. (Alan, 60)

Other participants, on the other hand, felt happy doing something new that could contribute to the reconfiguration of their identities, as Andrea expressed - echoing other women - who wanted to be “not just a Mum”. For these participants, regaining doing meant engaging in a new type of activity that made them feel excited and prompted thoughts about a “new career” that would introduce a *change* to their trajectories. It would be through being in a new setting and performing new activities that the contours of this notion of change would start to take form for these participants.

Another important aspect for some participants concerning the content of the doing, was that this had to match their circumstances, particularly health-wise. Anne, whose unemployment was related to health issues, found that her position - despite involving physical work - suited her, rather than her having to adapt to a type of work that could have deteriorated her health:

The hours suit me here, twenty hours a week suit me, you know, because I do have to kind of, I can’t overdo because I have ailments, I can’t overdo it. (Anne, 57)

Regaining doing, then, was the more immediate effect that participants noticed upon starting placement, which balanced the loss of purposeful activity, routine and structure that had marked

unemployment. The content of doing was important to understand the potential of meaning and fulfilment that placement would have.

I did not hear one participant saying that they did not like their position; but some had mixed feelings about the absence of remuneration, the lack of clarity about their progression and the internal dynamics of the organisations. Others, like Geraldine, told me “*there is only that much cleaning you can do*”, meaning that sometimes hours were empty, but then she resorted to the “social” aspect and how she could chat and relax. Criticism was not straightforward, in fact, I think participants would not agree with me for using the word “criticism”, because they always counterbalanced their critical comments by saying things such as: “*this is a great place*”, “*I’m happier than before*”, “*people are great, you get great reward*”, “*I’m dreading this will finish soon*”. Placement had for participants a nuanced and complex nature, as the next sections continue to explore.

The next sub-section looks at the training and work-experience component of placement as another dimension of regaining.

5.3.2. Getting closer: getting training, filling gaps

Framed by an unsuccessful job search and the awareness of what participants perceived as the increasing prominence of qualifications, many participants saw in taking courses and gaining experience accessible through placement, an opportunity to improve their prospects of finding a job. First aid, health and safety and manual handling were the more frequent courses provided by the schemes and constituted a sort of basic package of training; in many cases, the training ended with them. Customer service, reception, and basic IT were options that some participants regarded as relevant. Courses’ duration varied between one morning up to several months. Courses level 5 and 6 (e.g. bookkeeping) were sought by some participants but were not always available for funding reasons. During their time on the scheme, particularly on CE, which had more resources to allocate to training, participants were encouraged to progress towards an award¹³ depending on the participant’s background. Progressing towards a major award was a requisite for those on CE (under 55) who wanted to stay on the scheme for three years; this major award meant completing a full course (e.g. office skills, horticulture, IT); however, as I learned from participants, they could complete only a module of the course.

¹³ Awards and levels are established according to the NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications). A person can hold qualifications at the level of state examinations (Leaving Certificate, level 4); major awards (awarded by training institutions, level 5); non-major awards (awarded by Institutes of Technology, level 6); and named awards (provided by Universities, levels 7 to 10).

Getting courses' certificates and gaining experience meant enhancing one's CV and profile in the eyes of potential employers. Jack, who wrote his first CV at 54, and Violet, who was insecure about the 13-years-gap in her employment history, both saw in the courses an opportunity to improve their CV:

They all help, when you want it you can put them on your CV and told them, "look, I've done these courses" so...hopefully they will help me. (Jack, 54)

All these courses that I'll do will look good in my CV, and [supervisor] is happy to make up my CV and everything, because I don't know how to do that, I don't have a CV now. (Violet, 47)

Similarly, Sarah identified how placement could be translated into the CV to minimise the period out of work:

It helps to flash out your CV if you need it, it shows that you're actually doing something for whatever period of time, so if you have a gap of let's say five years, and you still have nothing written there, you can put the scheme in. (Sarah, 29)

Improving the CV showed another side of the difficulties that participants had identified in the context of their job search. As explored in Chapter Four, the CV was problematic since participants felt it did not portray them fairly (e.g. having experience and the know-how but not certificates, confining them to one type of job); now, through placement, participants saw a way to enhance some of their CV's weaknesses. Focused on their CV, many participants understood training as a way to satisfy what they perceived as a labour market requirement. In contrast, some participants saw in the training offer a chance to engage in personal progression and took it seriously. Celia was quite an exceptional case, having completed a number of courses available with enthusiasm and good results:

Since I started in January, I've done four level six courses, so, I mean, you get great benefits and you get great reward out of it, you know what I mean, it's flexible (...) I've done, train the trainer part one and two, I've done effective management, they're all level six courses, I've done computerised bookkeeper and payroll level five and manual handling instructor. (Celia, 47)

Dan, on the other hand, was unconvinced about the use that training would have for him, echoing some of their fellow older participants. Quite unhappy, Dan told me about some courses he attended, such as safe use of pesticide and fire emergencies:

I couldn't understand why, I couldn't understand why that was...why you have to go on these courses in the first place...You have to do it, I know you have to do it. (Dan, 61)

When I asked Dan what course he would prefer, he said “*get out there and do it, get out there and show me how it's done, show me what and I'll do it*”, very much related to his own background, having left school and learning skills hands-on. A few participants, echoing Dan's views, were sceptical about training since they saw themselves coming from the “old” system where they did not need certificates to get jobs and progress. Michael and Carol were exceptions in this regard; Michael, 59, wanted to go to college and Carol, 64, learned enthusiastically how to manage websites as part of her placement.

Participants' educational background played a role in the meanings they attributed to training. Some participants who had a long disconnection with academic activities, felt intimidated by training. Geraldine spoke about her fears:

It's just that fear of, like even here when we have to do courses I say, “oh Jesus, I'm not going to be able to do that”, like, I left school, I'm nearly 40 years out of school now, no, I wouldn't be able to do that...I've done a few, like I've done okay in them but, like, there were others here and they were getting distinctions and [sighs] God almighty!, the hassle... (Geraldine, 56)

A few participants found that the training offer was not meaningful and did not connect with their aspirations and educational background. Adam, for instance, found that the offer of courses was basic and would not make him substantially more attractive for the labour market. Altogether, the training component provoked ambivalent opinions about what was available and how meaningful it seemed from a personal point of view as well as a jobseeker.

Filling gaps as to get closer to the labour market not only took form through training but also through gaining experience. Leo, for example, had trained as a carer assistant but needed one year of experience in the field to apply for a position in a hospital, as it was his aspiration, and he was obtaining that experience through his placement in a rehab centre. Sarah, who only had had one job that lasted a few months, struggled with the “experience required” requisite:

I don't think six months is really that much experience...although they see it from October, so that would be nearly a year, but most places look for two to five years of experience before they even think of hiring someone...like, yeah, I have stepped up and I'm not the person with no experience like I used to be, but I still don't have the two to five years of experience. (Sarah, 29)

How to include the “placement experience” in the CV was a consideration that Sarah, along with a few other participants mentioned. Placement provided a kind of work experience that could be “renamed” as volunteer work, when writing the CV:

I even have on my CV now that I volunteer, I still have it written as volunteering because, how do you put Tús scheme on your CV?, so I just have the name of the shop and everyone would know by the name of the shop that is volunteering anyway, and I have from 2017 to present written on it, and everything I do, like yesterday was my first day balancing the till. (Sarah, 29)

In the case of those participants who were doing something different and were seriously considering a career-change, placement was the first step towards this plan. For them, the experience they were gaining in these new areas was the first approach, but they were realistic about the necessity of formal training. Tamara, who had trained as a child carer, was determined to change career after a few months into her placement:

I'm working as an admin now, I have no admin skills before I took on Tús, and now I've learned so much that I could actually work in other areas of...reception work, administration work in any other businesses now, because of all the, all of the...experience that it's given me over the last few months. (Tamara, 28)

Regaining doing and filling gaps emerged as very important elements of participants' experience of placement; however, these elements had limitations and flaws.

As participants' quotidian experience started to change, they also started to feel differently or, at least, “better” than before. As the next sub-section explores, placement was also giving participants something of themselves back.

5.3.3 Getting something of oneself back

Sarah stated feeling different “now” compared to how she was “before” and when I asked her to explain it with an example she added: “*Well, from the Sarah that was at home going “I can't do shit” to the Sarah now that's like “let's go to work, let's get things priced!... ”.* Sarah was one of many participants that spoke of an “old” and a “new” me, of “*recovering the old spark*” as Lucy put it, or “*going back to myself*” as Claudia vividly expressed it. The motive of *regaining aspects of oneself* emerged with force throughout the data, especially among women. Aspects such as self-esteem, confidence, feeling valued and challenged, stood out and seemed to be having a deeper influence on participants’ sense of self and identity. As Chapter Four portrayed, self-confidence was identified by participants as badly damaged as a result of the fruitless job search and not getting responses, fostering self-doubts about one’s abilities. Anne expressed this feeling and how she was regaining confidence:

I'm more confident because I'm here, I lack confidence very, very badly and coming here gives me more confidence, you know what I mean, to get out of bed, because some mornings I was “oh, God, Jesus, how am I going to face it?”. (Anne, 57)

Being challenged and seeing oneself as more capable than one had started to think, were dimensions highlighted especially by women. After staying at home focused on care responsibilities, many of the women expressed having started to feel less capable and insecure about their performance outside the domestic realm. Placement gave them a chance to take on tasks which challenged these thoughts and self-image. Tamara was a young mother of two who had been at home for more than two years and, in her words, had lost her confidence. She was doing her placement as admin and focal point for a county-wide project supporting local producers, which was new to her. Having responsibility and accomplishing these tasks were important aspects that strengthened her confidence and self-concept, as Tamara explained:

I kind of feel kind of more important in a way, because...as I said, I'm kind of the face of this business because everyone is approaching me, I'm dealing with everything, and I do have to bring it to other people you know, queries that come up, but everything, everyone approaches me. Whereas before I hated talking on the phone, I hated talking face to face to people, whereas now I feel kind of I can talk to anyone in a way, so I've grown a bit as a person. (Tamara, 28)

Tamara dwelled largely on her personal process, from being a shy person suffering from anxiety, she re-emerged, to herself, as “the face of this business” and having “grown as a person”. The

feeling of “accomplishing”, of *seeing oneself more capable than one thought*, was a common realisation among women. Very openly, Andrea narrated her experience:

You forget that you're actually able to do things, and once I started back after a few hours I realised, I remembered what it feels like, I remembered that feeling of somebody actually valuing your opinion. You don't get that at home, you just don't (...) your world just gets smaller, you know, “can you post that letter for me when you're on your way home”, “yes, I can, watch me [laughing] I'm the best at posting letters!! [chuckling] No, you don't get that at home, and definitely...that feeling very, very quickly it goes when you're unemployed, you forget really, really quickly, you forget what's like to be part of a team, like, as I said, your opinion actually means something, to count. (Andrea, 39)

Feeling valued and being challenged through placement helped these participants to regain confidence and self-worth and, in turn, fuelled their planning of the future, as the next chapter explores.

Gwen also engaged in a narration of a transformed self, of *changing through regaining*, that in the case of Gwen meant regaining the “old me”. This change, Gwen explained, was also evident to others, who somehow acted as witnesses of the experience:

It's more...it's me finding my way back to things, and it's getting me happier, in myself, it's just great...I can, I got my confidence back, that's what it's, it's all confidence building, and I think that...not fully got my confidence level but I'm getting there, which is great, I'm nearly 100% the confidence level that I used to be at, mmm, even my parents have said it, like, you know, I can't believe the difference in six months, my son is looking at me like “are you my mum?” and I “yes” [assenting with her head] “Okay, right” (...) even my friends say “god, we got the old Gwen back”, so only for, I think finding this, the scheme, I think I'd still be the same me (Gwen, 50)

Similarly, Celia identified a sense of “*being myself again*” and linked this process to the losses of unemployment and the gains of placement. Celia spoke of feeling happier about herself and her life:

I'm definitely myself again because I'm more aware of what's going on, like, when I was unemployed for the twelve months, as I said I was in the house and I was more inclined to stay in the house I didn't want to be going out (...) when I came here I have my confidence back and I have, I'm, I'm the same person I was, I'd be very outgoing (...) I

have to say I love it, I'm so happy, I'm a happy person again now, really happy...like, if you'd have seen me probably this time last year, I was a totally different person (Celia, 47)

Echoing other women, Gwen and Celia identified a change, a “then” and “now”, a time when they lost themselves, and the time - now - when they were going back, regaining. This sense of feeling at home with oneself, again, was accompanied by positive feelings.

Most men, specifically older ones, did not engage in a narration of change with the same openness that women did. Nonetheless, this did not mean that these men were immune to processes of internal unsettledness or change, as the experience of “being inside” and “losing doing” illustrated in Chapter Four. Particularly men with a strong identity as providers, saw their self-image challenged by the whole experience of losing doing, and with it, their sense of material and ontological security and, as mentioned earlier, by regaining activity they regained much of their “old” sense of identity. For many of these men, a critical challenge was coming to terms with the idea of being perceived as “old”, as their job search had showed them.

Participants who were going through health difficulties, expressed their sense of changing through feeling better or feeling stronger. The experience of regaining had impacted on the mental health of these participants. Lucy, who suffered from physical and mental health issues, identified improvement since she started placement:

I get mentally, I get so much from this, my mental health has improved so much since, my self-confidence, because I lost my confidence and my belief in myself, so this is really helping me to get some of that back (...) When I started this I was so low, and the difference in just six months in myself, I can feel it, people can see it around me, they say I'm brighter, I'm happier than I've been for a long time. (Lucy, 55)

Together with Lucy, Geraldine, Timothy and Anne, found themselves in an emotionally vulnerable situation. These participants shared part of their life stories, disclosing difficult episodes and events that had caused them long periods of depression. They expressed feeling “safe” in their placement and supported by their supervisor. These participants experienced regaining as *recovery*, as Geraldine and Anne expressed:

Absolutely terrified, work nearly frightens the life out of me to go to work, I don't even think I ever want to leave here, mmm (...) I've built up my confidence for the past two years, a lot better, I'm still not out of the woods yet. (Geraldine, 56)

I'm not better but I'm better than I was, I'm not in that dark place where I was before, you know, you can't get out of bed, you're wearing your night gear all day, that's what I went through. (Anne, 57)

Regaining something of themselves was conversant with the experience of losing, through which many had experienced a strangeness about themselves, as the last chapter portrayed. Correspondingly, unemployment was given, by most participants, the meaning of a discontinuity, a before and after that through internal losses, configured a sense of “an old me” that was lost, and now was being regained, or “a new me” that was emerging somehow changed. However, it must be noted that many other things were happening in participants' lives, such as illness, separation, bereavement or marriage, all events that exerted their own influence as a discontinuity or change, and interacted with the influence of unemployment, and now placement.

The next section centres on a substantive component of placement that shapes much of its nature.

5.4 Helping others and giving back

The previous sections presented the configuration of the three-fold experience of placement somehow in a chronological fashion: first, the invitation, coproducing the position, taking part in the selection; afterwards, starting placement, regaining doing and regaining aspects of oneself. This section presents the third dimension of the experience of placement: *helping others*. Doing placement in a local not-for-profit community organisation connected participants to a narrative of helping. *Helping others* and *helping the community* offered participants a source of meaning that acted as a sense-maker through which the demands and uncertainty that participants faced acquired a comforting scope.

The narrative of helping was channelled through the community organisations, by highlighting the social and altruist nature of their work; through the supervisor, who presented altruism as a reason to accept placement (rather than emphasising the compulsory side); and it was also channelled through cultural beliefs - arguably stronger in small villages - which, in the same way they were capable of shaping the figure of the welfare recipient as undeserving and a burden to society, were now capable of shaping the figure of the volunteer-like participant as one that contributed and helped.

Local not-for-profit organisations carried out their activities with the systematic and vital involvement of volunteers. In the villages and towns where participants were based, these

organisations held a high reputation. The organisations were visible actors of these local communities and provided needed and esteemed benefits, for instance, for children and older persons. Others, like the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), held an additional long-standing sense of community pride, especially in rural villages. Altogether, these local organisations had a reputation for “doing good” and delivering necessary services. Within this well-established context, *doing community work* emerged as a concomitant aspect of placement that emphasised *giving back*, and helped to play down the obligatory aspect of it. Doing community work was, then, a sort of exchange, as Steven expressed, that seemed reasonable:

It's community work, which is good for the community you live in, it gives something back. I believe, I believe you should do something to get your social welfare payment.
(Steven, 42)

Participants expressed different degrees of engagement and emotional connection when alluding to what most called the “social aspect” of placement, by emphasising the “good feeling” about “helping others” and “contributing”, and how “rewarding” the experience of “doing something for the community” was for them. *Helping others* introduced a new range of experiences that recalibrated, once again, how participants saw themselves.

Doing placement in a local organisation held a persuasive power. As Steven mentioned above, it was “good for the community”, thus, who would refuse to do good for the community? This appealing aspect was consonant with co-production as the supervisor presented the altruist edge of placement as a good reason to do it. Some participants had the apprehension of “working for free”, which was eased when learning that placement was in a not-for-profit organisation, which added an additional element to the persuasive argument of doing good for the community. Andrea reflected on this aspect:

I think it would've been different if I was going to work in a place that other people were being paid to do the job that I was doing, I don't know how that would work. (Andrea, 39)

Doing volunteer-like work was, for the vast majority of participants, unknown territory and, with the exception of four participants, most had not volunteered before. Nonetheless, it took them a few weeks to tune into the community organisation ethos, as the next sub-section explains. Difficulties or pitfalls experienced during the placement lost preponderance when assessed through the lens of this ethos, which, at the end of the day, seemed to account for more benefits than setbacks.

5.4.1 Tuning into the community organisation ethos: believing in what one is doing

Once in their placement, participants started the process of *tuning into the community organisation ethos*. Participants expressed admiration for the mission of their organisations, and they specified how their assigned tasks contributed to the overall mission. It is worth noting that this process occurred intuitively and “hands-on”; there was no formal induction for participants from the scheme side, and this was left to the discretion of the organisations.

Through tuning into the organisation ethos, the tasks and the hours devoted to placement gained a new sense - “the social aspect” - which enabled participants to see themselves as doing *something of value*. Subverting the initial fears, modest expectations and prejudice, doing placement for a not-for-profit organisation became *doing good for the community* and *helping others*. This dimension emerged strongly throughout the data and related directly, as the opposite process, to the experience of the welfare recipient. Celia’s quote below illustrated clearly some of the prejudices that the scheme faced. However, if what was at stake was the community, and if the goal was to help the vulnerable - as Celia pointed out - who could criticise it? Celia expressed her belief in helping the community, through the scheme:

There would be a lot of people who would say “Oh, I wouldn't go to community employment because, oh God, this thing or the other”, but community employment is for the community, it's for the people (...) years ago I remember when community employment started first, people would say to you “Oh my God, I wouldn't go there, that's like begging for a job”, you know, but that's completely so untrue, community employment is for the community, is to help the people who are probably vulnerable...maybe need assistance. (Celia, 47)

Those with a stronger identification with the organisation ethos spoke “on behalf” of the organisation, praising the help *they* provided to the community. Leo was doing his placement in a rehab centre and worked with people with limited mobility. He described his tasks with conviction, using the pronoun “we” and tuning into the mission:

Some people, they don't have a family, you know, and being alone is not good you see, main thing we try to integrate them in society, sometimes if they want something you can go to the shop with them, you see, to feel that they have the same right you know, and some days we involve them in games, games like bocce just to talk, and the ball, an easy game to participate, to be involved, to let them have more independence. (Leo, 37)

Participants connected with the mission of the organisation from different “places”, such as emotions, life experiences and values. Rose, who had left her country, connected with the mission from an emotional place, thinking about her parents being helped by someone else:

I always liked old people, and I always keep thinking about my parents, who are far away and that there is someone else that will be there for them to give them a hand (...) it gives me a lot of...I'm not getting pay for that, it just gives me a self, a self-satisfaction. (Rose, 38)

Bob, who had lost his business and was now, through his placement, promoting the local economy, felt responsible for the impact that his tasks were having on local businesses:

I feel responsibility, because basically you got people's livelihood you know...people's businesses and livelihood are in your hands, you're promoting their businesses. (Bob, 43)

The role and position that local organisations held in the territory was better understood within the dense network underlying the “community spirit”. The towns and villages where participants lived and did placement were closely-knit localities with a robust sense of community, a strong sense of “we” and social responsibility. Many of these places preserved a rural ethos palpable through the character of economic activities and social relationships based on reciprocity. The community spirit of the village was a dimension that surfaced and connected to the meanings of helping others. Gwen's experience in a local charity shop captured part of this dimension. As someone who was not originally from that village, she was amused at the role that the charity shop played and how this was allowing her to have a deeper access to the community:

I've gotten to know so many more locals that I just knew to say hi, now I know their first names and they go “Gwen, how's it going”, you know, what happened this weekend, and you know what happened to them and this person who got married to that person, that type of things, it's great, it's great community spirit, it's positive in so many different lines, getting to know people, getting to hear about people who have been helped by them, from...like the managers telling you these stories, and they don't mention names or things like that, so they say “oh, we had a person and we went to the house and visited and this person needs this, this and this”, and you kind of go “but I know a person who is throwing out a bed and a mattress, would that person be interested in the double bed and this and this”, and they say yes, so I get them the number, that's the way kind of works out, it's just great. (Gwen, 50)

As Gwen narrated, she was acquiring a new sense of her locality, where she was becoming known in a positive light, as the lady of the shop helping out. The helping environment was contagious, and Gwen found herself totally invested. Adam, who moved from Dublin to a small village searching for a better quality of life, connected his placement with the long-term benefits that helping *his* community could have for his family:

I think I feel a bit more invested in what I do because I live in the community as well, and I can see now the changes and what's happening, and I can see the long-term benefits because I have children who will be growing up here as well, so I can see that drive to make a better place and that interests me. (Adam, 45)

The direct outcome of helping the community was a “good feeling” and a sense of personal reward or, as Gwen said it better, knowing that “*maybe I did help somebody today*” which, in turn, she explained, helped her:

It's very rewarding to go home at the end of the day and say “oh, maybe I did help somebody today” even if they only bought something for three euros, I helped to brighten up their day by, you know, helping them to pick that, or saying “you know what, I have the perfect thing for you here, I think you'd like this”, you know something like that, and knowing that you helped somebody is very, very rewarding...it's more rewarding than you think, it's just great and that's what I like, so, mmm, that's how working for them has helped me and I know it will help me a lot more. (Gwen, 50)

Tuning into the community organisation ethos meant for participants becoming involved and invested in their placement from a position that resembled the volunteer-like person, which counterbalanced their experience as welfare recipients. Participants felt regaining a relationship with society based on contribution, as the next sub-section explores.

5.4.2 Recognition and contribution: being seen in a new light

As the last chapter portrayed, the unemployed and the welfare recipient were very public identities that carried expectations upon participants' behaviour and fostered internal processes of self-doubt. Defined in part by absences, the welfare recipient's identity was underpinned by not contributing to society through paid work, and this meant becoming a target of stereotypes and prejudice. The volunteer, on the other side, held a completely different identity that meant contributing and, moreover, gifting, to the closer community. Being placed in a not-for-profit

community organisation gave participants a chance to experience this identity. In the eye of the bystander, volunteer and scheme participant were the same.

Through helping others, participants gained a different standpoint to see themselves and to be seen. This dimension introduced the *relational* side of placement. The notion of feeling different or changing, exerted a constant presence throughout the findings. These feelings were *relational* since they emerged in the dynamic interplay between self and external eyes, between being seen and seeing oneself. *Giving back* introduced equilibrium to this interplay; participants were not “taking from taxpayers”, as Claudia expressed in the last chapter, or “doing nothing”, as many of the men expressed, but they were giving back through their work which was deemed useful.

Giving back was met with “feeling rewarded”. Defining their experiences as “rewarding” and getting “reward” for what they were doing, were common throughout participants’ narrations. The rewarding experience was connected to regaining a visible way to *contribute* to society, by helping others, which was also signified as a form of giving back. Celia’s narrative was very much focused on the reward she obtained from helping other people and contributing. She saw this as a kind of legacy that would stand for who she was. The “unemployed self” stood in the background of Celia’s account, to whom Celia was saying “I’m not worthless, I do help”:

I want to be able to work, please God, for the next twenty years and be happy in what I’m working, but I know that when I retire I gave back what society gave to me, as the scheme gave me the chance to get back and feel confident about myself and feel that I’m worth something, that I’m not worthless, that I do help the society no matter how much bigger, small it’s, I do help, you know, and that when I retire after working for all the years, that I’ve worked that I’ve done something worthwhile for me, and even after retirement age I still want to be involved in the community and be able to help in community groups and, you know, and give back and just be happy really, you know what I mean, just, and feel fulfilled, you know, and that my children have learned something by looking at me. (Celia, 47)

Celia’s account was illustrative of the complex functions that placement was having for participants. Through the experience of placement, Celia was reconciling her past and future selves sustained by the notions of contributing and giving back. Celia expressed, for instance, how her sense of worth was connected to doing something for society; this contribution, which, as reviewed in Chapter Two, has been very much tied to paid work, was now being possible through helping the community. Celia’s account also illuminated other aspects relevant to participants, such as the sense of fulfilment and meaning that they could obtain through doing

“*something worthwhile*”. This, as some participants expressed in Chapter Four, was not always possible through paid work, as some had to endure pointless jobs.

The relational aspect of placement through which participants projected a different identity, was also projected inwards. Gwen, for example, explained how the interactions with her “clients” in the charity shop where she was placed gave her an image of herself that challenged her self-concept, which infused her internal conversation and provoked a “learning”:

(...) I actually learned that...I'm actually quite a nice, I know it sounds awful, but that I'm actually quite a nice person, and I'm actually quite a good friend to have but I, before I used to go “aagg, why do they like me? I'm only me”, and when someone gives me a compliment and say “oh, you look great Gwen today” What!?! “It's only me”...and that's...Why am I saying that it's only me? Why I don't just say, “well, thank you, you know, you like me for who I'm and not the outer shell”, because that's what I used to say, “it's only me”. (Gwen, 50)

Placement in a community organisation gave participants a place where they could - while still being welfare recipients - establish different relationships that held the potential to *mirror a different me*.

The experience of community work was not free of downsides, as the last sub-section of this chapter explores next.

5.4.3 Compensating for the pitfalls of placement

Participants blended in, and, in the eyes of the organisations’ clients or an outsider, there were no evident marks to differentiate a volunteer from a scheme participant. Krinsky and Simonet (2013) analysed the case of New York, where participants of workfare schemes were refused by unionised paid workers while volunteers felt offended and complained. In the end, the authorities resolved to give scheme participants a uniform of a different colour as to make their status clear. Fortunately, for research participants, those problems have not arisen in Ireland, where paid staff among the local organisations would be a very small proportion. In many cases participants had daily contact with volunteers and shared tasks; most of these participants reported having good relationships with volunteers. A few participants were placed in organisations where there was paid staff, in which case two participants expressed having had some sort of difficulty, for example, caused by an unclear delimitation of tasks.

A number of participants were unhappy with some of their placements' conditions. These participants, however, were exceptions when compared to the larger group that expressed satisfaction. More frequently, placements' pitfalls had to do with the organisations' structure and style of management. Having a clear description of tasks, getting feedback and recognition from an authority figure were problematic for some participants who, paradoxically, expressed at the same time being happy in their placement. Participants related these difficulties to the nature of not-for-profit organisations run mainly by volunteers; most organisations were of local scope, having limited resources and lax structures. Very few participants, such as Adam, related the pitfalls to the style of monitoring displayed by schemes' supervisors.

Adjusting to a less structured work environment was one of the pitfalls of placement. Adam was one of the participants who dwelled largely on this aspect. Having worked in highly structured workplaces, he found it difficult to have no direct supervision or targets to meet. Interestingly, stress was one of the aspects he hated the most about his previous jobs:

It was quite difficult to adjust to it from the onset (...) there was a period of adjustment, always coming from a company office background to suddenly being in an office where there's no management whatsoever. I mean, if I was the type of person who wanted to write down that I've done x amount of hours a week, I don't feel there is anybody checking it, as I said, I could be sitting there actually doing nothing most days if I wanted to, mmm, so the drive comes first and foremost from within the person (...) I think the scheme itself is fantastic, but maybe it can't be monitored closely enough. (Adam, 45)

Adam's observation is illustrative, since it identified aspects concerning the organisation, the supervisor and the participant. The absence of a business-like management - one could assume - works well for a community organisation run by volunteers. Thus, this absence is not a "flaw" of the organisation itself, but it is an aspect that supervisors could take into consideration and managed in the specific realm of placement within the organisation. On the other hand, while volunteers - one could imagine - would not wonder why they are not being supervised, some participants - like Adam - did wonder about who was checking his hours and evaluating his performance. Adam also brought up the issue of participants' motivation. Believing that the work carried out by the organisation was important was a source of motivation for participants, but, as Adam pointed out, this was not enough for those who "*could be sitting doing nothing*". Adam was also referring to his work ethic; he told me the tasks he was carrying out, emphasising that, given the absence of clear direction, he created these tasks and felt motivated.

The absence of direct supervision was also mentioned by Jack, who, similar to Adam, was *relying on his work ethic to cope* with the absence of management. As mentioned earlier, organisations had different structures, which worked well for them, but did pose challenges to participants. Jack was doing his placement alone, having no supervision or co-workers. Jack was the only person present in his placement where he worked four mornings a week:

I'm up there on my own now, all the time, I very seldom see anybody (...) sometimes you get a text or a WhatsApp message saying they need that done, but, like...I'm in there for like, last November, December, January, I didn't see one human being [chuckles. I don't mind, I don't mind because, like, you know what you have to do so, you just go and do it and then you go home, you know. (Jack, 54)

Jack's words shed light upon the aspect regarding the meanings that the organisations gave to scheme participants. I did not speak to organisations since this was beyond the scope of the study; therefore, the study's insight into their views is limited. Nonetheless, Jack's words pointed to a functional and limited relationship where the organisation told him what needed to be done. In the next chapter, the experience of end of placement sheds further light upon the way organisations related to participants. When I asked Jack how he felt about it, he told me:

Ah, I'd be fairly self-motivated, like, if I didn't go up there today nobody would know I wasn't there, you know, as simple as that, like [supervisor] never, very seldom, comes up there, and you very seldom you see anyone from the [organisation] like, I could stay off for two days and nobody would know, you know, so like...I enjoy getting up there and doing it. (Jack, 54)

Jack showed me different photographs of “his work”, which was a large field of green grass perfectly mowed and well-kept. He told me that some Fridays he would feel such satisfaction with his work that he stood there and contemplated the field thinking of the young people that would use it for their own enjoyment playing sports, and then, he would take a photograph with his phone and keep it. I found his gesture eye-opening. Jack was presenting his work ethic: finding motivation “from within”, the reward and contentment that accomplishing the tasks yield, even if nobody was looking. But, at the same time, having to rely on one's work ethic to replace the absence of management seemed unfair to Jack in the long run.

Adam complained about the lack of management but loved the absence of stress and an authority figure and enjoyed highlighting his proactivity. He was critical about his placement yet, at the

same time, he felt that “*it’s been one of the more rewarding, satisfying jobs I’ve done*”. When I asked him why the job was satisfying, he explained:

(...) first of all, you don't have management eye, so I'm not constrained by any rules, I'm not dictated by some authority figure, so that'd be a plus point for me...the nature of the work, I had no idea that in a place of this size would be so many people giving out their time to pursue things for the benefit of others, so that's been to me quite an eye-opening, it appeals to me, mmm...and I suppose the staff I work with (...) we have great laugh, you know, because there is no, I suppose a set amount of work to do, there is time to interact with the staff, don't get me wrong, it could be far more proactive in there and there could be far more done, but because there is no management overlooking it, and because it's a voluntary organisation, there isn't need, you can interact with your staff, with the other people there you can get to know them, you know better. Previous jobs I had, like in travel, if you say hello to somebody you had a manager breathing back your neck saying why are you talking. (Adam, 45)

Jack and Adam represented the complexity of the construction of the pitfalls, because, somehow, *they never fully emerged*. They played down the pitfalls, they disliked one aspect, but they liked the whole. The construction of the positive experience, as this chapter initially asked, was complex and nuanced, singular and at the same time collective.

Another aspect some participants wished could be improved was the financial incentive. On average, scheme participants received their Jobseekers Allowance plus 22 euro extra per week¹⁴. In general, participants tended to express conformity, similar to Alan’s response when I asked him his opinion about the money he received:

So-so, yeah, it's okay, it's a few bobs, yeah, it's not great but good, good for everybody, good for the community, you know, keeping the place clean, you know, you're getting a few bobs, you're keeping the place clean. (Alan, 60)

Alan brought the benefit for the community as a higher reason to conform. Most participants who touched this aspect had similar opinions. Dan, however, was very vocal about his feelings: he was happy with placement, but unhappy with the money. He talked about “incentive” and how the tasks he was carrying out were “*not worth the hassle*”, as he explained:

¹⁴ As per 2019, Jobseekers Allowance was €203 and scheme participants were paid a minimum of €225.50 per week.

I'm glad I'm doing it, but if there was an extra hundred euro there would be no problem, something to look forward to, then when you're up in [organisation] and you get all the hassle because you're not letting people down in the pitch, and you get all the... is not worth twenty euro to put up with this type of, this type of bullshit (...) a couple of days ago, I'll show you, I took photographs, there was a couple of youths that were not supposed to be there, so I said "listen lads, you have to go", but they kept throwing the ball over. (Dan, 61)

This was one of the many incidents Dan told me about, he had even taken photographs and filmed, but he did not show them to the supervisor nor the organisation. He complained, but at the same time he spoke keenly about his placement and how he was out of the house and doing something. Dan was 61 years old and had little hope of getting a job and was hoping to get an extension and continue on the scheme until retirement age.

As mentioned earlier, participants' criticism about placement was inconclusive. As Adam, Jack and Dan recounted, it seemed as if, when putting things in the balance, what they were gaining weighed heavier than the difficult aspects. Overall, the pitfalls of placement were mostly related to the characteristics of the working structure of the organisations and supervisors' lax approach to monitoring. While the functioning of the organisations was well-suited for volunteering, those who approached the position from a work-like stance found it difficult to assimilate at first.

5.6 Conclusions

This second chapter of findings explored the meanings that participants attributed to their experience of placement, paying close attention to the processes giving form to the widespread positive feeling about placement. Chapter Four presented the three-fold experience of long-term unemployment. Relatedly, the experience of placement also emerged three-fold, fuelled by the processes of *co-producing*, *regaining*, and *helping others*. This correspondence was guided by and grounded in the data, which consistently expressed communication between both sets of experiences, suggesting that co-producing, regaining and helping others were counterbalancing the troubling aspects of losing, becoming a welfare recipient and dealing with new rules. At the core of both three-fold experiences there were two larger processes taking place, with different degrees of intensity and engagement among participants: changing by losing (Chapter Four) and changing through regaining.

Co-production challenged participants' initial modest expectations; participants received the letter to join the scheme, expecting very little change. Based on their ongoing interactions with the welfare system up to that moment, they had been complying with job seeking rules that had not changed their jobless situation and, on the contrary, had turned them inwards, asking whether they were the "problem". The introduction of a third-party, the scheme supervisor, framed it differently. Through dialogical interactions, a more horizontal positioning, and a flexible structure, supervisor and participant co-produced the placement position. The result, thus, was not – in the eyes of participants – pre-determined or pushed by the supervisor but negotiated and accommodating to their needs and aspirations, setting the mood for the start of placement.

The concept of co-production has been used predominantly used to identify the paradigm promoting the explicit and goal-oriented involvement of citizens in different phases of the design and delivery of public services (Verschuere, Brandsen and Pestoff, 2012). However, the co-production of the placement position, as it emerged, was not an expression of an official approach and systematic effort from the main authority, in this case the DEASP. As presented earlier, co-production was a dialogical process taking form as-it-happened, that is, attentive to participants' inputs, and in which the skills of the supervisor to foster motivation were key. Co-production as it emerged from the data, bears some semblance to the notion of "personalised approach" mentioned in some of the literature on activation, and it broadly refers to a more flexible attitude from activation professionals that recognises the heterogeneity of clients' backgrounds and needs, but which is criticised for not offering a systematic and unified approach (see Kampen and Tonkens, 2019; Van Barkel and Van der Aa, 2012). Kampen and Tonkens (2019) analysed the use of the personalised approach with participants of a workfare volunteering scheme. In the study they identified participants' need to tell their stories and explain themselves, and when supervisors gave them attention and time, participants engaged positively; however, participants felt exploited when deprived of a voice, for which they blamed the standardised rules. Kampen and Tonkens' study also found that supervisors' use of this approach decreased along the way, and participants reported seeing supervisors growing disinterested in them, concluding that their initial support may have been to make them comply. Similarly, my study found that co-production was concentrated on the initial phase and that, for some participants, the supervisor's involvement at the stage of end of placement was very weak. The next chapter will explore this aspect.

Looking at supervisors' strategies to foster participants' engagement, some studies have concluded similar strategies to what the findings reported. Arts and Van der Berg (2018) found that caseworkers actively coached and motivated participants to create feelings of hope, optimism and emotional empowerment. Building rapport to generate trust to gather information to achieve a good match between the participant and what is available, in terms of placements or training,

has also been reported, explaining that persuasion and cooperation have better results than coercion (Senghaas, Freier and Kupka, 2018). While it is arguable that supervisors might be actively using a personalised approach to foster engagement, trust and availability in participants; this view is incomplete when contrasted to the findings that showed that co-production was a *shared endeavour*, in which participants were not letting themselves be manipulated, but were negotiating their position and using the margin of attention and freedom to their benefit. Co-production emerged dialogical and having benefit for both parties, as the notion of synchronisation suggested. Of course, most participants' position was framed by the "yes or yes" context of conditionality, and that cannot be overlooked. Still, in that context, being part of a dialogical selection process had a certain sense of exceptionality.

Placement gained an extra layer of meaning when framed by the narrative of helping. Throughout the data, the "positive" feeling towards placement emerged early into the placement-term and remained for its duration. Participants' positive assessment was not a synonym of placement as an experience free of difficulties, or that participants did not express criticism; they certainly did. However, this positive feeling proved more important for participants than the pitfalls of placement, as the last section of this chapter explored. The experience of helping others was meaningful for participants to regain a more positive public identity and the relational sense of work. Garret-Peters' (2009) concept of "self-concept repair" finds resonance in participants' experience. Garret-Peters' study with unemployed men who attended support groups, showed that these men experienced comfort in being able to help fellow participants, because this allowed them to see themselves as capable and not lacking. For example, when they were able to give good advice about the writing of the CV or how to approach an interview, they felt they were doing something that had a sense of efficacy, and they narrated these little acts of help as accomplishments. As a result, Garret-Peters proposed self-concept repair as a collaborative strategy to restore the damage caused by unemployment. Coming from a period where not much was efficacious, especially the job search, knowing that, as Gwen expressed it, "*you helped someone today*", had a strong appeal, and the capacity to mirror a different me.

These experiences supported the process of changing through regaining, counteracting, to some extent, the eroding experience of unemployment. Placement, however, would not be a permanent situation and participants needed to consider their future. The next chapter will explore this dimension.

CHAPTER 6

REACTUALISING THE FUTURE

6.1. Introduction

This last chapter of findings dwells upon participants' stances towards the future, that is, their ideas, expectations and fears about the future, which emerged in the form of five main stances. These stances comprised the experiences of (1) men over 50 who faced difficulties related to their age and profile; (2) women returning to work who were longing for a change in their lives; (3) participants who prioritised the right match between their internal desires and their circumstances; (4) participants with health issues that faced more specific challenges; and (5) participants who displayed a stronger notion of career ambitions and self-improvement. Participants' arrangement of their narratives including their past, present and future made it clear that their experiences need to be understood within a trajectory of past aspirations and decisions, on the one hand, and the imagined future, on the other. In that light, stances were constituted by three dimensions: the "future in the past", alluding to the images that participants had developed about their futures and whose outcomes were known; the second dimension referred to the ideas and insights emerging from the experience of placement; and, finally, participants' evaluations about their contingent circumstances within a changing context. Interrogating how participants had envisaged their future in the past and how they envisaged their future from the present, offered a closer look at the *continuities* and *discontinuities* in their trajectories and selves, and the role that the experiences of unemployment and placement played.

Participants' stances towards the future emerged as a process in the making positioned in the present experience of placement; therefore, attention had to be given to the nature of this present. Placement acquired, in participants' voice, the character of an *exceptional time*, an *in-between*, which framed much of the activity of the self during this time. Correspondingly, the first section presents a brief account of the liminal character of placement to offer an insight into where and how this future thinking was occurring. The second section focuses on participants' stances towards the future. The third section identifies the predominance of hope, and similar forms of future thinking based on external forces, over planning. The last section brings the future closer by offering an insight into the experience of the end of placement.

6.2 The in-between present: placement as a liminal space

During their time on the scheme, a participant was neither unemployed nor a worker. Scheme participants were taken off the Live Register (register of unemployed people seeking work in Ireland) and, for the time being, they were not counted among the unemployed. Moreover, the host organisations did not identify them as volunteers as such. How did this indistinctness permeate the future thinking of participants? Entering the scheme was stepping into a parenthesis, a suspended time. No longer and not yet is a notion that summarises the idea of liminality as a transitional human experience suspended in an in-between (Wydra, Thomassen and Horvath, 2015; Thomassen, 2009; Turner, 1974). The liminal, as a transition, presents the individual with tasks, internal tasks, and the one who passes the threshold outside the liminal is not entirely the same self, since the liminal is not an irrelevant experience, but a period of reformulation and change. Liminality transports a spatial and temporal meaning (Thomassen, 2009), captured by the metaphors that are used to refer to it as a suspended, bracketed, in-between, or exceptional time. The notion of the liminal in-between made sense as an appropriate frame for what participants were doing “inside” the experience of placement.

Placement was a productive time for participants, and some thoughts, aspirations, and emotions seemed freer to emerge while being within the borders of the exceptional time. Besides the activities of placement, *the self was at work*, and the future - the future in the past and the future ahead - consistently emerged as a leading focus of this internal work. In Bob’s words, placement gave him time to “*think back and forward*”, and others would echo his words and speak of having time to consider their future. “*Being on a break*” and “*having time*”, as some participants described placement, seemed to slow-down their worries; so, even if they were feeling anxious about their future, they could always resort to the safe feeling of “*I will worry when the time comes*”. Placement was giving participants *time* and having time meant having a break from the pressures and urgency imposed by the uncertainty of their situation, and, on the other hand, pondering and drafting their future after placement. External pressures, such as the responsibilities of being a welfare recipient, the compulsory job search and not getting responses, to name some, became *suspended* and transferred *outside* the in-between placement. This sense of relief expressed by many is illustrated in Thomas’ words about the suspension of the bureaucratic rituals that he disliked so much:

It’s giving me time to be able to be away from the whole just applying for jobs situation, and just focus on one thing, a business or something like that, or an idea, instead of being put under pressure to do, you know, go home, fill an application. (Thomas, 44)

The unsuccessful job search had affected participants' state of mind, and placement signified as a break gave many a renewed sense of optimism. Jack was very vocal, expressing his frustration for the times he was told his age was a problem in getting a job. Now, while on placement, he expressed "*it doesn't matter now*", leaving the negative feedback about his age suspended:

Well, it used to really bother me, but it doesn't now...I'm doing the [placement] but then in the beginning it did, it used to really bug me (...) the ones that did reply, the ones you get in contact with they just say "no, you're too old", that kind of thing, but it doesn't matter now. (Jack, 54)

Bob deferred the worry about his future after placement for later, and meanwhile he was taking ideas that could benefit his own plans:

I'll have to deal with it when the time arises, when the time comes (...) you know, at the end of the placement, I'm not worried now, as I said, I have a couple of ideas that I'm taking from this. (Bob, 43)

The construction of placement as a break took essentially the form of a mental break that enabled a sort of emotional relief and recharge. Geraldine, who had quit her job because of health issues related to working conditions, construed the break as a time to get better:

I need to get my head into gear with, you know, that when I go back there it's not going to be the same (...) this is like oxygen, I'm really trying hard now, like this is getting me a great, more oxygen that you can breathe and see where you want to be, you know... (Geraldine, 56)

The in-between was also giving participants mental and emotional time to figure out what they wanted and could do after placement. Participants shared these deliberations as an on-going "mulling over things"; as some expressed "*I don't know what I want to do next, but I have time to figure it out*". Gwen illustrated this mulling over ideas and how the sense of urgency became relative, and big decisions were deferred into the future:

I don't have a one hundred per cent plan yet, like, there is a lot of "mmm, maybe, maybe not" (...) I don't feel pressured, no, I used to feel under a lot of pressure to decide things (...) I'm not going to stress out. I'll just take it as it comes. (Gwen, 50)

The liminal character of placement was the framework within which the deliberations about the future took place, which translated into different forms of future thinking related to the “outcomes” that the liminal placement was producing: self-esteem, training and experience to enhance the CV, insights into a career-change, to name some. Internal conversations were also prolific during this time, notable in the narrations of participants such as Gwen, Carol or Adam.

Within the exceptional time that represented their present experience of placement, participants shared different stances towards the future, which meant engaging with the future and considering possible paths. While some participants would try to extend the liminal and push the threshold as far away as possible, others would embrace the promise of a future self with eagerness. The next sections will present the five main stances.

6.3 Stances towards the future

Participants engaged with future thinking differently: while some declared “*living one day at a time*”, others believed in detailed planning. Participants organised their narrations within a large scope that brought together past, present and future. Since the outcomes of their past plans and decisions were known, these illuminated their current deliberations as to how to project into the future and what the present placement could contribute, without forgetting that they were in relation to a contingent changing context that would facilitate or limit their future aspirations and hopes. Stances towards the future emerged, then, “in the making” and it seemed that some participants were drafting alternatives as they were verbalising them during the interviews.

I assembled five stances, each one composed of three dimensions: (1) the “future in the past”; (2) the experience of placement; and (3) the evaluation of contextual circumstances. The first dimension, the *future in the past* referred to participants’ ideas, dreams and plans about what they (in the past) had wanted to do and become in the future. Participants continually referred to their sense of contentment and frustration with their past plans to explain why they were preferring or refusing certain paths when considering their futures, in the present. The *experience of placement*, the second dimension, referred to the present placement and how participants were, for instance, recalibrating expectations about their future chances or imagining new possibilities in the light of this experience. The third dimension related to *participants’ evaluation about the context* and the opportunities, barriers and risks they identified concerning their future chances.

Infused by the exceptional character of placement, participants were trying to reconcile their internal aspirations, the external conditions and the input of the experience of placement. These

five stances, which I develop in the following sections, alluded to the collective experiences of (1) men over 50 who faced difficulties related to their age and profile; (2) women returning to work who were longing for a change in their lives; (3) participants who prioritised the right match between their internal desires and their circumstances; (4) participants with health issues that faced more specific challenges; and (5) participants who displayed a stronger notion of career ambitions and self-improvement. Each one of these stances reflected similar and comparable collective experiences, but their borders cannot be considered rigid, and some participants may find themselves comfortably moving between stances.

6.3.1 Men over 50: a problematic future for a labelled self

As the previous chapters presented, men over 50 (plus Steven and Luke in their mid-40s) emerged as a group channelling similar life trajectories. These men, generally speaking, identified as breadwinners and hard-workers, and endured a difficult period of unemployment and a frustrating job search. Most of these men's employment history involved unfinished education and manual and low-skilled jobs in rural and urban settings, except for Joe and Jack who had worked in retail and driving, or Ronan, who had worked in education.

6.3.1.1 The future in the past

How had these men thought about their futures, in the past? Most of these participants were early school leavers, mainly because starting to work as soon as possible was necessary to help their families. This decision, as they explained to me, was rooted in the cultural and socio-economic context of Ireland in which their younger selves grew up. Leaving school to get a job or emigrate were not rare decisions, I was told, for those who came from a working-class background, rural and urban. Some participants like Alan and Mark added that they did not see the school as an essential step to forge a future for them, because they were "not academic" and enjoyed and wanted to work with their hands. In Mark's words:

Well, there was anything I wanted, just, like...I went to secondary school just for a year and I didn't, I just couldn't...it wasn't for me like, you know, I liked it, but I just didn't have that [points his head]. (Mark, 60)

Securing a stable job and forming a family was a recurrent image of the future among these men. The first available job became the first job without much consideration. Dan reminisced about his first job at a newspaper stall when he was fourteen years old; while Alan, Mark, Henry and Steven started their working life on a farm. Ronan, who had the highest educational level among this group, was also an early school leaver and had emigrated to England (not a rare decision among

men of his generation, as he told me) where he had several minor jobs before going back to education. Overall, these participants illustrated a more standard type of trajectory, where choices about their future life were embedded in the cultural and economic conditions they described as relatively homogeneous and gender dependent. This tendency provided an insight into their present experience of going through contextual changes, as this group had manifested when referring to “dealing with new rules” of the labour market as a discontinuity in their trajectories (Chapter Five).

These participants looked back at the paths they had taken and shared contentment and regrets. Dan, shortly after he got married, had the idea of emigrating but felt restrained by his lack of formal education. He explained his incomplete education, which was limiting his plan as a combination of need and want:

With the wife first I had a vision of going to Australia, but then you needed skills, I missed out, I didn't go to college because of...I left school when I was fourteen to help the family, didn't want to go to further education. (Dan, 61)

Mark recalled how, for him, “*the future was, I was gonna work in a farm, that was me all the time*”, and then listed the different jobs he had in his lifetime, which corresponded exactly his wishes (picking cabbage, driving tractors, keeping grounds, and so forth). He concluded by telling me that he had achieved the future he wanted: “*that's why I'm happy, and I'm sixty now in September*”. Mark expressed a feeling of contentment with his life that represented the feeling of most of these men when recalling their employment trajectory: they wanted to work outside, with their hands, and they did so. While an outsider - such as those participants who dreaded the prospect of manual work - would assess Mark's life negatively as a route to low-skilled and low-paid jobs, Mark would certainly dispute that. Dan, who had several jobs in factories and alike, proudly told me how he had excelled at these jobs, and despite not having a trade, “*I was good at everything*”.

This sense of contentment, echoed by Jack's reminiscence about the “*good days*” driving a van, or Alan's “*always working outside*” was nuanced by the narration of difficult times, such as intermittent periods of unemployment, low wages and not having saved money. Providing for their families was a cardinal responsibility. Mark had had several periods of unemployment and recalled being constantly worried: “*money was a worry, always thinking, what am I gonna do? and that, big about money*”. Jack had resorted to finding “*extra bits and pieces*” to “*to get a few extra bobs, you know, just to make life a bit easier, and look after the kids a bit better*”.

Some participants also expressed regrets, and many had had dreams that they were unable to fulfil, mostly because of family commitments and financial restrictions. As Dan stated above, he could not pursue his dream of emigrating and told me what he would have done differently in his life. When I asked him whether he and his wife would have these conversations, he looked surprised and told me that he would not do that because these were private thoughts:

I'd have finished school...I wish I could've done better (...) actually I'd have gone to school, finish, finish college and then I'd have actually tried to join the police force (...) I'd get my same girl again but I wouldn't have kids as quick...I...I would think if I had kids again, that's a terrible thing to say, isn't it?. (Dan, 61)

Henry, Mark, Aidan, John and Dan, expressed that their main regret was not having a trade (such as plumbing or carpentry), and hypothesised that having one would have protected them from unemployment and enabled them to have better living conditions. Jack had tried to influence his sons' future thinking in that direction:

I'd be trying to encourage them to do something with their hands, because I try to explain to them that if you work as a plumber, an electrician or carpenter, whereas if you get computers courses and this and the other, mmm, like they can always go, but there will always be work for the trade. (Jack, 54)

Overall, these men transmitted a sense of identity grounded in work and in their ability to provide for their families. They gave their past lives a stable meaning, and this provided a biographical sense rooted in a context that was manageable within their repertoire.

6.3.1.2 The future after placement

Work, as it had been for the most of their lives, was central to these men's future thinking; however, at the time of the interview, they assessed having remote prospects of finding employment in the near future. This evaluation was strengthened by their unsuccessful job search and negative feedback about their age, as Chapter Four outlined, and the growing awareness of their skills becoming less required (e.g. farm tasks becoming more automated). Consequently, these participants were pondering three main routes forward: extending their placement, resuming the job search, or having a long-term plan.

Aspiring to get an extension for their placements was the preferred way to face the future expressed by participants who saw themselves closer to retirement age. Dan, who was 61, had one more year before ending his placement, and expressed pessimism about his future:

I have another year of extension, after that, I hope I'm staying because I can't see myself doing anything else. (Dan, 61)

Dan was expecting to get an extension that would keep him on the scheme until eligible for State Pension (the current qualifying age for State Pension is 66). Mark and Aidan also focused their expectations on getting an extension. Joe had recently learned that his extension for one more year was successful:

I was only going from year to year, and looking back it's six years now, you know, but it's only from year to year that the contract was and at the end of the year, April of each year, I didn't know whether I was going to extend or not, but as it turns out I had it extended. (Joe, 61)

Joe was now about to complete six years on the scheme, the maximum for a CE participant. Beyond that point, Joe expressed having no clear plans, and hoped the organisation could keep him with the scheme support since they did not have the funding to employ him:

I don't know what's gonna happen, right? So, for argument's sake if I'm, let's say, if I'm let go in April...I don't know what's gonna happen from April onwards. I think [the chair of the community organisation] will ask for another year, and hopefully, fingers crossed he gets it. (Joe, 61)

Extensions were more likely for those on the CE scheme who were near or over 60. Tús, on the other side, did not contemplate extensions, and the alternative for these participants was to move on to CE, which in principle was possible. However, this was not straightforward. Henry and Luke were hoping to stay on the scheme by moving from CE to Tús but, unfortunately for them, the absence of the CE scheme in their area made the transference more difficult. Henry and Luke, nonetheless, kept their hope for an eventual - though unlikely - extension, as Henry expressed:

It's only for a year, but hopefully, I'm praying, I'll get a three years scheme, yeah, yes, I'd love that. (Henry, 61)

Prolonging their time on the scheme emerged for these participants as a form of *doing time*, to extend the liminal and defer the challenge of resuming the job search, which had been already ruled out as pointless by most of these men. Henry, Mark, Aidan and Dan talked openly about staying on the scheme as their strategy to cope with the remaining years before being eligible for State Pension. This was their best outcome for the long future, in connection to their employment

trajectories of low-paid jobs which left them without savings. The gap between finishing the scheme and being eligible for State Pension was a worry for these participants who were close to that age, and they kept the hope that the scheme would grant them an extension.

Resuming the job search was a second way forward, preferred by the younger men who anticipated a slighter better chance to find a job after placement. Jack, who was 54 and had one more year of placement, was getting ready for reactivating the job search. In our second interview, Jack told me that he had lined up a few places to apply for a job, which he had done through informal contacts and within the local circuit, dismissing the formal route: *“the amount of CV that I sent out and got no replies, it’s just, it’s outrageous, so I just don’t do it anymore”*. These potential places (e.g. a fish shop), however, offered temporary and part-time work. At the same time, Jack was trying to make his hobby profitable, buying and reselling objects in auctions, but he needed money to invest. This second idea made him happier, and by our second interview, it had taken the form of his long-term plan, hoping that a part-time job would allow him to save the money to invest. Jack also hoped that his age would help him to get an extension and combine placement with a part-time job or his hobby-business idea.

Like Jack, Timothy was considering resuming the job search and told me he was writing a list of people he knew around town that could help to “to put a word” for him; Timothy’s options were also part-time and seasonal (e.g. Christmas-season shift at the post-office). Timothy was critical about the scheme time-limit and was worried about his future pension:

The only disadvantage I have about the scheme is the maximum of time, say you do three years here, you finish, at the end, after the three years, you’re back on social welfare, which I think it’s very unfair (...) the maximum you get is three to six years, and then you’re back to square one again, you know what I mean, it doesn’t make sense (...) I’m getting to an age now that I just want to get something maybe for the next ten, twelve years, I can get a pension out of it and maybe settle then (...) I’m fifty-six, I’ll be fifty-seven in March, the clock is ticking. (Timothy, 56)

Michael had a long-term plan for his future to which he had given much thought. He was a carpenter who had developed an interest in computers and, unable to afford training, taught himself how to program. Michael’s life took a turn when he was sent to prison for two years. Since the time of his release, five years ago, finding a job had been difficult, but he had kept learning about computers, and getting the formal qualification that he lacked had become his immediate plan. Michael’s position was unusual among this group because he was open to retraining - moreover in IT, which was dreaded by the rest of the group -:

I'm hoping to go to college in September this year (...) I created a few programs, I even created a few websites, so I've got quite a wide range, but I got no certificate for any of them (...) I want to get into college to get that piece of paper, you know, go and get that piece of paper it makes it a lot easier, people would be more "oh, you've got the piece of paper, okay, see what you can do". (Michael, 59)

Michael was convinced that the only way forward was to create his occupation and become self-employed:

I'm 59 years of age this year, and the chances of me getting a job are very slim, so I'm gonna have to look at ideas where I can employ myself or work as a self-employed person, because companies are not gonna take me on (...) so I'm gonna have to get my own training. (Michael, 59)

Ronan had worked in academia abroad, and since coming back to Ireland, his inclusion to the labour market had been unsuccessful. Similar to Michael, Ronan was expecting that his placement position in a community project could lead to an employment opportunity in a new field. Ronan was still unsure how he could transform his involvement in this project into a concrete possibility, but as he had lost hope in getting a job within his field, reconverting through placement was his next best option.

When assessing the current context and its possibilities and barriers, participants identified their age as the main issue limiting their reincorporation to the labour market. As they had evaluated earlier, their unsuccessful pre-placement job search and the lack of responses was somehow telling them "you are too old". Thus, their alternative plans, such as doing time, were informed by this experience. Age was an omnipresent element across these participants' deliberations about their future chances, well summarised in Michael's and Joe's words:

I may have the knowledge and the experience and the adaptability, but how long are they gonna be able to keep me employed for, you know that's, a lot of the lads here they, most of us are sort of 50 or over, and we're all in that sort of age bracket where companies are gonna be less and less willing to take us on. (Michael, 59)

...when I became 60, right, then I was saying to myself, well, things are probably looking this is the way it's going to be, that people don't employ sixty-years-old, and, like, you've got to remember that friends of mine of the same age who were in the same position, they

couldn't get jobs either...so, it was a sort of, how would you say, a foregone conclusion.
(Joe, 61)

These men expressed feeling conflicted by the cultural and social meanings about older persons and the way the labour market perceived them. These discourses shaped, for example, the idea - expressed by participants themselves - that younger workers were preferred because of their flexibility, vitality and even looks, among other features, that gave them more chances in the labour market and beyond. While these participants seemed to agree with this idea, they complained about employers' unwillingness to assess their abilities for a job. As Jack expressed: *"I don't feel old, but they tell me I am"*. Labelled as "too-old-to-get-a-job", participants assumed that this was dictating their range of possibilities, decreasing as they were getting closer to retirement age. Even Ronan, with a third-level degree, could not escape the age barrier, challenging the idea that education would have, somehow, protected them, as some participants expressed.

The experience of helping others (Chapter Five), family life and hobbies counterbalanced the feeling of being disregarded because of their age. Participants were considering their future and making choices within their range of circumstances, and the age constraint was not strictly paralysing. Some sought to by-pass the age barrier by thinking of alternative self-made paths, like Michael, Ronan and Jack; while Steven and Timothy were about to resume the job search. Older participants, on the other hand, felt less optimistic and had accumulated much frustration during their experience of not getting responses. Paradoxically, participants' age was potentially an enabler for those who wanted to get an extension, specifically those over 60.

Together with age, the transport was a common difficulty identified by these men limiting the scope of their (actual or hypothetical) job search. Searching beyond the local area was for some an impossible task given the poor availability of public transport in some villages, the cost of bus fare, and the bus timetable that, for example, made shift-work very difficult. Transport was not a minor aspect, and other participants outside this group also mentioned it. Steven insisted on this point as a barrier, for example, to do shift-work that started or finished outside the bus timetable. Henry identified the transport barrier to search for a job outside his area as well as applying for another scheme outside. In some localities, participants would need to take two buses each-way, increasing their expenses in relation to the prospective wages, and none of them had cars. Henry illustrated this aspect well:

I have no transport and it's a big loss, so, you'd be looking somewhere in the local area for work (...) because shift-work, I wouldn't be able to do shift-work because I wouldn't have the transport to go up and down all the time. (Henry, 61)

Overall, these men shared a stance towards the future marked by their experience of getting closer to retirement age and seeing their chances of regaining employment decreasing. Their general outlook and feeling about the future tended to be pessimistic while retaining some hope. In the light of the future they had imagined for themselves, and the future they imagined after placement, there was a *discontinuity* marked by the *contextual changes* that they observed. The future appeared very much tied to these external forces, such as the labour market and the “rules” about older/younger workers, public transport, the obsolescence of some of their occupations, or the rules about schemes’ extensions.

The notion of *doing time* echoed quite well what most of these participants were doing, since doing time was not the absence of a course of action but *their* course of action, it was their most suitable plan within their contextual and emotional circumstances. Doing time, waiting, postponing, were ways of dealing with the uncertain immediate future, and the liminal in-between of placement was complementary to this stance. Doing time, interestingly, emerged as a gendered strategy, since women of similar age displayed quite a different stance.

The next section focuses on the stance displayed by women of different ages returning to work.

6.3.2 Women returning to work: a bright future for a different self

An optimistic stance towards the future emerged consistently across women returning to work, which comprised women between 28 and 64 years of age. Most of these women had quit their last job to prioritise care commitments, while others were made redundant. The experience of changing by losing, connected to unemployment, had been central for these women who saw their confidence, self-esteem and sense of worth diminished, as Chapter Four illustrated. Generally, these women shared a positive feeling about the future, focusing on the potential opportunities that placement and the current context could offer.

6.3.2.1 The future in the past

How had these women imagined and planned their futures in the past? There were some early school leavers among this group. Gwen, Andrea, and Claudia told me how much they hated school and the little connection they saw between school and their interests, discarding the idea of further education. They had left school at fifteen and taken a course (hairdressing and secretarial), mostly,

as they saw it now, to obtain their parents' approval rather than to satisfy a vocational dream. These three participants were not pressed by economic difficulties to leave school to work as the men expressed above. In contrast, going for further studies was the path that Celia and Carol had dreamed of when younger, but could not pursue because they had to work to support their families. As Celia expressed, getting a job at an early age to help the family "*was the way it was*" and she was proud of her efforts:

I couldn't afford it, back then my Mum didn't have money to put me into third-level education, and that was the way it was, I went there and work, you get a job, I mean, I had three jobs when I was nineteen-years-old (Celia, 47)

Tamara finished school without any idea of what she wanted and started to work. As she told me, the later decision of studying childcare had to do more with what was affordable than with a new-found vocational awareness. By the time she co-produced her placement position in a new field, she was longing for a career change. Violet took the first job available, in a factory, a few days after finishing school. She had dreamed of becoming a vet, but not too seriously since she disliked studying and knew she could not afford it. Generally, most of the women in this group worked at a young age and before becoming mothers. Only one of these participants, Joan, went to college after school; Breda and Lucy completed further education as mature students. These participants had worked in a range of areas, such as retail, secretarial and admin work, beauty salons, factory work, youth work and childcare.

Most of these women recognised having thought of their future selves as mothers. Forming a family and having children was a central aspect of their life plan, as Breda emphatically expressed:

I think if I say life plan, I'm kind of halfway through it (chuckles), like my plan was to, like, obviously have kids and I've achieved that. (Breda, 28)

Celia and Claudia had faced difficulties in becoming mothers, but they did not stop pursuing this central dream, as both recalled their efforts:

I always had a life plan, so my plan when growing up, I always wanted to get married which I did [laughs] very young, and I always wanted to have children, now, I struggled to have children (...) For me was a massive achievement in my life that I was able to have IVF and have two children. (Celia, 47)

We were trying for a couple of years for kids, so that was a big part taken over your life, you know, so when that did happen, I was all about them, all about kids, kids, kids.
(Claudia, 37)

These women's images of their future selves incorporated motherhood as a fundamental component of their lives, providing them with what they construed as a vital source of identity and biographical sense. Women from different generations situated family formation at the centre, and from there on, other options were taken, such as those related to employment. It was at the core of this "life plan", as Breda and Celia named it above, where the dilemma for balance as well as the driver for a different future self would emerge. Motherhood, nonetheless, was expressed as an evolving identity as children grew older and new family and personal needs arose.

6.3.2.2 The future after placement

These women had faced unemployment as stay-at-home-mothers. The experience of placement as an in-between was a productive period for these women, not only favouring the experience of regaining confidence, self-esteem and self-worth, but also allowing them to discern and imagine their future selves and career paths. Regaining employment and progressing, although very much wanted, was not seen as an end in itself (e.g. to achieve upward mobility), since the horizon for these women was very much about *fulfilment*. Fulfilment emerged as a delicate combination between family needs and personal needs, where work held a central role as a vehicle to realise a *personal project* which was frequently referred to, in participants' words, as "being more than a mother". Consequently, the route forward after placement was, unanimously, getting a job. These participants shared a positive assessment of the possibilities that placement and the changing context could offer to this plan, which took the form of a "career change" or an on-going "search", allowed by the suspended time. None of these women considered an extension to their placement.

Especially women with younger children, such as Tamara, Andrea and Joan expected going back to work as a means of detaching from their maternal role as their primary source of identity. Andrea's words reflected this longing, recalling her first days in placement:

...it showed me that I'm more than a Mummy and a wife, I can be Andrea, and that was a thing that I loved when I went in, that people called me Andrea, you know, not Mummy, I was "that's me, I have a name, it's Andrea!". (Andrea, 39)

Sharing the longing for a different future self, some of these participants were considering a "career-change". The concomitant experiences of having co-produced their position according to their interests and helping others (Chapter Five) were clear triggers in this process. Gwen, who

was divorced with a son about to finish school, was considering a career-change driven by her experience of discovering a “social” interest through her placement. Gwen shared her internal conversation, looking back and forth, challenging herself to go forward:

I might end up going into that type of work, finding work placements for people like myself that are long-term unemployed (...) I'm willing to take up courses and training more than I'd thought in the last couple of years, and I kind of go “why I didn't do that years ago?” and then I sit back and say “well, you didn't do it because you were too lazy to do it, or you didn't think it was going to be of any value, or you just don't listen to anybody”, so, that's kind of where I'm coming around, which is great. (Gwen, 50)

Similarly, Celia was motivated by the experience of helping others and, not only wanting to go into something “social”, she was even considering applying for the supervisor's job for which she felt confident. This renewed confidence in Celia echoed the process of changing by regaining:

I'd like to get into social work like, you know, maybe counselling and...I've looked at courses, like being a counsellor and help and give back to others (...) [supervisor] is due to retire, so, I kind of, you know, I don't know, maybe I'll apply for his job (...) I know I can do it, I know I have the ability to do it. (Celia, 47)

The experience of co-production also opened new fields for these women that gave them the challenge and the change most of them wanted. Tamara was trying out a new area of work, as she had wanted to break away from “the one box” of childcare and being a mother, as she emphatically expressed:

I enjoyed working with kids, like I stayed eight years there, I really enjoyed working with kids, but since I had my own two, I don't want to work in that again! [laughs] because I'd be just nonstop, you know, working in childcare, coming home to mind children (...) that's why I wanted something different because I've been stuck in the one box for so long. (Tamara, 28)

Entering into a new field would require training and experience which they were obtaining through the experience of placement, up to some extent. Whether they would be ready to compete for a job in the new field, once placement was over, was not taken into consideration – at least not for the time being.

Other women within this group, such as Violet, did not have a specific image of what she wanted to do after placement, but knew that she wanted to do something “new”. After ten years at home and after having worked in only one place, Violet was slowly regaining confidence and allowing herself to think about her future, which as mentioned earlier, was encouraged by the sense of “having time to figure it out”. While finding out what she wanted to do after placement, she was focusing on regaining confidence and experience.

While age was the main barrier for the men over 50, the *balance* was the main issue for these women. Fulfilment emerged as the horizon for these women’s imagined futures; an evolving understanding of fulfilment that was now more focused on their internal needs and their desire to be challenged. While becoming a mother had been a central part of their future in the past, becoming “more than a mother” was now, paradoxically, a central part of their future longings. Balance emerged, then, as a threat, and also as a task that needed crafting. The struggle for balance between family and work was not something new for these women, and many recalled having faced this dilemma during their past periods working and combining work with care. Somehow giving it now a different sense of urgency, work was presented by these women not only as a source of income but as a vehicle for their desire to have a personal project.

Balance was influenced by cultural notions around motherhood and many of these women spoke about *guilt*. Andrea, a mother of three, was the first participant who brought up the topic of guilt into the conversation, and from then on, I started theoretically sampling for this emotion among the mothers in the study, emerging as a component of balance. Andrea dwelled largely upon the meaning of work and her struggle for balance. In this quote, she recalled the moment she received the letter from the scheme and was pressured by her family to refuse:

My family and everyone were like just, “no, you only had a baby, like, tell them that you can’t get a job, you can’t drive, or tell them...”, you know, everyone was coming up with all these reasons, you know, why I shouldn’t do it, but I wanted to do it, I was just pretending, I was like “yeah, yeah, I’m gonna tell them this, of course I am”. (Andrea, 39)

The guilt was problematic and caused mixed feelings and, at its worst, held the potential of immobilising. Joan recalled her internal struggle for balance when she was working and commuting daily. She felt guilty for not seeing her children during the day, and despite economic pressures decided to quit her job:

I reached the point where I asked my son what he liked the most about his first year in primary school, and he said, “the days you collected me Mummy”, and I collected him twice, twice in the year, so it was really tough trying to get that work balance. (Joan, 37)

Joan’s experience echoed the struggle of other women in this group, who felt divided into two competing spheres. Placement, on the other hand, provided Joan and others with a “better deal” in terms of hours, proximity to home and relaxed norms, as Joan and others described:

My hours are quite flexible, I can finish today at three o’clock pick my kids from school and be back, I have a meeting here today at eight, so my husband is back from work then so, we make it work as a family. (Joan, 37)

Celia was one of the few women, along with Breda, who rejected guilt and were critical of the effects of staying at home for long periods, as Celia emphatically expressed:

I never, no, because I always felt, well, I’m doing this for them, I’m working to make their lives better so, why should I feel guilty? (...) I’d probably feel more guilty if I was staying at home because I think it’s pointless, you’re wasting your life, you get baby-brain. (Celia, 47)

Moving forward and progressing in a career path, and therefore achieving a better balance, seemed possible as children grew older, as Celia also explained:

I know they can look after themselves and they, you know, they don’t need me to be there all the time, that they have their own lives, like, they do what they want to do, now I have the time to give to something. (Celia, 47)

Joan, who had younger children, was waiting for that moment to go for her next personal dream:

I set my heart in things, I wanted to get the Master, I wanted to achieve certain things, mmm, I’d like to do a PhD, but I said I’d give myself ten years before, before I do that, until the kids are older (...) but my dream is to move forward. (Joan, 37)

As guilt emerged as a threat for women’s desire to regain work and progress, the argument of “giving an example” emerged as a strategy to cope and to lessen the feeling and give it a different projection. Looking at the long-term future, these women made sense of their guilt through their

aspiration to see their children becoming “good people”, as some worded it, and having learned the value of work from their example as working mothers. Breda gave a clear vision about this:

There are people who go to yoga, that go to clubs and go out, you find it very hard to do anything like that for yourself because you feel guilty, there are mornings that you go to work and you feel guilty (...) but then you have to do it, you know...like, I know the benefits of staying at home but I do think there are lots of benefits for your child to see you working, more so than, you know, you're teaching them that you don't get everything for nothing. (Breda, 28)

It is worth noting that the desire to transmit a work ethic to their children as a sort of legacy extended beyond this group to most participants who had children.

The work-family balance was an omnipresent element in the future thinking of these women. Their ideal future saw their future selves working, contributing and developing their skills; and to get there they needed to adjust and, consequently, these women considered a part-time job or a full-time job near home as the best choices. Especially those with younger children wanted to get a part-time job – similar to placement hours – that would allow them to be present for their children. Economic pressures were also relevant, and they needed the income; however, different urgency was expressed between those who were the sole earner for their families and those who were not.

Age emerged as a less central aspect for these women when compared to the experiences of men over 50. Women over 45, such as Celia and Gwen, did express concern about the way employers looked at women of their age and, similarly to men, assumed that age was playing a part in not having regained employment before. Nonetheless, they kept their motivation high and focused on a future that, somehow, looked brighter. Carol summarised part of this more positive attitude, which also highlighted the role of cultural conceptions about older persons:

If you listen in society people can't help themselves and, I'm, obviously because of my age, like, I'm sixty-four, I'm aware of what people, people perceive you're sixty you're old, you're just old, you know, but times have changed because, my grandmother, my grandmother died when she was sixty, and I remember, you know, she was an old woman then at sixty, so my own mother like would, I wouldn't say she looked a lot younger but things are different, we...the world is different I think for women (...) I've heard people saying “oh my God, I can't do that, you can't do that, you're too old to do that”, you're

not too old! You can do anything, if you can't do it you can't do it, but don't blame your age, don't let that restrict you. (Carol, 64)

Carol represented an interesting case among these women, sharing insights about the interconnection of gender and age. Carol's narration embodied three generations of women as she made sense of her life in the light of her mother's, who never worked, and saw in her daughters' choices and struggles the future she had aspired. Carol worked from a young age, got married and quit work, "*worked for my husband's business (...) until I decided I wanted to go out and do something myself, get my own career going after raising the kids*", and got an administrative position in a state-owned company. After 12 years of progressing in her job, the recession hit, and she was let go. Carol's daughter was struggling with her work-family balance around that time, and for a couple of years Carol was the grandmother looking after her daughter's home, until she felt that this situation was leading her to stop striving and, again, "*I wanted more than just to be a babysitter*". Carol got a placement in a community initiative where she had to administer a website and design newsletters. She happily took the IT training. As the end of placement grew closer, and worried about her future and the need of an income, Carol dared to ask the volunteer chair of the initiative - a solicitor with his law firm - for help in getting a job. Two weeks after finishing her placement, Carol got a temporary part-time job in the law firm. When we spoke last, she was two weeks into this job, and told me: "*I am delighted because at my age now I'm only starting there*".

For Carol, her desired future became a reality much quicker, but how was she dealing with being a 64-year-old woman, starting a new job? She recalled telling herself:

"Oh my God, all these years later you're walking into an office, and you're starting at this level", and I was kind of saying to myself, "well, how do you feel about it?", "I feel okay because the environment where I'm working is accepting me", now, I do have, I'll say, there is an office manager and she has used words like "I know this would be a little more difficult for you, but, you'll get used to it", so, I have to rise above that, because that's kind of quite condescending. (Carol, 64)

Carol had overcome the significant barrier of recruitment and was now in the workplace, but this environment was not free from stereotypes about age. Dealing with the polite-subtle discrimination from her female younger co-workers was the challenge that Carol was currently facing.

The way these women were thinking about their future was very much grounded in their *desire for change*; many wanted to try a new type of work but, moreover, they wanted to become someone different while keeping the right balance between personal and family needs. The liminal in-between of placement offered them time to figure out this future and to gain experience and training and, especially, to regain confidence and focus. These women aspired to redirect their futures to amplify their chances of fulfilment, but they did not desire to break away with their past selves radically. They felt contentment for their options but did not want motherhood to colonise the whole meaning of their lives and identities.

The next section presents the third stance towards the future, represented by those who prioritise the best fit for their plans.

6.3.3 Searching for the right fit: a future on my own terms

This stance towards the future emerged from participants who focused on what they did not want to do and become, and explained their options mostly based on their personalities. These participants, Thomas, Adam and Bob, wanted to be in control of their future and were critical of the welfare system, but had a positive experience of placement. They were in their mid-40s and aware of being at a crossroad in their lives. These participants had had a varied employment trajectory and were driven by the search for meaningful projects but constrained by the circumstances, mostly economic. They actively avoided stress, and two of them had tried self-employment ventures.

6.3.3.1 The future in the past

The future in the past, for these participants, had a sense of exploration and freedom, marked - in the cases of Bob and Thomas - by an artistic interest or a “passion”. Thomas, with a passion for music, did not want a “traditional” life. After finishing school, he took a year off and travelled, and later took different jobs for which he felt no interest. Thomas described himself as “a drifter” and having difficulties in coping with stress:

I'm a kind of a drifter, you know what I mean, I don't settle in places, I work for a while and then I move on, you know what I mean, if I get bored or something (...) I suppose that's why I never settle, mmm...I suffer from stress, and if something gets stressful and gets monotonous I'll move on, I won't stay. (Thomas, 44)

Similarly, Bob imagined his future linked to his passion for photography, which he has pursued intermittently, having an incomplete degree and a failed business. In between, he attempted

different jobs and travelled extensively. Bob summarised his life as “*a comedy of mistakes*” and was regretful about the way his life turned out. Adam finished school without any idea about his future, and despite - or because, as later he reflected - his father’s insistence on education, he decided to travel and take different jobs. Adam reflected on what he called a “*life-time journey*” searching for a vocation, having tried counselling and coaching. Partners and children were not a priority, and only Adam, in his late 30s, had formed a family.

These participants had wished that their future in the past would unfold as their choice and not as an imposition, and consequently, they kept moving and changing places and jobs. For Bob, Thomas and Adam, their personalities were a driver and a motive for their actions; they mostly explained and justified their decisions based on “this is who I am”. When jobs became uncomfortable, monotonous, meaningless, they recalled experiencing severe stress. In that sense, their desire to live according to their choices and resist impositions was very much related to their difficulties to deal with anxiety and stress, as they all recalled having gone through “difficult” emotional periods when they felt overwhelmed by responsibility and very structured work environments, all issues that can be linked to their mental health. In turn, these experiences were very much related to how they came to be unemployed.

Trying to translate their artistic passion into a business to provide them with the freedom and meaning they strived for, was for Bob and Thomas a perfect solution, and they both had tried to set up businesses. However, they struggled with the implementation of the idea. Not enough money to invest, lack of knowledge about the market and the event of the recession, were the reasons given to explain the failure of their attempts. Thomas explained what setting up his business meant for him:

I think it was freedom, mmm, like I mean, I didn't feel constrained working, I didn't have to go by the rules or anything like that of other places of work, I was on my own, I was free to go, you know, come and go as often as I pleased, mmm, there was no pressure.
(Thomas, 44)

Adam’s journey, similar to Bob’s and Thomas’, took a turn when he became a father in his early-40s. As he recalled, this event refocused his energies and scope:

I suppose in one sense children have been great for me because...in one sense it allows me to take a lot of things out of myself because it's not about me anymore, well it is, but it doesn't feel like that, you know, it's more about them (...) I find myself attracted to certain things for some reason and I go for it, and if I like them great and if I don't, you

know, mmm, but I suppose the last ten years I've personally found it quite difficult until my children came along. (Adam, 45)

These participants had attempted to create a life following their search for meaning and trying to avoid conventional constraints; however, they found it difficult to achieve this and had encountered structural difficulties in the pursuit of their preferences, especially financial limitations.

6.3.3.2 The future after placement

These participants expressed knowing themselves and their needs well, and this awareness made them sometimes less available to compromise. They shared long narrations of their lives and insightful remarks about their decisions, regrets and continuous search. Still, they had not been able to find a (career)path and their lives had been financially unstable. Thus, they expressed that acquiring a level of financial security for their future was their current goal. To get there, they wanted to do it on their terms, as much as possible, meaning not having to take “bad jobs” or let themselves be pressured, especially by the welfare rules.

These participants thought about their future after placement “on their own terms”, meaning they would try to find “the right fit” between their personalities, needs and interests or, as Thomas expressed it: “*something that works for me*”. Placement provoked new insights about what this fit could be, and so these participants considered three main future paths: doing a second scheme, a career change, or setting up a business.

Doing a second scheme was their first option. This option, however, would not be straightforward and they needed to apply to move on to another scheme (in their case, moving from Tús to CE). Thomas and Bob were happy with the idea of continuing in the same community organisation; however, they were not sure how the procedure for an extension worked or if it was possible. They enjoyed the idea of continuing, but perhaps imbued by the liminal in-between, they let time go before taking a concrete measure. Adam was more proactive and considered asking the organisation directly if they would ask the scheme to keep him on.

The idea of a career change emerged from the experience of trying a new activity during their placement. Co-producing their placement position gave these participants a positive start, especially after their negativity when asked to join the scheme. Adam expressed that his placement was “*the most rewarding job*” he ever had and was impressed by the community spirit. Thus, Adam wanted to continue involved in an initiative oriented to benefit the community and wanted to work in the county council. Nonetheless, he complained about the bureaucratic nature

of the job application process and its narrow scope to evaluate a varied employment experience like his, positively. He also considered his lack of training in that area as a potential barrier, along with his age. Thomas, on the other hand, was impressed by seeing himself “*doing something social*”, and by our second interview, he was considering going into that area while retaining the idea of a new business as a long-term plan. However, he was less convinced by the idea of retraining for that purpose. At the time of our first interview, Thomas was attempting a small-scale business which he had discarded by the second interview for its modest profit. He was by then considering a new business idea related to music. Becoming his own boss, having the freedom and doing something meaningful, were essential to Thomas’ future and, as he explained, he knew well what life he did not want for himself:

I don't wanna really go back to full-time employment working for somebody, because I think it'd stress me out...I just don't wanna be again in the same boat where I live and don't care so much. (Thomas, 44)

Bob, like Thomas, wanted to be his own. Bob told me about a new business idea he had after his first months of placement in a tourist information office, that would merge his passion for photography and the new-found interest in tourism. Despite the fuzziness of the idea, Bob was excited, but envisaged barriers: money to invest, not having a car, and his unfinished degree. Bob’s unfinished degree was an aspect to which he went back many times during the interviews, to express regret, or to see it as a barrier looking forward. Bob did not finish his degree for financial reasons and his inconstancy, as he summed up. Now, he saw himself in a lesser position compared to other photographers and pondered back and forth about the idea of going back to education:

I'm probably a bit old now to, you know what I mean, to actually do it, I'd love to go back to college, I'd love to go back to university but it's not possible really, it isn't, you know what I mean, with your bills and you know stuff like that (...) Would I put three years into this? I mean, psychologically, put three years into this, you know, there could be some part-time positions, but I can't see, I'm not gonna get hired for a photography job without a degree. (Bob, 44)

These participants saw their future selves doing something meaningful that also provided them with financial security. Fuelling this stance was the realisation of entering, in Adam’s words, “*the next twenty years of my work-life*”. They saw themselves at a crossroad: they had experiences they did not want to repeat (bad jobs, failed enterprises, stress); they did not want to be

unemployed and endure the pressure of welfare; they had dreams they have not accomplished, and yet the years were passing. Bob's words, similar to Thomas' above, illustrated this dilemma:

I'm sure what I want to do, I worked in a factory, I worked in a bar, that's not what I wanna do, I have to be doing something that interests me or I get bored, there has to be something creative, you know, I know I have to pay the bills and all but, there is always a job, part-time or whatever, but if you're younger you have better prospects, if you go to university there are great jobs out there, but for someone of my age I think it's more, you wanna do what you love, you don't wanna be in a job that you know you're not happy.
(Bob, 44)

The right fit was problematic and underlined by a fragile tolerance to certain working conditions. Then, having control over their lives was something substantial for these men. They wanted to be free from the welfare rules and to prolong the liminal by moving on to a second scheme was their way to get it, discarding, in Thomas' words, the "nine to five" type of job that "welfare wanted" them to have.

Adam's situation as a father added other variables to his right fit. He had been a stay-at-home father for two years before joining the scheme; he was specific about the conditions he needed to go back to work: a meaningful job (ideally something to benefit the community), local to be near the children, ideally part-time, and the "right salary" to afford childcare and still have money left. Adam explained how, up to now, the combination of placement and being in charge of his children worked perfectly for him and his wife; she had an ascending career and a salary that lessened the urgency of getting a job (an urgency that Thomas and Bob did feel). Thus, a second scheme was his first option. Adam was honest in explaining how this arrangement meant for him using the system "to my own benefit". As Adam explained:

I'm using the state to my own benefit which I really admit, I can't admit that in the Intreo office (...) it's just where I find myself in, my situation, and I'm unwilling to move out of that situation until a job comes along that I think is right for me and works for me, and there are lots of variables. (Adam, 45)

These participants were crafting an alternative for their immediate future after placement similar to the men over 50. Doing time through prolonging their time on the scheme was an attractive option for them. They wanted to do it, however, as a way to have control over the timing of their decisions while waiting and searching for the "best fit". Placement and the experience of liminality had syntonised well with these men's personalities and little tolerance to stress; they

were enjoying the flexibility and suspended urgency while finding in the community spirit another way to express their creativity. Whether moving on to another scheme was possible, that was an open question that they have not addressed fully yet (except for Adam as I will present later).

The next section explores the stance towards the future taken by those participants with health issues.

6.3.4 Needing more time before the future comes

As Chapter Four described, some participants had become unemployed because of physical and mental health problems. Anne, Lucy and Geraldine expressed their desire to work but were aware of needing more time before feeling ready to go back. These participants expressed combined feelings of pessimism and optimism when thinking about their future. Most of them were deeply affected by past life-events and felt vulnerable and neglected by welfare rules that disregarded their health situation.

6.3.4.1 The future in the past

Anne was one of the participants who had, in equal measure, the most detailed image of the future she had wanted, and the most significant frustration for her broken plans. Anne wanted to be a postwoman and pursued it by going through the application process twice. She described to me in detail how she had imagined her life as a postwoman, to later express with the same passion how she had felt let down by unclear institutional rules that never explained why she did not get the job: *“I was not given a chance”*. Suffering from depression and since being diagnosed with a chronic physical illness about six years ago, she felt: *“my life was put on hold”*.

Lucy, on the other hand, had had little expectations about her future and left school at fifteen. She recalled coming from a deprived area and a difficult family, where planning for the future was something that did not make sense to her. She married young, had a child, and separated. In her 30s, she decided to go back to education to pursue her new vocation of youth work, as she narrated:

It was only in my early thirties when I started then realising I wanted to do youth work, I sort of fell into voluntary work first and then, mmm, got my degree in [educational institution] in social studies, so... it was hard having to work full-time and trying to get my qualification at the same time, but it was what I needed to do to enable me to do what I wanted to do at the time, which was working with early school leavers (...) I was so proud of myself because it was something I never ever thought I would have a degree,

you know, it's just something, where I came from, it was something you just didn't get.
(Lucy, 55)

Anne narrated her broken plans, illness and other events from the position of suffering from external forces acting against her, and she expressed: *"I have no choice in the matter"*. Geraldine left school at sixteen and started to work in retail, an area she enjoyed. Geraldine saw her life disrupted when she experienced harassment at work that worsened the depression she had developed after her mother's death. Geraldine also narrated her life from the position of someone who had been wronged by others while having no power at all. In contrast, Lucy's decision of going back to education was her way of taking control of a path that had been more defined by her upbringing than by her choices, as she explained in the light of her siblings' lives. Lucy told me that she saw herself responsible for the deterioration of her health as the result of committing fully to her work and burning herself out.

Overall, this group shared a collective experience marked by illness and tragic life-events that tended to be narrated from the stance of someone who had little power.

6.3.4.2 The future after placement

These participants benefited greatly from the sense of being on a break that placement offered, which they signified as a sort of sanctuary where they could be away from the pressures of "real" life. These participants wanted placement to last into the future until they were ready to pass the threshold. The time they felt they needed was not measured in days and months, and the thought of the end of placement was a source of acute worry. Consequently, the end of placement was these participants' central topic when talking about their future, haunting their present experience and causing anxiety. Life after placement appeared daunting and vulnerable. The end of the in-between was foreseen as the end of the support they were receiving from supervisors, colleagues and organisations.

Lucy and Geraldine wished to continue and felt frustrated at the rigidity of the rules that did not contemplate extensions for health reasons and did not consider their specific difficulties; as Lucy expressed *"all they see is me unemployed"*. Lucy weighted different aspects that were crucial for her future thinking:

...When it comes to an end that's gonna be sad, because then I'm gonna be back in the situation again where I'm gonna be pushed into, you know, try and find work (...) I think that's probably what will happen again [asked to do JobPath for a second time], not that will be my choice but, what I'd hope to do would be maybe possible to find a CE scheme

at the end of this, because part-time suits me, I also have my mother, she is living with me in the house, she is seventy-six, she is just starting in the early stages of dementia, so I give her support as well, but social welfare, they don't see that, you know, all they see is me unemployed. (Lucy, 55)

Anne, on the other hand, liked the idea of finding a job that suited her health, but, at the same time, she felt anxious about finding such a position. Anne had one more year on the scheme and was focused on getting as much training as she could. Losing her medical card was also a worry and Anne, who was 57, felt vulnerable, knowing that she would not have the help of a partner or children in her old age.

Anne, Lucy and Geraldine wanted to work. They saw working as positive for their mental health as well as a way to be connected to others and found the community experience of placement very rewarding. They wished, however, to be allowed a different timeframe to progress at their own pace, and, consequently, the extension of the placement experience was their ideal situation. However, the feasibility of an extension was unclear. On the one hand, there were no health grounds to grant extensions, but, on the other hand, Anne and Geraldine, who were on the CE scheme, could have their cases considered because of their age (55 and over). Lucy was on Tús, which allowed one year on the scheme; thus, Lucy would need to move on to CE, but this decision was governed by unclear norms.

Despite being in their mid-50s, these women felt more worried and restricted by their health than by their age. Finding a job that suited their physical and mental health was expressed as a more vivid worry. Financial security was also a continuous and central preoccupation since they did not have networks or extended family to help them.

The next sub-section briefly reviews the case of a couple of participants with a stronger sense of career making.

6.3.5 Progressing and improving

The four stances reviewed in the above sections were participants' predominant stances towards the future. Two participants, however, displayed a stronger drive towards the future moved by career ambitions and self-improvement that set them apart from the other groups. Placement played a relevant role in these participants' plans, and the position they co-produced was selected trying to connect it to their broader interests as to advance their career plans.

6.3.5.1 The future in the past

Peter, who was 35, was invested in making a career as an illustrator - despite the setbacks - but his field was competitive, and he could not progress as quickly, and as much he had wished. Peter had to take part-time jobs in retail while trying to set up his own business after securing a grant, but this was affected by the recession.

Leo had been living in Ireland for several years, coming from a non-English speaking country. At the height of the Celtic Tiger, Leo set up a business that was very successful but closed down during the recession. Being a businessman, like his father, had been his imagined future. Leo had a difficult time trying to make sense of his broken life-plan; however, he took control of what was within his power, as he explained:

I was very depressed, very depressed...and that day I said no, no, no, I have to look for a solution (...) only stay positive, you know, it's like, you seek the cause of the problem and find and choose an effective solution and take necessary action to resolve this problem, it's like, I said I lost my job, what is the solution now? I have to change my career so, what I'm gonna do? The barrier was English, I had to go to school, you see. (Leo, 37)

Leo progressed through different language courses provided by the State until he was able to graduate from a healthcare course, which he had devised as his new career. Leo was proud of his educational achievements, as he told me emphatically, stressing the difficulties he had faced and his strong will to overcome them. An important aspect for Leo was to become an example for his children.

6.3.5.1 The future after placement

Peter, an illustrator, believed in planning and was always devising short- and long-term routes for his career. Peter planned to get a job in animation, an industry he saw booming in Ireland. As he explained, international studios were basing their operations in Ireland, and that contextual element was presenting opportunities for him; however, Peter needed to shift his initial portfolio. Placement, he explained, suited this plan by giving him the flexibility to devote hours to this task. Peter explained how his profession has been changing rapidly, and how the animation industry has become the dream job and, luckily for him, studios were now in Ireland:

I'm trying sort of stir my portfolio towards more animation, but I don't have animation qualification or experience, so I'm trying to get like a little bit of storyboard and experience, and then put it into some of the big animation studios (...) If I can get my foot in that door that's a great industry right now, it's huge, they're all over the place because

they can't get people into Dublin because the rents are so high, so they have opened studios in different parts of the country. (Peter, 35)

Obtaining a job in this industry and making a career out of it was Peter's plan and dream. He contemplated different steps, such as building up his portfolio, doing online commissions to support himself, networking and assisting at specific events, and working on his online presence which he explained was essential. Peter explained he was responsible for controlling what was "within his reach" and was optimistic:

I'm optimistic...within the circumstances within my control yeah, you know, I mean, you can't control who is gonna be the president or anything like, but you can vote, yeah, I am optimistic. (Peter, 35)

Leo finished his healthcare training but could not get a job because he needed experience. The request to join the scheme and his need for experience matched well, and he was able to get a suitable placement position. Leo's image of the future was to get a job and, later, go back to education to become a nurse. He was a firm believer in education which was, in his words, "the key". Leo focused on improving himself and practised meditation and guided exercises to program his mind with positive thoughts. After going through a difficult time during the recession, he now saw change as an ally:

You have to accept change, you have to adapt for the new challenges, be open to new ways of doing things, yeah, if we accept change everything is gonna be possible...because I put in my mind, everything is positive, when you're positive you can get anything you want, you see, and healthcare was tough for me, was so tough (...) English is my second language, you see, but I worked hard. (Leo, 37)

These participants displayed a strong belief in their will and motivation; they had a strategic way of thinking and engaging with placement and the future, aspiring to an upward trajectory, more visible than in other participants' stances. To some extent, other participants, such as Celia, Rose and Breda, could also find a place within this group, given their strong will to progress career-wise.

Generally speaking, thinking about the future involves devising courses of action and planning. Most participants, nonetheless, preferred not to refer to their images about the future as "planning". The next section explores this dimension.

6.4 Common ground: hoping for the best and disbelief in planning

Is there a feasible continuity between the future aspirations expressed through these stances and the opportunities available outside the exceptional time of placement? Or, in other words, what are the participants' chances of achieving their preferred future paths? I should answer this question paraphrasing participants' own words: "*nobody knows what is around the corner*", "*we cannot plan the future, only hope for the best*". The uncertainty participants frequently referred to seemed to permeate their future thinking and predispose most of them towards *hoping instead of planning*. Uncertainty was a feature of the present context that made it difficult to navigate and to predict. Altogether, participants' future thinking had in common a disinclination to plan, which seemed grounded in their understanding of planning as a long-term vision into the future that necessitated control over certain aspects, which was unattainable in the increasing contextual uncertainty and instability. Also, past experiences of planning had not gone as expected, and participants expressed disbelief based on this disappointment.

What then, if one does not plan? Hoping, trusting luck, faith or fate to "make things fall into place". This more *emotional* engagement with future thinking was a common dimension among many participants across the stances portrayed earlier. There were, of course, exceptions; however, the "planners", such as the last group discussed in the previous sub-section, represented a minority. Participants' leading position towards planning gravitated towards a common view sustained by statements such as: "*I go from day to day*", "*I do not plan*", "*what is the point in planning?*", "*going with the flow*", that were repeated in the voice of many different participants.

Thomas, as other participants did, told me about this sort of external logic that he saw guiding his life and which he trusted. He had endured disappointment, and this seemed to be the primary source of his inclination towards "not expecting" anything, as he expressed:

My life is all...something that's always worked out without me making plans (...) I don't expect...anything, you know, I just hope it works out, but, it's okay if it doesn't, no tragedy around or anything like that, I just hope for the best (...) When I think of the future I just hope for the best (...) I don't really think about the future much, whatever happens, happens. I don't wanna make plans because in case they don't work out. (Thomas, 44)

Accumulated disappointment and the fear of going through that again, elevated hope, faith and external forces to a central place while displacing planning and deeming it useless. Andrea's words also spoke of learning not to expect and not to plan, after experiencing disappointment:

My future now is just, definitely just day to day, I know it's not ideal and I know everybody should have some sort of plan...I don't (...) I can't, I've learned that you can make all the plans you like, and they can be ripped from underneath your feet tomorrow, so...I take every day as it comes and be thankful for that. (Andrea, 39)

Gwen also expressed a belief in external logic, which she applied to different events of her recent life, as she explained to me in detail, including being asked to join the scheme:

I very much believe in mind over matter, and also that saying, "what goes around comes around", if something is there for you it'll come around to you (...) that's my motto! (Gwen, 50)

At the same time, Gwen struggled with the fact that she was not in control of her life as she wanted to (e.g. having the money to take her son on holidays, doing things as used to), and spoke of not wanting to be pushed - for instance, to get any job - and how she was learning to do things "at my own pace". Her future, thus, was open:

I don't know, to be perfectly honest, I think when those times come, I think I'll just take it as it comes, I'm not going to stress out about it, I'm not going to stress out, do I have a job? (...) I'll just take it as it comes, if something is there or if something happens, well it's good it happens, and the time was right for it to happen, that's the way I'm going to look at things. (Gwen, 50)

Joan spoke openly about her faith in God as a guiding force in her life that helped her to cope with present and future decisions, such as the imminent end of her placement:

For me a lot of it is about my faith (...) everything I do, before I do anything I pray (...) all the time I invite God to use me in this role and, mmm, because of that it takes a lot of pressure off me (...) Faith is very important to me and that trust, that trust that this is where I feel I'm meant to be now, but I definitely trust that as things open up that I'll move on. (Joan, 37)

Participants were looking at the future from a post-recession outlook, which meant looking at the future as individuals who have been through a radical disruption that had played an important role in their unemployment and other aspects of their lives. Participants, as unemployed welfare recipients, shared a common context of uncertainty, financial restrictions and external pressures that interacted with their "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004) when imagining their future. Not

a small proportion of participants based their aspirations for their immediate future after placement on extending their time on the scheme, which to some extent – or a large extent – was founded on their assessment of having little prospect of regaining employment, as well as a job that would be meaningful and match their aspirations and ideas of fulfilment. Hoping instead of planning was also an emotional place from which to face the future and “let go” of anxiety and worries.

The next section presents a brief exploration into the experience of the end of placement.

6.5 End of placement: coming out of the liminal

The end of placement was, sooner for some, later for others, the visible signal of the end of the liminal and the coming of the future. The end of placement meant facing a “reality check”: testing the viability of the imagined future and the endurance of hoping for the best. I gained an insight into the experience of exiting placement from the experience of some participants who had completed their terms by the time of our second interview, and others who had recently completed when I met them first. I draw on the experiences of Tamara, Adam and Steven to illustrate this experience.

As Chapter Five explored, participants co-produced their positions and felt heard by supervisors. Interestingly, Tamara and Adam experienced their exit without much guidance from their supervisors, who seemed to have less presence as placement was nearing its end. Tamara had an encouraging experience of placement and, in our first interview, she mourned in advance the end of placement:

I'm kind of upset that it'll be over because I've done a lot for the placement, like, I've done so much for them, that it's actually dreading me leaving. (Tamara, 28)

When I met Tamara for a second time, it was three months after finishing her placement, and she was unhappy and surprised by the way her exit took place. Tamara did not receive a formal goodbye from the management of the organisation which, after having invested herself, made her feel disappointed thinking that her work had not been acknowledged:

A month before I finished I let all the girls and all the clients know that I was finishing on the 7th of September, because [supervisor], my supervisor, sent me out a letter, so I said I'll send an email in case they don't know that I'll be leaving (...) the main people, not even a goodbye, good luck, so I felt like...I was just [sighs], like, I never got told out

they were gonna keep me on or what was gonna happen in the future (...) I was kind of confused, I didn't want to leave, I was so upset. (Tamara, 28)

Still, Tamara was “tuned into the community mission” and excused the management of the organisation saying, for instance, that “*they are very busy women*”. At some point, Tamara expected getting a job in the organisation; still, she was waiting for the “last conversation” to ask about the possibility, but this conversation never took place.

Adam experienced an unsatisfactory end of placement and felt that his efforts and commitment to the organisation were ignored. He assessed his work as a contribution to the organisation; for instance, he applied and received grants for the organisation:

...that didn't finish so good, nothing really to do with the work but, mmm, there was no...how should I put it...there was no exit strategy at all (...) I think I finished on a Wednesday and there was no, there was no, thanks for your work, mmm, because I actually got, I managed to get a couple of grants for the office and they got all the grants, I got all the office painted inside, and we got lights in the outside, and tables tidied up, so, it was left in a much better state than when I arrived, you know, there was no coming down saying “thanks for your help” No, listen, I'm not needy but you do like to be thanked for your efforts, you know...I was just expecting somebody to come down, and maybe say “it's been great having you, thanks”. (Adam, 45)

Regarding the scheme, Adam spoke of the absence of closure from the scheme and the careless attention that his supervisor gave him:

...there was absolutely no exit, I actually thought the supervisor would maybe come down and say, you know, “how did you enjoy the scheme, here is what you can do going forward, is there anything else”, she didn't, there was nothing! [laughs] (...) after that time I think the supervisor was calling into the office, and I think somebody from the office said, there was no exit interview, there was nothing, and I think she realised then, and she made contact with me to meet but, we arranged to meet three times, but she always called it off, and in the end I think, God, I think we were about the end of November at this time, and I said look, it doesn't matter now, let's just call it a day, so, there was nothing, I was quite surprised by that. (Adam, 45)

Tamara received written notification from her supervisor informing the end of her placement (one year) and, overall, Tamara was satisfied with her supervisor's support during her placement.

Tamara and Adam were surprised by the absence of a formal closure of placement. Similarly, they did not have an evaluation from either side or verbal or written feedback. In the end, finishing placement was, for these participants, the opposite of the co-production experience, when they felt heard and wanted. As they finished their placement, other participants were waiting to occupy their positions, and one could presume that organisations have become accustomed to scheme participants arriving and leaving. It was not clear to me – since I did not have contact with organisations’ representatives - what this way of approaching the exit of participants was saying about how organisations understood the role of participants, and their role as sponsors within the scheme. Not having the organisations’ views about the scheme was one of the limitations of the study.

Another worry that added to the absence of “closure”, was the fact that, once out of the exceptional in-between of the scheme, they both were, again, officially unemployed. With no concrete prospects of a job, the only available option was - as other participants were anticipating – claiming Jobseekers’ Allowance again. The end of placement also meant losing the routine and the sense of purpose they had regained through placement, as Tamara expressed:

I was kind of lost of what to do, because I had to go back then and sign on, to go back on to the social welfare and, mmm, [sighs] I enjoyed working in the mornings, and then I was kind of lost for routine, you know, I was getting, I was getting on with that routine now. (Tamara, 28)

Adam was cynical and felt frustrated telling me about his interactions with welfare officials when trying, several times, to sign on for benefits. He had to go back to the same bureaucratic rituals that had been suspended during the “break” of placement:

I had to go in to do a job progression interview, which I’ve done, which I did about a year ago with them, and I went for the allotted time and I was finally taken twenty minutes after that by a woman, who started by saying she shouldn’t be doing it, it’s just that her colleague overrun, so instantly you’re like, but you don’t wanna be here, I don’t wanna be here, and really I wasn’t asked a single question, and what I mean by that is I wasn’t asked where I wanted to go, what my efforts are, how can they help me get there, it was just about filling an online form [sighs]...and I purposively sat back and I said absolutely nothing, and I wasn’t asked anything, and at the end I was handed a piece of paper saying “here is your job progression” [sighs] Really? [sighs] And you haven’t asked me anything? Waste of time. (Adam, 45)

Tamara also faced difficulties when signing on that made her wait for several weeks before her first payment, causing much emotional and financial distress. Concerning her imagined future, Tamara wanted to go for a career change inspired by her placement, and now she was looking for jobs in an area for which she felt highly motivated but had little experience:

I feel scared because I don't have much experience, just with this, being with Tús that time, but I've done a lot through the experience so I'm hoping that it can help me, I'm scared of a different career-change, but, I'm also excited at the same. (Tamara, 28)

Despite feeling scared, Tamara expressed feeling more confident and optimistic about her abilities to find a job she liked than when we first met, about six months earlier, and she indeed looked different to me.

Adam's first option was to move from Tús to CE. Before finishing, he asked the organisation to have him for a second period, but this was not successful because the scheme had already someone assigned for that position. Then, Adam tried to apply through the welfare office; however, three months later he was still trying to sort his reincorporation as welfare recipient in the first place, because of miscommunications between the welfare office and the scheme. All this was testing Adam's patience. Still, Adam was hoping that the person who had taken his position would not last, as a former colleague in the organisation was predicting, and so he would be able to "negotiate" his return:

I'm just sitting tight I suppose, but as I said there had been talks of this position becoming available within the [organisation] possibly by June. (Adam, 45)

Adam did not have solid ground to believe that he could get the position back if, eventually, it became available; however, he was trusting that his good performance – the same that he deemed unnoticed by the organisation's management – would make it possible. Tamara and Adam were hoping for the best.

Steven was the only participant who did not criticise the welfare requirement of an active job search; although he relaxed his job search once he started placement, eventually he got a reply from a building site. As a result, left placement two months before the end of his term. I learned this decision at the second interview with Steven; I was surprised since he had been categorical telling me he was tired of building sites' working conditions, and he was enjoying his placement very much. Steven's rationale for his decision showed the tension between what he wanted and what he was expected to do:

I had two months left to do, so after that two months I had to get a job anyway, so I was offered this job and I took it, the money was good, so I took the job and then realised [sighs deeply] not for me. I wanted to stay in the [placement organisation], I was more, I was doing what the social welfare wanted (...) that's what social welfare, as soon as I was offered a job I had to take it, if the social welfare found that I was offered a job and I didn't take it I'd be in trouble. (Steven, 43)

Steven lasted six weeks in a job he could not stand emotionally and physically, “*I hated it*” he told me. Going back to the type of job he did before placement made him realise that something had changed for him:

... it's busy, it's dusty, it's noisy, it's, I've done it for years and now I've discovered I don't want to do it anymore [chuckles] (...) just it wasn't for me anymore...I don't want to go back, too noisy, too busy, aaagg!...I'm getting older [chuckles] (...) my body isn't, I'm only, I'm, I just turned forty-three and I was older than my supervisor and the other fellas I was working with. (Steven, 43)

The site's environment was the complete opposite of the organisation where he was doing his placement. Steven told me in our first interview how he was, both surprised and pleased, that the staff did not treat him “*like a skivvy*” or shouted at him. During the six weeks, he missed the new environment and interactions he had rapidly got used to:

I missed it because when you go to a building site it's very rough, and it's not “would you do that?”, you know, it's just shouting and roaring, barking. (Steven, 43)

Steven's stance towards the future after placement was about finding a job, and so he did. In our first interview, he had expressed his doubts about going back to the type of job that had made him feel unwell but did not see other options and felt the pressure of the welfare rules. Steven brought his placement to an abrupt end, only to realise that he did not want to go back to building work. The experience of being treated “well” and doing something “outside” as he wished to, but in a friendlier environment, played an important part, along with his physical health. After quitting the job, Steven rang the organisation and, luckily for him, they wanted him back and offered them a temporary job (for three or four months) for a few hours a week, which was what the organisation could afford. In our second interview, he had been back in his placement organisation, now as a worker, for a couple of weeks, and was hoping they could afford to extend the hours and keep him.

6.6 Conclusions

The experience of placement, as participants' accounts construed it, described a liminal type of experience that located participants between past and future events and selves. The liminal placement gave them time, and participants occupied themselves thinking about their future after placement. To plan or not to plan? Hope, dream, postpone? Placement, thus, emerged as a time and place of internal work - *the self at work* - where stances towards the future were a core task. This chapter presented the five main stances displayed by participants, which integrated the past and future aspirations, as well as their assessment of their contextual circumstances.

The past was revisited by participants to examine the future they had imagined for themselves, and to trace continuities or breaks with the future ahead of them. The past selves had taken different forms at different moments in their trajectories, contingent to their circumstances: they had been younger workers fully able to sustain their families, they had been stay-at-home-mothers, they had been entrepreneurs, they had been unemployed; they had struggled, succeed, failed, started over. Participants' future selves were more or less promising depending on the circumstances of their present selves and how they were dealing with the changes that the context - uncertain, as they all agreed - presented. Placement emerged, as Chapter Five depicted, as a significant moment in participants' lives, and the input of placement was reflexively integrated into the making of their future stances. Things that before placement were not within the range of possibilities and interests, such as a career change or having an interest in community, had now developed from the day-to-day experience of placement in new settings. At the same time, the limited chances of going back to work, that older participants assessed, appeared to be manageable by "doing time" on the scheme; other participants wished to prolong the in-between while they could keep recovering or searching. Thinking about life after placement was a big part of the content of the activity of the self in the liminal present, deliberating over what was wanted and what was possible. The end of placement - feared, anticipated, ignored - would mark the end of the exceptional time, opening the parenthesis to leave participants, again, facing the "real" time and the contextual demands placed upon them.

Control, autonomy and freedom were aspects addressed by participants' stances. Wanting to exert influence upon one's life and future was a motive along the trajectories depicted by participants. Nonetheless, the interplay between structural elements and agential decisions regarding past and future outcomes, allowed to see tendencies across the five stances ranging from more driven stances towards the future (such as the career-oriented participants or women focused on going back to work as a priority) as well as those present-centred and assessing having little control (such as some of the men over 50 or participants with health issues).

Forms of future thinking closer to emotions than to rational planning emerged as a more attainable position for those who felt more affected by the past broken plans and the uncertainty of future. Hope, faith and fate have been proposed as non-rational strategies displayed by individuals in difficult situations to cope with the risks and uncertainties of the future (Zinn, 2016, 2008). The idea of extending placement and the liminal could be connected to these strategies to cope with the future, by means of postponing the future.

In the light of the overall experiences construed by participants throughout these three chapters, the *tension between change and stability*, or in other words, *continuity and discontinuity*, is at the core of their deliberations concerning their present and their future after placement. Participants were making sense of the tension between their internal aspirations and concerns, and the contextual transformations affecting their immediate circumstances, as to how this tension would affect the continuity/discontinuity between their past, present and future selves. These contextual transformations, in the voice of participants, have spoken of a “before and now” in the labour market, with the event of the recession breaking in between both; of welfare rules that have become more intrusive; and of cultural discourses about gender and age. Participants weighed these structural and cultural elements – and the possibilities or barriers that these might pose to them - based on their lived experience and exercise of reflexivity.

In perspective, placement was an experience of significance and potential for participants because it enabled them to reflexively generate meanings to work upon the (re)building and repair of their identities, sense of self and biographies and, by doing this, generate continuity / discontinuity with their past and into the future through the specific courses of action they devise. This multi-layered process happened as placement unfolded through actions and interactions with self and others that “did things”, that is, these interactions and actions caused and generated “something” that was not there before (e.g. experience of a new activity, possibilities, ideas, such as changing career or moving on to a new scheme), or repaired something that was damaged or broken (e.g. repairing the spoiled welfare recipient identity through the volunteer-like identity, repairing the broken bond of “contributing” to society through helping others). Participants *were at work with themselves*.

Through their stances towards the future, for which the input of the experience of placement has been vital, participants displayed a stance towards change and stability. Ubiquitous, work and unemployment have a central place since an important portion of participants’ aspirations sees their way of realisation through work. The next chapter, devoted to the conclusions, will present an explicative framework of these experiences.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Overview

This thesis set out to explain how research participants made sense of their experience of unemployment, job search and activation placement in a not-for-profit community organisation in connection to their past and future. Since beginning the data collection and analysis process, closely following the standpoint and methods of Constructivist Grounded Theory, participants brought into this process a constellation of meanings, experiences and views that the study could not have foreseen or predefined. Participants' narrations challenge much of my initial understanding of the lived experience of unemployment and activation, which was influenced by the related scholarship and literature that have focused mostly on the shaping effects of conditionality upon recipients' minds and souls (in tune with the leading governmental approach among this literature). Participants' narrations do not deny activation policies' intent to inculcate change in the unemployed welfare recipient; still, their experiences show how they, as reflexive beings, go about interacting with the structural and normative influences. Participants are positioned within a time of much structural change: recession and recovery, welfare reforms, labour market changes and the transformation of work, are some of the macro-trends that intersect with participants' more recent life trajectories. Participants' experiences offer access to a realm of activation policies in Ireland of which little is known, that is, schemes operating through placement in community organisations.

The main findings of the study, presented in the three preceding chapters, have followed a sequential storyline displaying participants' trajectories before and during placement, focusing on their interactions with work, welfare, the labour market and community organisations. The topics of going through contextual discontinuities, facing wanted and unwanted internal changes, and projecting into the future, were consistent threads across this storyline. The study found that the experience of placement supported participants' exercise of reflexivity in their core task of forging a future course of action that would combine their internal aspirations and the possibilities and barriers posed by their contextual circumstances. Participants' experiences spoke of internal change and liminality, of recovery and repair in the light of the eroding experience of unemployment and job seeking, and they also spoke of the future.

Placement introduces a change in the lives of participants who were coming from a long period of unemployment and unsuccessful job search that was experienced as gradually losing aspects of oneself. What does this change mean? More visibly, it means regaining some of these aspects of oneself that were felt lost, such as self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of worth. It means moving from the emotional and experiential place in which they were. In that sense, it means a possibility of regaining the stable sense of self to which some participants were attached; in contrast, for others, it means a possibility of exploring oneself and “going for a change”. Rebuilding identity and sense of self enable participants to project into the future and deliberate a course of action after placement. This experience of change is not homogeneous and specific patterns emerged related to gender, age and personality. The experience of placement is also a matter of interrogation concerning, for example, the extent to which participants’ unemployment can change as a result of their participation on the scheme.

Irish scholarship (e.g. Boland and Griffin, 2015a, 2015b, 2019; Murphy 2016, 2019) has been critical of the consequences that Pathways to Work and its shift towards conditional welfare, frantic job search and the threat of sanctions have meant for welfare recipients’ wellbeing and the little impact these measures have on their unemployment situation. These analyses of the development of Irish activation, from the point of view of those who experience it, could be further strengthened by incorporating the views and experiences of those who take part in community placement schemes, which is a dimension that has been overlooked by Irish research on activation. Community based activation schemes provide a different range of possibilities and limitations for welfare recipients, as this study has shown, that call for a nuanced understanding of the structural influences upon recipients’ lives.

This last chapter reflects upon the core category of the tension between change and stability, paying attention to the interplay between agency and structural elements. The first sections of this chapter dwell upon the tension between contextual and internal change and stability and how this tension is reflexively treated by some specific groups of participants, as well as the notion of future. The following sections reflect upon the structural influences upon participants’ experiences, such as conditionality, the dominant narrative that locates the community at the centre of the schemes, and the precarisation of work.

7.2 Between change and stability

In 2005 The Economist named Ireland “best place to live in the world” and explained: “Ireland wins because it successfully combines the most desirable elements of the new, such as low unemployment and political liberties, with the preservation of certain cosy elements of the old,

such as stable family and community life” (The Economist, 2005). This combination of what they called new and old was celebrated by the ranking as if it had been strategically crafted by specific policies; however, the literature portrays the economic, cultural and social changes that Ireland has experienced since the mid-1990s as provoking a problematic tension between the traditional and the modern (Keohane and Kuhling, 2004; Dukelow and Meade, 2015). Much has happened in Ireland since 2005. The country has gone through an economic boom, recession, austerity and recovery (and is possibly heading towards yet another recession following the coronavirus pandemic), leaving traces of transformations in the structure of the economy and the labour market along with a significant welfare reform introducing conditionality to unemployment benefits, to name some. Research participants were not strangers to these changes and tensions and, in one way or another, these changes have intersected their life trajectories. As it turned out, grounded in participants’ experiences, this research is very much about change and changing.

The realisation of living and going through changes, contextual and internal, was a common thread that participants’ narrations have knitted throughout the finding chapters, expressed for example, in the notions of changing by losing and changing through regaining (Chapter Four and Five). Dwelling upon the findings, change and stability, and reflexivity, stand as fundamental notions to conceptualise participants’ experience of placement and unemployment in connection to their past and future. The concepts of change and stability, and their pair, discontinuity and continuity, better represent the breadth and richness of participants’ experience from a trajectorial perspective, providing a broader scope to connect with how participants reflexively project into the future. Grounded in the data, change and stability are two processes that have both an internal and external facet, and the interactions between these four dimensions sustain the tension. The internal facets are internal stability and internal change, while the external facets are contextual change and contextual stability. These facets are defined in the next paragraphs.

Contextual change refers to the structural changes that participants - based on their lived experience – identify happening around them and affecting them, which means that not “all” structural changes are relevant to participants’ lives. The addressed changes intersect with participants’ plans, aspirations and hopes, but they do it differently according to the specific aspirations they hold, and so, these can have a positive or negative influence upon them. In that sense, contextual changes may help to improve or, on the contrary, negatively affect their living conditions, having social and psychological consequences. More notably, contextual changes open up a terrain of uncertainty and unexpected events and make of planning a challenging and problematic activity. The recession is identified as a milestone of contextual change, holding a personal and collective dimension at the experiential level, since this event introduced disruption to participants biographies (such as causing the loss of employment) while affecting the country

as a whole (which supported a narrative of crisis). Other significant contextual changes that participants identify, and which they link to the recession, refer to the labour market and the economy (e.g. increase in low-paid and part-time jobs; recruitment strategies; discrimination against older jobseekers; decreasing availability of certain jobs, among others), and the welfare system (e.g. conditionality rules for unemployment benefits). These changes affect participants in different degrees in connection to their age, gender, occupation, and, in turn, exert influence upon their aspirations, plans and images of the future.

The other side of this distinction, *contextual stability*, refers to the context that participants refer to as familiar, manageable, and, somehow, more favourable. A stable context tends to refer to the way “things used to be”, which, in general, provided participants with a greater sense of control and a repertoire to act. In particular, participants who had developed continuous trajectories, that is, not introducing radical changes and following more established roles, refer to contextual stability as disturbed by the contextual changes and less likely to achieve. Stability and change emerged as concomitant dimensions of the making of social reality, and their interrelations were contingent upon participants’ future thinking. Contextual change and stability were also conversant with the experience of control and efficacy that participants narrated, for example, illustrated by the notion of dealing with new rules when carrying out their job search.

Internal change refers to the subjective experience of perceiving oneself differently, in the light of the personal interactions with contextual change. For example, seeing oneself helping others, changing by losing, changing through regaining, are some of the self-assessed experiences of going through internal change depicted in previous chapters. Internal change, then, can refer to a desired and intended change, or externally induced and somehow resisted (such as becoming a welfare recipient, Chapter Four). These experiences illustrate a sense of feeling “less” or “more” like oneself, a sense that, in some situations, was confirmed through the perceptions of significant others. From a Symbolic Interactionist view, selfhood and identity are ongoing, contextual and dialogical processes, better expressed in the idea of becoming, since identities are never finished (Scott, 2015). Thus, the self is contingent and dynamic. Internal change is a pivotal dimension of participants’ experiences and, to some extent, embracing or resisting internal change becomes the clear expression of the tension between change and stability. Equally, some participants would make of “changing” – according to their meanings – an important aspect of their imagined future. Conversely, *internal stability* refers to a continuous and established identity and sense of self that provides security and orientations about what roles one plays in society, what expectations are upon oneself, and so forth. These stable personal and social identities provide a self-concept and a sense of ontological security that the changing context challenges. Therefore, those inclined towards sustaining stability, such as most older men, tend to resist the idea of being different,

illustrated, for example, in these men's experience of being inside. Both internal dimensions of change and stability need to be understood as backbones of the sense of internal consistency that feeds from a permanent bond with the world and vice versa, meaning that these are not isolated processes but social. In that regard, work holds a role sourcing both processes.

The tension between these dimensions reflects participants' efforts to coordinate the internal with the external or, in other words, to coordinate their concerns, interests, and plans with the contextual changes, as they attempt to project into the future. Participants attempt to deliberate a course of action for their future after placement (Chapter Six), manifesting patterns of future thinking. This activity of the self, well contained within the liminal contours of placement, is better analysed through the concept of *reflexivity*. Reflexivity is another key concept underpinning the central processes construed through participants' narrations. While change and stability were concepts that emerged during the research, and I had not considered them, reflexivity was a sensitising concept present since the design of the study.

The data-grounded concepts of stability and change speak of continuity and discontinuity at a biographical and societal level. Participants exhibited trajectories that evince stable and continuous paths, as well as discontinuous ones. Lucy, for example, went back to education in her late 30s after separating from her husband; she wanted not only to get a degree in a field she liked, but she wanted to break with her past, the family rules and the economic disadvantage that had prevented her from taking a different path. Some participants, especially older men, had construed and followed contextual continuity based on a specific route of employment which they did not want to disturb since this had provided them with a stable sense of self. Most women, on the other hand, were focused on introducing a discontinuity to their maternal identities while maintaining a balance between family and work.

A life trajectory embedded within a mental landscape that remains familiar and identifiable is one that enjoys contextual continuity, allowing the person to develop stable expectations over their life because of the predictability of a taken-for-granted environment (Archer, 2007). Gray (2010) studied three generations in Ireland and identified patterns; they found that the oldest cohort (those born between 1930-1940) expressed a sense of not having much control over their destinies because they were born into pre-made paths and roles that continued forms of lives coming from previous generations; thus, expressing a life path embedded in contextual continuity. The next cohort conveyed growing up in what they defined as a transitional period that presented them with a mix of more opportunities, in relation to the previous generation, and also constraints. This cohort (which corresponds to the research participants in their 50 and older in the present study) identified a positive range of opportunities for unskilled manual and lower non-manual jobs; at

the same time, opportunities of social mobility were arising deriving from more chances of education. Finally, the younger cohort, witnessed more fragmented and discontinuous employment patterns, a prolongation of early adulthood and fewer guidelines combined with growing choices, in tune with what the literature has described as reflexive individualisation (Chapter Two). Those born in the second period identified as transitional, seemed to have had a narrower scope of resources and choice in comparison to later generations.

Thus, in contemporary society shaped by globalisation, acceleration and risks, contextual continuity is presented as less attainable for less predictable and more contingent life trajectories. A major contextual change in participants' lives was the event of the recession, which was narratively integrated into participants' trajectories as a symbolic and chronological marker (Chapter Four). Framed by a narrative of crisis (Knight, 2017, 2012) participants made sense of their unemployment as an event beyond their control and affecting a collective. In time, this narrative took for many the form of a comparison between before and after the recession, condensed in the notion of "dealing with new rules" to explain the differences they perceived in the job search and recruiting dynamics, and in their own abilities to manage these activities. Similar feelings among jobseekers facing new rules were found in the study of Fletcher and Flint (2018), in which low-skilled jobseekers saw themselves as disadvantaged compared to others because they had to comply with the more recent imposition of job search tools that were new to them, such as websites, irrelevant to the strategies they had always employed to find employment, which, as this study's research participants also expressed, were linked to local social networks. Sassen (1997) had previously observed how local networks had absorbed the traditional labour market functions of recruitment and screening in the case of low-skilled work, echoing Gwen's words "*it was about who you know and who knows you*", when outlining the ways to find a job in Ireland "before".

Changes affecting major structures in society eventually intersect with participants' personal change, when these structural changes prompt them to look at themselves and their sense of identity. Identity was another consistent thread across participants' narratives, understood as a dynamic process that resembled the tension between change and stability, questioning a sense of "sameness in time" to highlight the challenge of generating meaning between past, present and future selves (Benhabib, 1999). Thus, identity dilemmas that result from the loss of valued attributes, social roles, personal plans and physical functions (Charmaz, 1994), are conversant with participants' experiences, for instance, through becoming a welfare recipient, or those participants who were at the same time dealing with a health condition.

Reflexively and through the narrative expression of their sense-making processes, participants made sense of their past to make sense of the imagined future, for example, retrospectively justifying decisions as to fit them congruently into their projection. Bob, for example, had had a life he summarised as “*a comedy of mistakes*” having made spontaneous decisions, for example, travelling and taking and quitting jobs and relationships without much thought; now, in the context of placement, he construed a narration that – in the present - gave these decisions a logic that connected all the way to his future: his travelling and not settling in were justified because these past decisions gave him now the perfect experience and profile to do placement in a touristic office where he was devising a business idea to attempt, once again, to accomplish his passion for photography. Bob, as other participants did, was using placement to reconcile – at least narratively - a difficult set of choices and events with the new possibilities coming from placement, putting things in order, making sense retrospectively of the past and himself, and recalibrating the future.

7.2.1 Reflexivity, change and stability

Reflexivity, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, alludes to participants’ agential property of mediating between their internal deliberations and the contextual circumstances and the possibilities and limitations that these present (Archer, 2003, 2007). As the findings exposed through different quotes, many participants, for example, displayed active self-talk referring to their past or present selves, asking themselves why they took or did not take such decisions, or giving themselves hope or reassurance; similarly, some participants spoke of their self-knowledge as a pivotal source of direction in their lives, doing things that fit their personalities, while others preferred not to engage in introspective activities. All in all, participants demonstrate a wide range of expressions of their exercise of reflexivity, displaying a more intense activity through their deliberations about the future (Chapter Six). The future is also sustained in the tension between contextual changes and participants’ work towards the making of a course of action for their future after placement that, according to their understanding of their circumstances, would match their aspirations and the possibilities introduced by placement. Participants were devising ways to make the most of what the scheme could do *for them*. The concept of co-production (Chapter Two) offers an example of it.

Participants explain placement in organic connection with their recent past of unemployment, the distant past of their working lives since early adulthood, and their imagined future. In that regard, a relevant aspect of the findings is their ability to integrate these connected experiences, that are more commonly studied separately, within a trajectorial scope. This scope enables the observation of a logic, a tendency, or a style of reflexivity, through which participants engage with the

different possibilities and barriers they have faced throughout their trajectories (e.g. forging a continuous path, introducing constant disruptions to the employment trajectory). The findings suggest, thus, that the experience of placement, from participants' view, is better understood within a trajectory of life-events, which are not completely of the participants' making nor have they been completely beyond their control. Participants' exercise of reflexivity towards the future is a situated phenomenon located in a specific historical time and context, and it is also sourced by and shaped through their accumulated experiences encompassing their past and their current present of placement. In other words, this reflexivity is co-produced by the present "I" who dialogues with the "past self" and projects into the "future you" (Archer 2003, p. 115).

As Chapter Six explored in greater detail, projecting and deliberating one's future after placement was a central activity of participants' agential reflexivity as to "make something out" of the tension between their internal preferences for change or stability and the contextual changes shaping their potential plans. When looking at this, patterns emerged, as Chapter Six depicted. Men over 50 were attached to a continuous self, grounded in contextual stability while struggling to interact with contextual and internal change; women returning to work were inclined to reconcile their aspirations of internal change with contextual change; participants with health issues were inclined to connect contextual stability with internal change; a few participants were driven by their desire to live according to their rules and had a strong sense of loyalty to who they were, and engaged to contextual changes as far as they were beneficial to them; a couple of participants aspired to self-improvement and career-building, engaging with both internal and external change.

Macro contextual changes, such as the ongoing transformation of work or the transformation of breadwinning roles, do not hit a wall; they interact with reflexive beings. The notion of agential reflexivity is nuanced (Chapter Two); agential reflexivity can thrive and take the best chances of the limited opportunities available, in contrast, it can be battered by accumulated disappointment and become apathetic. For example, men over 50 experienced a critical mismatch between, on the one hand, an employment route built upon jobs that encouraged on-site learned skills and had provided contentment with a stable sense of self, and, on the other side, new inclusion criteria for the labour market, such as certified skills, preference for younger workers, and the transformation of the type of low-skilled jobs they knew. Reflexivity, as agentic property, mediates between the self and the world as to illuminate how one can dovetail aspirations and contextual circumstances, in the best way one considers possible at that specific point. However, as Archer (2007) argues, people can assess their contexts wrong and over or underestimate their circumstances, and, consequently, craft unfeasible courses of actions. It could also be the case that someone is already too distressed by difficult experiences - for instance, a prolonged unsuccessful job search - that

their reflexivity is “fractured” or weakened, temporally. When considering their futures, research participants’ reflexivity was not always aimed at “direct action”, as the previous chapter detailed, considering deferring decisions and actions. Reflexivity should not be taken as an over-rational and infallible cognitive capacity of human beings, but rather as a complex multi-layered way to relate to increasingly uncertain and precarious contexts.

Placement and its possibilities were reflexively construed by participants from five different stances (Chapter Six); this last chapter focuses on three of these stances. The future after placement intended as a prolongation of placement was common among two groups of participants, as the next sub-section briefly describes. These two groups share an inclination for preserving internal stability, that is, retaining their sense of stable self and not engaging in internal change as a way to retain control in their lives since the contextual changes are mostly negatively perceived. The scheme is for these participants a perfect match because resolves much of the problematic knots they face, such as having to find a job but not seeing realistic prospects or not wanting to be pushed by the welfare rules to jobs they do not want. Their reflexivity is not devising an immediate course of action as such but devising a way to stay on and *do time*, waiting for better contextual circumstances.

7.2.2 Preserving internal stability

A reflexivity inclined to preserving their internal and external sense of stability was largely preferred by the men over 50 (plus Steven and Luke in their mid-40s). For most of these men, the contextual stability that had framed much of their past lives allowed them to build relatively continuous employment trajectories of low-skilled jobs. As Chapter Six depicted, most of these men had made choices framed and limited by their family, normative and economic context (e.g. leaving school to work and help their families, forming a family early in life and taking the breadwinner role). They started their working lives early in life, and went through much of it during a period when a match between the needs of the economy and their profiles was feasible and common, within male-dominated economic activities (e.g. building, farming) that embodied a model of masculinity and working-class adscription that shaped stable paths for men, for instance, flagging the early transition from school to work and later family formation within a male-breadwinner model (McDowell, 2003).

Adopting a continuous path does not mean “less” reflexive, since even if one ascribes to more established paths and roles, for example, deriving from the natal context, one needs to define what meaning they hold for us and, as context changes, one needs to reflexively adjust, or decide otherwise (Domecka, 2017). In the current context of rapid changes and uncertainty, those

preferring to ground their life plans in the taken-for-granted familiar context face challenges. Michael, 56, was an exception among this group by trying to adjust to the technological changes – by teaching himself software programming - and to the increasing demand for certified skills – by planning to go to college –, and so expecting to introduce change as to increase his chances to get a job or set his own business. Most men tried to make it to the future by deliberating within the range of possibilities that were familiar. However, and paraphrasing the words of one participant, Joe, jobs as they knew it are now less and less available; searching for a job as they knew it is less effective; presenting their know-how without written certifications does not impress employers, and, as some of them joked, the truth was that their bodies were not as strong as they used to be for physical work. All in all, stability and continuity seemed problematic for these men.

Since becoming unemployed, these men struggled not only with staying at home but with realising the little chances they had to regain the type of jobs they wanted and for which they felt competent. Participants with experience in farming were witnessing the automation of some tasks; other participants with experience in factories were aware of the closing of many of them. The match between their ideal job and what was available proved almost impossible for most of these men. The decreasing prospects of finding work that older unemployed face has been largely documented, depicting not only the shrinking possibilities but also the precarious nature of the labour market inclusion for older workers (Lain *et al*, 2019; Phillipson, 2018). In a UK based study, Lain *et al*. (2019) identify the pressure older worker face to extend their working lives, and many have no option but to access precarious work, dissociated from their former working experience, as a way to supplement inadequate pensions income. In the European context, Ireland has one the highest share of men working over the age of 65 (17 per cent; and 5 per cent women), mostly self-employed to complement pension income or because they do not receive pensions (Nolan and Barrett, 2019).

A stable context allows for the formation of “settled lives” (Swindler, 1986) and with it a stable sense of self. Assuring internal stability was necessary for these men as to maintain the continuity of their past identities, mostly as breadwinners; and priorities, such as taking care of their families, within the transforming context. Placement, as a liminal parenthesis, becomes a “micro-world” that somehow recreates part of the settled lives they formed, by providing them with a “doing” they know and like (e.g. working outside), money that is not openly welfare-money, and a way to contribute through their community work, which holds additional meaning for men well rooted in their local contexts, especially in small villages with a stronger rural ethos. It makes sense, then, that the aspiration of most of these men is to extend their time in this micro-world for as long as possible.

Those who, looking at the end of placement, were reactivating their job search, were facing options of jobs of poor quality in terms of working conditions and security. Temporary, part-time, seasonal, shift work, were the characteristics of the jobs Jack, Timothy and Steven, had at hand. Financial worries accompanied these men all along, since most had families to sustain. Complementary, the State Pension was seen by these men as their guarantee to face the long-term future. These men seemed realistic and pragmatic about their chances of regaining employment, and some were trying to craft an alternative that made sense to them, such as Jack trying to make his hobby into a business, or others wanting to continue on the scheme. Extending their time on the scheme was always at the back of these men's minds, and especially in the case of those over 60, they trusted they could reach their pensionable age on the scheme.

An inclination to preserving the stable sense of self also emerged among other participants. These are the men that I depicted in Chapter Six as those aspiring to create a work situation to fit their personalities and interests, and so they could be named "self-determined". At first sight, these two groups of men have different styles of engaging with the world; nonetheless, they share their inclination for internal stability but differ in their stance towards contextual change, since the self-determined do not refuse to engage with contextual changes as long as they are advantageous for their personal plans. The reflexivity displayed by the self-determined strives for control. On the one hand, they want to preserve their autonomy in the definition of meaning and fulfilment – especially what meaningful work is – and they do not want to compromise and be "pushed"; on the other hand, they strive for control because they have little tolerance to stress and monotonous work-environments. Then, they interact with structural enablers to use them for their plans, and with structural constraints to circumvent them. The balance of their plans, though, is fragile, and much depends - paradoxically - on structural aspects outside their control. Many other participants also showed a desire for controlling their timing (when going back to work) and meanings (what work/job was right and meaningful for them) but were more inclined to compromise. Probably, from an institutional view, the self-determined could be mistaken for "free-riders" or "difficult" clients and may be seen by supervisors as less open to being guided.

The self-determined share discontinuous trajectories marked by travelling as a form of personal search, breaks as a result of periods of stress and anxiety, unemployment, economic difficulties, broken relationships, unfinished studies, and businesses attempts. They were constantly introducing discontinuity in their attempts to match their interests with the circumstances, and they retrospectively reconstructed these events through their narratives, as personal searches. For example, Thomas, who claimed to be a "drifter", justified their "unsettledness" as a conscious way to be true to his own self. Through incorporating discontinuity and change into their trajectories, these participants were working at preserving a stable sense of self within their terms,

that responded to their own values and meanings, and not to the ones socially promoted. The stance of the self-determined towards family formation illustrates part of this style. Forming a family had been taken out of their list of aspirations in their youth, and they explained this option was seen as a “traditional” and automatic milestone that they refused to take as part of a mainstream normative model of adult life. In the end, and probably because of additional personal reasons that they did not disclose in the interviews, they reached their late-30s without partner and children, which they signified as a personal choice. Adam had more recently shifted this trend; in his early-40s he started a relationship and had his first child; unprompted, he explained that his child was not planned but that becoming a father brought the direction he had searched for all his life. Still, he refused to transit into employment unless it fitted his conditions.

The self-determined strive for a stable unity of self and meaning that they control; for them, thus, the threats do not come from the transformation of the labour market and their niche of employment disappearing, as it is for the men over 50. Consistent with their search for meaning and control and seeing work as a creative endeavour, not tied to a specific industry, conflict comes for the self-determined in the form of the welfare rules that mandate them to get a “proper job”. These participants construe their interactions with welfare as problematic and mostly negative. The conditional rules that they perceive lacking clarity and purpose constrain their aspiration of self-determination. They had had difficult experiences with jobs which did not connect with their inner aspiration for meaning and freedom and dreaded the vocation of welfare to push them into similar situations. The changing context of welfare and labour market offer possibilities and they made use of grants for businesses and training. They prefer temporary jobs and make use of digital platforms to pursue small businesses. Similarly, placement offers them opportunities in the form of new ideas of business or careers. The liminal character of placement that suspends the rules of frantic job search and gives them time was a gain for these participants.

These two groups, interestingly all male participants, display very active and strategic reflexivity as they try to *produce their own contextual continuity and internal stability*. Since what is available does not match their interests and aspirations, and since they felt rejected and not seen, as in the case of older men having to face continuous unsuccessful job search (Chapter Four), prolonging their time on the scheme, doing time, emerges as the best fit available. Before joining the scheme, doing a scheme was not within their range, and many had apprehensions about them; they were struggling with unemployment in different dimensions of their lives, in the words of one of these participants, they were “between a rock and a hard place”. Thus, placement comes to resolve part of the dilemma these men were facing, providing them not only with a liminal space to rest from the pressure but as a projection into the future that takes the form of a prolongation of the liminal. To what extent this prolongation is feasible is not as relevant for these

men as the thought of it, and the feeling of relief this thought gives them. Adam, whom I interviewed for a second time a few months after he finished placement, was back on the Live Register and was back suffering welfare; still, he was holding on to the possibility of being back on the scheme as his first option.

7.2.3 Going for change

The women who had been stay-at-home mothers before joining the scheme displayed a strong connection to the notion of change, which, on the one hand, was signified as recovering the “old” self and / or gaining a “new” self and, on the other hand, was represented in obtaining a job that would catalyse much of this desire for a new self. Through going back to work, these women project themselves in challenging situations in which they could express and amplify their skills and enter a different role from the one they had at home. The distinction between means and end is important for these women, for whom balance is significant. Work is the means to craft a different sense of self that would, at that specific point in their lives, make them happier, but that, at the same time, would not alter their family balance. Fulfilment, understood as balance, is the end and the horizon for these women. Consequently, it could be argued that placement was for these women a significant event in their lives.

These women’s reflexivity is inclined to internal and contextual change; at the same time, they struggle with internal and contextual stability that seems mostly represented by the pervasive influence of normative guides defining gendered positions and aspirations. Most men and women participants share a focus on family and feel strongly about their roles and commitment to their families. The male breadwinning model (Lewis, 2001; Warren, 2007) was prevalent among many participants, which, as in the case of older men, had sustained much of their stable identity, and so, they struggled severely with unemployment. Women, nonetheless, while retaining a central commitment to the place that family and motherhood have played in their life-plans (Chapter Six), feel an acute need to challenge themselves to “be more than a mother”, and take distance from that prevalent role, aspiration they see realisable thought paid work. Throughout the analysis, gender emerged as a relevant dimension of the experiences narrated by participants to show that their main aspirations, commitments and fears were negotiated by taking cultural and structural elements into account. What it means to be an unemployed person was understood as what it means to be an unemployed man or woman, and how the absence of work involved construing and experiencing their losses differently. The same could be said about the meaning of work.

These women manifest their positive experiences of placement in the light of how they were regaining aspects of themselves they had felt lost as a result of the time they spent out of work and focused on care responsibilities. This experience may say something different about Irish women's experience of unemployment from what is reported by Strandh *et al.* (2013); their comparative study found that Swedish women experienced unemployment more negatively than Irish women. Strandh *et al.* explained the results based on Swedish women's stronger identification with work, while Irish women's identities were argued as historically more bound to the home. Kiely and Leane (2004) analyse Irish women's relation to work and argue that, what they call, the ideology of motherhood, has been pivotal in Irish society and even supported by legislation (e.g. the marriage bar in place until the 1970s), thus restricting the participation of Irish women in the labour market and relegate them to roles within the family and home domains; consequently, regarded as mothers and wives. Kiely and Leane (2004) found that women who re-entered employment did it mainly for financial reasons while struggling with balance since they remained in charge of care and domestic responsibilities.

The problematisation of the gender dimension of unemployment is recent, and studies before the late-1980s seldom incorporated women's experiences (Allen and Waton, 1986; Hursfield, 1986). This tendency in research mirrored a socially rooted understanding of work and unemployment as a men's issue. Allen and Waton (1986) found that women had difficulties in identifying as unemployed; complementary, Hurstfield (1986) identified little understanding from research to see women as unemployed. The other side of this is the meanings that women attribute to paid work. The findings showed that work did not have the same preponderance in most women's life-plans (the "future in the past") as family formation did. However, research participants also expressed a changing outlook in which going back to work was not only a matter of financial need but a matter of internal need, especially for women whose children were becoming less dependent on them. The distinction inside / outside that emerged from participants accounts illustrates much of the gendered experience of unemployment and meanings attributed to work.

It was especially these women who would present and speak of their current placement as a sort of life-changing event, happening at the "right time" and giving them the impulse, they needed. Through their accounts, they turned the event of placement into an event of self-change, most evident in the use of the notions of old and new selves. Changing through regaining (Chapter Five) captures part of women's concept of internal change, which emerges through the rebuilding of their identities as they see themselves being challenged and capable for tasks they were not familiar with; from there, the plan of a career-change appears attractive for some of them, mostly through the idea of doing something "social". This process possesses an important connection with affect and emotions, as women feel happier, confident and in control of their future, giving

them a renovated impulse to project into the future. Correspondingly, as Chapter Six depicted, all of these women wanted to get a job as their immediate plan after placement, and none of them considered prolonging their stay on the scheme.

7.3 The Future

The making of a future-after-placement course of action consistent, as far as possible, with their internal concerns and aspirations, on the one hand, and with the structural circumstances providing a share of possibilities and constraints, on the other, was one of the predominant content of participants' reflexivity during placement. Deliberating about the best way forward was a sense-making activity through which participants had to identify what possibilities were available, had to conform with those that were out of their reach, temporally or for good, and had to come to terms with realisations about themselves, such as health or age; participants were also discovering that, for instance, they had a "social" side, or that they could get out of the "one box", as Tamara expressed. All in all, thinking about the future involves the wholeness of participants' selves. Moreover, as stated earlier, how and why participants struggle to deliberate future paths after placement can be observed in the light of the broader tensions between change and stability, at the agential and structural level.

Planning and projecting oneself have been commonly identified as features of agency, worded, for example, as planfulness, projectivity or purposeful thinking (e.g. Hitlin, 2009; Hitlin and Edler, 2007; Emibayer and Mische, 1998). However, as participants explained, thinking the future is not as straightforward as having the will and the rational capacity to craft plans. Thinking the future, as agential power, occurs situated in specific structural circumstances that are reflexively mediated, and this is problematic and sometimes not possible. Projecting into the future emerged as tension, as stated, which also shows a changing emotional stance and outlook from participants who were coming from an eroding experience of unemployment. In that sense, the emergence of the future as one of the leading contents of participants' reflexivity is a relevant finding of the study because it shows that the experience of "stuckness" and "losing" could be disrupted, to different degrees, by the experience of placement. In this, as mentioned previously, the liminal character of placement plays an essential role.

Building upon these aspects, I consider that the centrality of the future is a major finding of the study. The topic of the future and future thinking in the first-person account does not generally feature in studies about the lived experience of activation and unemployment. Activation schemes' participants face an externally imposed future plan, that is, going back to work, whose

problematization by scheme participants' themselves is a fundamental aspect of the lived experience of these policies.

Uncertainty about the future, triggered by the feeling of living through changes, was commonly construed as a reason for not planning the future. Limited control over their present translated into a feeling of not being fully able to visualise different scenarios, as some participants expressed. Then, hoping and relying on contingency – luck, fate, faith - was a common way of dealing with the uncertain future, so that, in the end, much of what might happen can be attributed to external factors, reducing the chances of experiencing disappointment and self-blame. Zinn (2008, 2016) argues that hope and belief in external forces are not irrational but have a different logic linked to emotions, which enable people to face difficult situations that may seem to be hopeless. These ways of dealing with the future (Chapter Six) can be understood within a broader collective experience of precarity that refers to the ontological experience of the precarious labour market and precarious life (Millar, 2017). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Irish labour market has been offering jobs of lower quality (Bobek, Pembroke and Wickham, 2018). Still, participants were part of the audience that was being constantly bombarded with the good news of decreasing unemployment and new jobs being created; however, as most participants expressed (Chapter Four), they continued not seeing opportunities *for them* and their localities.

Placement as a liminal experience emerged as a catalyser of participants' fears and anxiety about the future. The liminal is incorporated into the making of participants' future-after-placement: postponing, deferring, extending, prolonging. These immaterial 'plans' are made of a time that does not exist, yet. In a way, these are *liminal plans* through which these participants do not plan to pass the threshold to the "real world", yet. The extensions of the scheme's time, or moving to another scheme, depend on bureaucratic rules which, in practice, are not as straightforward as they are presented, and upon which participants had no control. Relatedly, Cook's (2017) study of the future thinking of young adults found that, based on their understanding of a future marked by risk and uncertainty, respondents deferred responsibility for the future away from themselves and onto institutional actors, thus helping them to manage their feelings of anxiety.

The reflexivity towards the future displayed by all participants shows the causal efficacy of placement as "temporal spaces of imagination" [I borrow this concept from Arts, 2020] where participants reengage with a future that looks, in the in-between of placement, infused by possibilities - staying on the scheme, training, changing career, for example -; these possibilities, however, are not assessed against the backdrop of what is possible.

The next sections focus on the structural dimensions of the experience of unemployment, job search and placement.

7.4 Reflexive conditionality and the structural drive to intrude

Activation and conditionality are complex policy constructs that channel normative assumptions about agency, individual responsibility and rights, among other relevant elements, seeking to mobilise change in unemployed welfare recipients (Chapter Two). This change has been largely understood as happening at the individual's internal level and assuming, for instance, that welfare recipients need to acquire or strengthen absent or weak personal features. Relatedly, a paramount expression of this drive has been the making of the unemployed into the active jobseeker (e.g. Demazière, 2020, 2017; Boland, 2016; Dean, 1995). A full-time job search and the willingness to conform to any job available are among the conditions underpinning activation policies. In sum, work-related conditionality seeks to change welfare recipients, within its terms. This welfare approach to deal with the unemployed can be located within the contextual changes that participants identified affecting them. Welfare rules exerted great influence upon participants' lives, especially through the label of the welfare recipient. Becoming unemployed, a welfare recipient and jobseeker were identities externally presented to participants, who adopted them with different degrees of adherence and resistance (Chapter Four). This experience represents the intrusive character of welfare under activation, which prompted internal tensions in participants' sense of self. The external pressure, thus, seemed unnecessary since participants did not lack the motivation to work, but they wanted to have control over the pace they were moving forward and the type of job they wanted.

Participants wanted to work, but many had their own terms (e.g. at their pace, according to their health, wanting a job with meaning), and incentives and practical aspects were relevant too (e.g. salary, transport, childcare). In that regard, research participants challenged some of the basal assumptions of conditionality: they wanted to work, and many explicitly expressed their preference for paid work over welfare; they did not see themselves lacking will or motivation and expressed holding a strong work ethic received from their parents and which they expected to pass on to their children. However, participants could not succeed in regaining employment, despite following the requirement of actively searching for work during their pre-placement time. As participants expressed, many wished they had more effective support from their welfare officers, rather than the routine monitoring. Some studies have shown the incongruencies between the demands towards the jobseekers, the type of support they receive and what is available for them, concluding, for example, that the chances of finding a job through the compulsory job

search combined with a poor quality of support provided by welfare case officers are very scarce (e.g. Boulus-Røde, 2019; Danneris, 2016). Ingold's (2020) study showed employers' view, who felt discouraged by the numerous unfiltered applications they received from jobseekers and, at the same time, understood this activity driven by policies.

A significant change in the content and form of the relationship between participants and welfare begins with their incorporation to the scheme. It is illuminating to revisit the moment when most participants were informed of their referral to the scheme. Despite sanctions in Ireland being low in numbers (Finn, 2019), the threat of it acted upon participants' will to attend the first interview with the scheme. Exerting reflexivity in this specific situation was constrained because participants had little room to take a different route. Saying no, as Sarah reminded me, meant no money, "*and without money you cannot live*"; thus, the decision to join the scheme was bounded to the financial constraint that participants faced, and refusing was an unrealistic option. Being in a constraining situation did not inhibit the reflexive deliberation of participants, and some shared their internal conversations before the first interview (Chapter Five). This aspect is illuminating and shows the fight for control that many participants attempted, even if having control was only possible within the realm of their self-talk. Internal conversations are meant to be causally efficacious (Archer, 2003, 2007), meaning that they materialise our reflexivity in actions. In this case, however, the course of action had been set by the welfare rules. Gwen, for example, narrated how she deliberated with herself about disliking the obligation, but making a deal with herself to go and try. Other participants expressed similar ideas such as "give it a try", "go and see", as if they were giving themselves the possibility of leaving or quitting.

As these participants reconstructed this first encounter, narratively they gained more power and control than they had effectively had, attending the interview knowing that *they* were giving the scheme a chance, or that *they* had told themselves that *they* could leave if *they* wanted. An exercise like this illustrates the complexity of situations in the experience of welfare recipients when the power of structure "outnumbered" their chances of making a decision. Nonetheless, they did not conform "to be made to" and, through the means of their internal conversations, they retained a part in the decisions. Later, the experience of co-production would show them that they had prepared with a completely different interlocutor in mind. Not all participants displayed this exercise of making a deal with themselves as to recreate a sense of having control when facing this "yes or yes" situation. Largely, they were aware of the nature of the situation and complained about it, but many others felt happy to think that they would receive a better type of help than the routine of appointments with case officers.

What does the notion of co-production depicted by participants' experiences tell about conditionality and the interplay between agency and structure? Co-production illuminates a different side of activation schemes under Pathways to Work, which does not directly resonate with the literature on activation and conditionality (Chapter Two). As Chapter Five explored in detail, the co-production of the placement position emerged as a game-changer because this had the power to affect participants' modest initial expectations and willingness and transform them into full commitment. Co-production is a very interesting process because it is dialogical and contingent upon the engagement of both parties in the dialogue, and because it fosters a sense of ownership and commitment resulting from the experience of taking part in the decision. Co-production looks different from conditionality, but in terms of results, it achieves the aims of generating willing participants. However, based on the findings, co-production is not psychologically or emotionally detrimental, as conditionality has been reported to be, and participants gained a sense of control that they needed at that time.

Activation needs – paradoxically - the active involvement of the “passive” participants it seeks to activate. The experience of co-production of the position of placement shows that engagement can be fostered through less disciplinary means, compared, for example, to the engagement that the compulsory job search seeks to secure. Thus, it could be argued that co-production connects with the reflexive agency of participants from a different perspective that appeals to them as a whole self (with interests, skills, singularity), and not from the narrower and subordinate welfare recipient identity. Participants experienced the hard and the soft side of conditionality.

7.5 The experience of helping others: does it help participants?

The community character of the schemes holds a central place in their architecture. In fact, the community services delivered by the schemes have been given much relevance by policymakers and other actors, that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish that these schemes are aimed at the unemployed participant. However, similar to what happened to research participants when playing down their criticism in the light of the good that their work does for the community, the official discourse about the schemes playing a central role in helping communities makes it very difficult to criticise them. In February 2019, Regina Doherty, the DEASP Minister, wrote an opinion piece for a local newspaper in Meath, in which she praised the work of the community employment schemes and committed her support for their uninterrupted continuation. In her piece, Doherty (2019, p. 25) stated that the schemes “benefit communities throughout county Meath” and that placements in particular “support local services which are vital to many communities”; even further, she affirmed that “many of the local elderly and home care services

throughout the county depend on people trained and provided by the scheme”, and other valuable services throughout the country depended on the scheme “to thrive and in many cases to survive”. Three-quarters of the piece highlighted the role of the schemes in delivering key resources for communities throughout the country. One short paragraph, however, remembered to say something about the participants who “also significantly benefit with placements” which, the Minister added, gave participants “the dignity, pride and self-esteem which come from doing a good day’s work” and so, the placements, she added, “allow individuals who may not find work otherwise to contribute to their local town or village”.

I found this piece quite puzzling. The Minister was not only acknowledging that critical social services were being provided through community organisations which, in a great measure, depended on the work of welfare recipients but also committed revising the schemes to allow vulnerable unemployed to stay on the scheme for longer periods, idea that seemed very much related to the steady decrease in unemployment figures. In the words of the Minister (Doherty, 2019, p.25), the services provided by these organisation “will continue to be needed no matter how much the unemployment figures trend downwards”. The community services seem to hold the priority and urgency from the policymakers’ perspective, while effective paths for participants to move into employment have not been addressed with the same urgency. The Minister failed to report that the scheme participants providing these essential services were unemployed (despite the fact that they were not officially counted as unemployed), and that, more likely, they would continue to be, once their placement ended. The evidence available, mainly from quantitative studies and meta-reviews, conclude that activation and welfare to work policies have very modest results in bringing unemployed individuals back to work (e.g. Danneris 2016; Card *et al.*, 2015; Martin, 2014; Smedslund *et al.*, 2006). Specifically, in the case of CE and Tús schemes, a NESC report (2018, p. 36) concluded that both are not successful in helping people back to work, but that they provide work experience.

As Chapter Two discussed, the incorporation of volunteering-like activities into the architecture of activation policies is underpinned by the ideas of reciprocity and responsibility. In general, workfare volunteerism efficiently connects two goals, on the one hand, volunteer-like work is presented as a medium to enhance the employability and commitment of welfare recipients, while, on the other hand, these activities benefit communities and society (Kampen, Veldboer and Kleinhas, 2019). In a recent study, Kampen (2020) found that participants largely justified the fairness of their volunteer-like work endorsing the idea of contribution. The study found that the initial compulsory request was perceived by participants as unfair, but later they compared the contribution of community work with previous paid jobs. Similarly, research participants tuned into the organisations’ ethos and believed that their work has a social impact. The goodness of

the organisations' work and the benefits it brings to specific groups is evident and participants syntonise and adhere to this enterprise. However, as Chapter Five depicted, participants shared some criticism and found it difficult to adapt to some of the characteristic of the organisations since they do not fully resemble the work-environment of jobs outside the community realm.

As participants were tuning into the organisation ethos (Chapter Five), participants reflexively distinguished the gains they could bring to their own situation. Kelemen *et al.* (2017) found that their respondents first engaged in "voluntolding" since they did not freely join an organisation but, as time passed, they became truly engaged in volunteering and evaluated it as an experience that fostered a better side of themselves, gave them chance to be better citizens and gained skills and experience. Allan's study (2019, p. 75) found that participants who engaged in employability-based volunteering focused not on "the Other in need" but on "one's own neediness", which reflected the precarity, material and existential, that respondents were facing. In that context, believing that one could increase one's chances of getting a job, as a result of volunteering, was described by Allan as a form of "hope labour". As hope labourers, individuals invest themselves in "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow" (Allan, 2019, p. 10), and so, they conform for non-monetary or deferred rewards.

Both ends, employability and doing good for the community, appealed to research participants, some engaging with one aspect over the other. Some participants even had the hope that they could get a job through placement, or that they could be employed by the organisation, but that was somehow seen as an unrealistic thought. Evidence from previous research (Allan, 2019; Sloopjes and Kampen, 2017; Kampen et al. 2013; Warburton and Smith, 2003) showed that very seldom workfare volunteers found a job at the end of placement (in the organisation or outside), and remaining on the scheme was not a rare option that, in the long-term, made participants feel stuck and discouraged. Thus, unless schemes offer good conditions for personal gains, participants potentially face an exploitative experience (Warburton and Smith, 2003). In a study with women doing workfare volunteering, Sloopjes and Kampen (2017) found that participants experienced personal gains as their self-image and self-esteem improved and reframed a deteriorated self-image, mostly deriving from being able to use their skills. However, the focus on empowerment and self-confidence raises questions, as to how these gains can be sustained in the longer term if facing again the disappointment of not finding a job. Especially in the case of women whose reflexivity was focused on embracing a personal project of change that would materialise through paid work, they were in tune with this dimension of the experience. Women had a positive and optimistic view of their future after placement, and the future self they were projecting was to be displayed through working.

The volunteer-like person is not a spoiled identity, as the unemployed and the welfare recipient are, and through adopting the place and the role of a volunteer, participants felt experiencing recognition, reward, responsibility and respect, and contributing to society. Through their daily experience of community work, participants reconnected with their social and public selves, and gained a sense of “mattering”, that is, feeling noticed and important to others, and that one can provide something that others need (Piliavin, 2009, p. 220; Garrett-Peters, 2009) These were all relational and social dimensions of work that they had felt lost when becoming unemployed. Contributing to society connected directly to the social meanings underlying the normativity about deservingness and, in turn, the stigma haunting welfare recipients. The introduction of workfare volunteering measures has been argued as a matter of reciprocity for welfare assistance, or, in other words, doing something in return for welfare benefits (Kampen, 2020; Veldboer, Kleinhans and van Ham, 2015; Warburton and Smith, 2003). As many participants expressed, “contributing again” and “giving back” was significant, and they valued the “restitution” of this connection with society through helping others. This experience related directly to their sense of self.

Participants’ experiences are very much produced and sustained through *emotions*. Similar to hoping and trusting an external logic instead of planning, putting one’s emotions into a positive activity seems another way of dealing with the contextual uncertainty and the tension provoked by ongoing changes. As in co-production, the mobilisation of emotions is a central medium of the experience. Ahmed’s (2014) concept of emotions is useful here to understand them not merely as psychological states, as emotions have tended to be portrayed, but also as cultural practices. This means that emotions “do things”, and that they do not exist fixed in persons or object, but they circulate and are produced as effect of that circulation or “sociality of emotion”. The relational nature of community work enables the circulation of emotions produced by the interactions and relationships of help and reciprocity that take part in the local contexts; which over time become stable. When participants joined placement, they became entangled in this circulation and, at the same time, produced new emotions, new interactions with others and self, potentially enabling a new feeling about themselves and their future. Steven had worked in building sites and, as he told me, that was a tough and hard environment; Steven explained that something he liked about his placement in an educational centre was that the staff did not treat him “like a skivvy”, as he had felt in the building sites. Steven could not get over the fact that the staff would find it okay that he, the gardener, ate in the canteen or had tea with them. This experience mirrored for him a different Steven, that circulated through the relational nature of that community. Later, this emotional experience would contribute to making him realise that he did not want to work in building sites and endure that work-environment anymore.

The experience of placement in a not-for-profit organisation, and the emotions produced by this experience, seem to have much affinity with the propositions about affective practices and affective labour in the context of precarity (Muehlebach, 2012; Berlant, 2011, 2007). Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism" reveals the power that the promises of a better life mobilised through economic, political and cultural structures have upon people's subjectivities and affect. Being a volunteer-like person performs for participants "not the achieved materiality of a better life but the approximate feeling of belonging to a world that does not yet exist reliably" (Berlant, 2007, p. 277). The meanings given to helping others (as means of contributing to society when it is not possible to regain the contribution through work, sanctioned by the work-centred society) echo Allan's (2019, p. 76) study of workfare volunteering as hope labour: "if all else fails, it makes one feel meaningful". The "emotional subtext" of welfare reforms is intertwined with issues of recognition (Tonkens, Grootegoed and Duyvendak, 2013, p. 408), an aspect that research participants' made clear through their accounts.

7.6 Bread and meaning. Understanding the meaning of work for participants

Just outside the village where Thomas lives, there is a massive site where an extension for a pharmaceutical based in Ireland is being built. A large sign reads: "Do you want a job with meaning?" That was exactly what Thomas was telling me about in our hour-long interview: he wanted a job with meaning but not the meaning assigned by an external entity. He does not want to take a bread job¹⁵ he feels pushed to accept because of the rules of active welfare. Ironically, Steve left his placement early to work in that very same building site. He lasted six weeks. Weary of the hard work and "*the shouting*", he realised that he could not bear the job he had done for 19 years. Steve did not want to leave the placement he was enjoying but took that job because "*that's what welfare wants me to do*". Meaning and control are two common aspirations that participants' reflexivity and future thinking tried to hold on to, amidst the tension between change and stability. How much of both could be attained, considering the circumstances, summarises much of the participants' concerns.

The notion of "bread job" (i.e. a job to cover basic needs) has been revisited by those promoting a work-first approach to activation through the motto that "any work is better than welfare". Sarah would disagree since she would prefer unemployment before having to take a bad job, in her words "*you might be depressed staring at the same four walls, but you are not being diminished*". In Lorel's (2018) study, supervisors explained how difficult it was for them to make welfare

¹⁵ The notion of "bread job" is attributed to Frank Kafka, who referred to his insurance company job as a job whose only aim was to pay the bills.

recipients understand that they have to settle for a bread job and defer the “dream-job” for the future. The same message is promoted by the intense job search and the conditions to be available to take any offer and keep actively searching for work. However, as it has been assessed, the Irish conditionality is weak in enforcing and sanctioning, but the power of the threat exerts a convincing influence upon welfare recipients. “Getting a job to get by”, as some research participants put it, was something many had to do in the past in order to secure a livelihood: these were not good jobs, or jobs they truly enjoyed, but their circumstances and responsibilities left them with no choice.

Taking control and creating a life trajectory that includes meaningful work acquire extra levels of difficulty when considering the increasing normalisation of precariousness as the current baseline for the making of life projects (Lorey, 2012). The promise of upward mobility held by paid work is practically absent from participants’ narratives. This promise, central in Fordist society, has become problematic and unattainable since work cannot offer security, as the short-term planning of participants, or the total refusal to plan, showed. Expecting welfare recipients to accept any job has been criticised for its potential to lead people to precarious work and maintain them in precarious conditions (Greer, 2016). At the same time, it has been argued that growing numbers of workers consider their jobs to be useless, empty or pernicious (Graeber, 2018; Frayne, 2019).

A future scenario where the best next option that a scheme participant holds is to continue on the scheme, or to move on to similar one, tells us a few things about the state of the labour market. Some older participants mentioned the idea of a job for life as “a thing of the past”, and those who had had a job for 15 or 20 years, knew that they were not going to regain a similar situation. This institutionalised expectation of what working life was like, that accompanied much of the stable context of older workers, is not available to them or younger participants. Today, intermittent and precarious employment has been very much normalised. The tension between change and stability refers directly to this reality.

Meaning and fulfilment were reflexively positioned by participants as ideal future aspirations that for most of them were connected to work in its broad sense. Meaning and fulfilment have been understood differently at different points in their lives; some participants recounted having achieved fulfilment, such as women through their experience of family and motherhood, and as their life course developed, their notion of meaning and fulfilment extended beyond the limits of their family life-plan. Older men, caught in the tension between stability and change, consistently expressed their contentment with their working lives despite the financial pressures they had endured; however, as the findings exposed, they assessed that their chances to regain work were slim. They could get a bread job, but meaningful work as they had construed it over their working

lives – working outside, with their hands or similar tasks – was possible for them only through placement. Other younger participants or those with health issues were also caught in the struggle for meaning, control and self-reliance.

Somehow, participants' experiences show that the notion of deservingness extends now beyond welfare and incorporates the labour market, in the sense that one can now ask *am I worthy of getting a job?* This question occupied much of the internal conversations of participants when asking “what is wrong with me?”; “what is my worth?”; “why am I not being seen?”; “why am I not being recognised as someone who can contribute?”; “why is that I have to be “stuck” in the welfare recipient, unemployed identity and never move on to being a worker, again?”.

The tension between stability and change emerged very much intertwined to the relationship between work and self. As the findings explored, work is a source of identity, meaning, income, purpose, relationships, among other aspects. This relationship is not straightforward and is problematic. There is a tension, then, between the search for meaning and the search for the necessary “bread”. In its ideal form, participants wish to find both: bread and meaning.

7.7 Concluding thoughts

Activation policies in Ireland might be reaching a point in which a more comprehensive analysis of its role and future direction is needed. As Chapter Two exposed, Ireland's relationship with activation has not been straightforward; first, slowing down the introduction of work-requirements and conditionality; then, adopting a full activation outlook in the aftermath of the recession as part of the bailout commitments. It might be time to consider the Irish activation's future, this time, from a more mature policy stance.

Research generates knowledge that is critical to illuminate what works and what does not work, what is absent and what needs attention. Qualitative research that builds upon people's experiences and views is particularly well-suited to present the lived experience of social policies. I believe my Grounded Theory research can offer relevant access to the lived experience of activation policies in Ireland, from the perspectives of participants of schemes that have attracted little attention. Community schemes appear to be less problematic when compared to other measures and schemes based on the compulsory job search, which involves a more direct style of monitoring and surveillance along with the explicit threat of sanctions. Community schemes appear to be friendlier and constructive, and they are; as the findings revealed, schemes do provide participants with a break, an in-between and time to be away from the pressure of the welfare

rules. These schemes, as participants' experiences revealed, work well for those who have mental and physical health issues; for them, placement means recovery. Placement works well for older men with little chances of finding a job in the current labour market, for reasons of age and employment profile; for them, placement means a micro-world that somehow gave them back the "working outside" and the meanings it holds for them. Women also benefited greatly from the experience of placement, and for them, placement means reconnecting with themselves and projecting into the future, and they were eager to find a job; these women, however, did not want any job, but a job that would allow a balance between a personal project and family. Placement works well for the "self-determined" because it gave them the liminal space that somehow reflects their own lives; for them, placement means freedom. All in all, placement has the potential of being a transformative experience, it helped participants to recover from the deteriorating time of long-term unemployment, and it gave them an experience to reconnect with work, in the broad sense. The future of schemes participants, a central motive for research participants themselves, needs to be addressed by these schemes.

What could work better? Putting the person at the centre; this is a strong idea that resounds across participants' positive and negative experiences with welfare and activation. In their encounters with welfare officers, participants experienced standard and routinary rules based on a homogeneous profile of participant; in their encounters with placement they experienced quite the opposite. Nonetheless, the positive experience of placement is not unproblematic. Findings suggest that there is a need for tailored scheme support that can accompany participants outside the threshold of placement. For instance, participants with health problems want to work, and, as they expressed, they need more support to transit out of the scheme to a work situation that does not interfere with their health. On the other hand, the "work-ready" feeling that some participants expressed, especially women, can be quickly turned into disappointment and a new cycle of "not getting responses". These aspects tell of the need for exit plans co-produced with participants and follow-up measures. The findings found no evidence of this. Schemes that are person-centred would need to re-think the balance between community and participants' needs. This aspect seems to be very much a political issue. As Chapter Two depicted, since the origins of community placements there has been a complex combination of diverse social actors' interests taking part in the schemes, with their own goals and agendas: community organisations, agencies and government. The needs of participants seem to be absorbed by the rhetoric of social inclusion and community benefits. I think there is a valid ethical question regarding the complementarity of these different sets of goals and values, and the role of welfare recipients in the delivery of community services.

This research offers a unique insight into the experience of community placements, and also offers points of departure. Future research would need to incorporate the views of community organisations; at the same time, a focus on the work of supervisors, as frontline activation workers, would provide a more in-depth insight into the notion of co-production and its potential. Relatedly, future research on these schemes would need to incorporate the views of younger participants and participants with more complex needs (those deemed “difficult” by supervisors). These three aspects reflect the limitations of this study and the findings. Another limitation to be addressed is the geographical location of the findings, which may not be representative of the experience of schemes participants in larger urban cities.

What placement, unemployment and welfare reciprocity meant for participants was construed through their experience of passing through. As Adam told me when saying goodbye after our second interview: *“at the end of the day, placement makes you feel better, but it does not necessarily make the future better”*. Placement holds the potential to co-produce with scheme participants the experience of a “better inner place”; however, the challenge remains for these schemes as to how to offer effective paths into paid work and unpaid work keeping the person at the centre.

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Appendix 1 – Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Title of the study: *A study of the experience of women and men in activation schemes in Ireland.*

This research is being carried out and supervised as part of a doctoral study with the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin. You are invited to take part in this research. If you accept, I will ask you to meet and take part in an interview at a time and place convenient for you.

Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please read this information carefully. Please feel free to ask me any question. Please take time to decide whether or not to participate.

⇒ **What the research is about?**

This research aims to understand the personal experience of unemployment, job seeking and placement among Tús and Community Employment schemes' participants. This research wishes to gain a deeper understanding of the possibilities and changes that the experience of placement brings to participants' lives.

⇒ **What will taking part involve?**

If you accept, I will ask you to meet for an interview at a time and place convenient for you. It is important for you to know that you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer. You may choose to stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. The interview will last for between 60-80 minutes. The interview will be recorded (audiotaped) to help keep track of what we both say during the interviews. Your identity will remain anonymous. Your name will be removed from the transcript (your name will NOT be written), and your identity will NOT be disclosed. Before the interview, we both will sign a consent form and you will keep a copy.

⇒ **Why have you been invited to take part?**

Hearing your views is important. You are being invited to take part in this research because your experience can contribute to the understanding and knowledge of what is like to be on an activation schemes at this time in Ireland.

⇒ **Will taking part be confidential?**

Your participation is confidential. Your name will be removed from the transcript and your identity will NOT be disclosed. Other details such as places and names of institutions and other's people names will also be removed from the text. Extracts from your interview may be quoted in, and your identity will remain anonymous. The only reason for me to break confidentiality would be in the case you say something that indicates there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either you or another person.

⇒ **How will the information you provide be recorded, stored and protected?**

After the interviews, the recordings will be transcribed into text and the tapes will be destroyed once the thesis is examined. The text version of the interview will be stored safely on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and the academic supervisor will have access to this

material. The fully anonymised transcript of your interview (what you said but removing your name and any personal information) will be kept for further analyses.

⇒ **Do you have to take part?**

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

⇒ **What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be presented in a thesis and they will be presented in the form of articles and presentations. It is important to share the results, so the study and what you have shared can be helpful for the understanding these schemes. I assure you that your identity will not be disclosed and will remain anonymous. If you wish, you can access the findings of the study. In that case, please let me know and I will contact you once the report is finalised.

If you decide to take part in this research, please contact me by text, email or telephone: 087 xxxxxxx/ petautsc@tcd.ie

Thank you.

It is important for you to know that this research has been approved by the Trinity College Dublin School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee.

If you want to ask any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me, or my academic supervisor by telephone, text or email. Our contact details are:

Carla Petautschnig, Researcher	petautsc@tcd.ie	087 xxxxxxx
Professor Virpi Timonen, Supervisor	timonenv@tcd.ie	+353 1 xxxxxxx

THANK YOU

Appendix 2 - Consent form

Participant Consent Form

Consent to take part in research titled: *A study of the experience of women and men in activation schemes in Ireland.*

This research is being carried out and supervised as part of a doctoral study with the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. A copy of this form, signed for both of us, will be given to you.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research.

= I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

= I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

= I have been given the information about this study and I understand what is involved in taking part.

= I understand that my participation involves taking part in an interview, at a time and venue convenient for me.

= I understand that my participation in the study has no consequences and it is not related in any form to my welfare entitlements.

= I understand that my interview will be recorded for research purposes only and that the audio and transcript will be treated with complete confidence.

= I understand that in any report on the results of this research (thesis document, conference, presentations and published papers) my identity and name of institutions will remain anonymous.

= I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, she may have to report this to the relevant authorities.

= I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage.

= I understand that I am free to contact the researcher or the academic supervisor to seek further clarification and information.

If you want to ask any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor by telephone, text or email. Our contact details are:

Carla Petautschnig, Researcher	petautsc@tcd.ie	+353 087 xxxxxx
Professor Virpi Timonen, Supervisor	timonenv@tcd.ie	+353 1 xxxxx

Signature of research participant

Signature of researcher

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

