

Entrepreneurial becomings - the disruptive power of self-employment for people with learning disabilities

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Abstract

Background

Many people with learning disabilities lead marginalised lives and navigate a world that values people in terms of employment and economic contribution. Although the number of people with learning disabilities in paid work was recently estimated to be just 4.8% (NHS Digital, 2022), some people are using self-employment to create employment opportunities in ways that also demand a reappraisal of this conventional allocation of human value.

Methods

Using the narratives of three entrepreneurs with learning disabilities, this paper builds on Critical Disability Studies' emerging DisHuman scholarship to ask how enterprise is being used to challenge, subvert, disrupt and extend our understanding of how human becoming happens. It analyses three conceptualisations of entrepreneurship - the conditional, the relational and the DisHuman - to consider the tensions, contradictions and delight inherent in building new understandings of human value.

Findings

The study finds that self-employment presents a conduit through which people with learning disabilities can interact with the wider social, education and welfare systems as they simultaneously reject normative notions of success while inviting new ways to embrace opportunities for inclusion.

Conclusions

We think not of self-employment just as an employment outcome, but as an exciting site of potential through which individuals celebrate interconnection, interdependence and collaboration, unencumbered by normative ideals of perfection, autonomy and contribution (Goodley, 2001).

1 Accessible Summary

- 2 • People with learning disabilities are often excluded from society.
- 3 • Because there are barriers to work, the number of people with learning disabilities in
- 4 paid employment is very low.
- 5 • Education, social and welfare systems do not work well for all people.
- 6 • Some people are becoming self-employed as a way of creating work opportunities
- 7 for themselves.
- 8 • Our research found that people develop different types of self-employment
- 9 depending on what barriers they face in society.
- 10 • Self-employment is therefore also a good way to challenge society about what is
- 11 important.
- 12 • It can also change how we think about disability.

1 Introduction

2 People with learning disabilities often lead marginalised lives - forced to navigate a world
3 that so often adopts employment and economic contribution as an abbreviation for
4 inclusion and value. Employment is presented as a route to better health, social status and
5 economic wellbeing (Sayce, 2011), as well as to community connection and social meaning
6 (Suzman, 2020). It is synonymous with identity, purpose and belonging and is considered a
7 right under Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).
8 Having a job is widely viewed as a fundamental aspect of the human experience.

9 Yet at a time when the ONS reports a general employment rate in the UK of 75.2% (ONS,
10 2025) the number of people with learning disabilities in paid work was recently estimated to
11 be just 4.8% (NHS Digital, 2022). Exclusion from work denies connection, choice and
12 possibility, leaving unemployed people to become objects of precarious welfare systems. At
13 the same time, late capitalism's emphasis on individual intelligence and knowledge
14 production - sometimes referred to as "cognitive capitalism" (Rindermann & Thompson,
15 2011) - links perceived cognitive ability directly to economic productivity and social value.
16 Individuals considered lacking are therefore frequently deemed "non-contributory" and
17 thus rendered inferior within the human hierarchy. Welfare reform and dehumanising
18 employment systems reinforce a maelstrom of discourses that suggest that those who do
19 not fit the "ideal" are less valuable and more disposable (Goodley, et al., 2020). The inability
20 to secure work thus functions not merely as economic exclusion, but denies access to active
21 citizenship and one of the dominant constructions of human value: employment.

22 However, some people with learning disabilities are turning to self-employment to embrace
23 this normative regulation of employment and economic contribution, but are doing so in
24 ways that demand new community, values and meaning beyond simple job creation. For
25 these entrepreneurs, becoming self-employed calls for a simultaneous acceptance and
26 rejection of the assumptions that surround the human category - at once tolerant yet
27 troubling of the economic allocation of human value. Here self-employment becomes a site
28 of potential through which the sometimes conflicting economic, education and social
29 systems are navigated. In managing these contradictory systems, self-employment both
30 conforms to conventional understandings of work and value, while simultaneously opening
31 new possibilities for rethinking how these can be realised and extended. Here, self-
32 employment offers disabled entrepreneurs an opportunity to resist ableist limits upon who
33 is seen as fully human and enact this challenge from both inside and outside normative
34 assumptions. It is this disruptive potential of self-employment – especially in the lives of
35 people with learning disabilities - that lies at the heart of this paper.

36 For the purpose of clarity, we refer to the term "learning disabilities" as it is widely used in
37 the UK, but recognise that other labels are used in different countries such as intellectual
38 impairments, development disabilities and cognitive impairments. We also recognise these
39 terms as contested and complicated, sometimes connected to stigma and shame, yet often
40 necessary for access to support and resources. We also embrace a presumption of
41 competence and employability that considers people with learning disabilities capable of
42 communication, contribution and inclusion. At the same time we use "self-employment" to
43 describe any work that does not directly involve an employer. Whilst we acknowledge the

common understanding of “entrepreneur” as someone who establishes a business and takes on financial risk and responsibility, we use the term here as a signifier for the business owner who seeks ‘opportunities without regard to the resources they currently control’ (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990, p. 23).

Critical Disability Studies [CDS] perceives disability as both a lived reality and a socio-political phenomenon that interacts with wider systems of power and oppression (Critical Disability Studies Collective, 2021; Reaume, 2014). CDS recognises that disabled people lead deeply intersectional lives where disability cuts across class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age and other identities that have been considered less than human (University of Sheffield, 2024; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Some CDS scholars (e.g. Goodley et al, 2021; Feeley, 2015; Cameron, 2023) use the lens of disability to trouble the dominant humanist concept of the human as independent, exceptional and distinctive (Nayar, 2013) and exchange it for a world of relationships, co-dependencies and networks. Inviting us to adjust our way of thinking about what it means to be human, Goodley and colleagues offer a DisHuman positionality to provoke an understanding of human-ness from two simultaneous perspectives: firstly, that disabled people engage in community life in ways that emphasise their human-ness in humanist terms whilst secondly, developing new forms of community, which extends how we understand the human. This forthright acknowledgement of the messiness and fluidity of identity creation connects deeply with CDS.

In an extension to this DisHuman conversation, we consider the stories of three entrepreneurs with learning disabilities and show how the storytellers develop various entrepreneurial identities that simultaneously embrace and reject humanist ideas of contribution and belonging and what it means to be included. Our research shows how interactions with enterprise, support and the outside world enables nuanced, complex and contradictory becomings – fluid identities that emerge from multiple, heterogeneous perspectives. The stories in this paper challenge assumptions about what people with learning disabilities can become and problematise notions of human value. By showing how self-employment enables participants to shape and reshape their identities through interconnection, interdependence and collaboration, we ask:

- How are people with learning disabilities engaging entrepreneurial identities to help them interact with community, economic and social life?
- What can self-employment “do” for people with learning disabilities?
- In what ways does self-employment help challenge, adapt and recalibrate what we mean by autonomy and independence, disability and impairment?
- How do people with learning disabilities help us understand entrepreneurship in different ways?

Locating the study

Self-employment represents some 15% of the UK’s employment rate (Francis-Devine & Powell, 2024) , and is viewed by many as a favourable way to organise their working lives. However, it is also thought to carry a number of specific benefits for disabled people and is a way to arrange work around individual health needs and personal preferences (BASE, 2018). Policy makers in the UK recognise its potential for those considered “furthest from the

labour market” (DWP, 2022; 2024; 2025) while employment support agencies are increasingly keen to include self-employment as part of their support offer (BASE, 2018).

Few academic studies concentrate specifically on people with learning disabilities running their own business. Indeed Hutchinson et al. (2021) found only six out of 1080 papers focused explicitly on self-employment for people with learning disabilities. Only one was UK based. However, these suggest that self-employment conveys a myriad of benefits not found in other employment formats including, increased levels of control and access to job roles not found elsewhere (Hagner & Davies, 2002), pride and an appreciation for work done (Caldwell, et al., 2019; Thoresen, et al., 2018), engagement in meaningful activity and social interaction (Reddington & Fitzsimons, 2013), improved quality of life (Conroy, et al., 2010), development of new skills and interests (Thoresen, et al., 2018; Caldwell, et al., 2020b) and a chance to control the pace and place of employment (Hagner & Davies, 2002). The mechanics of how disabled people more generally engage with enterprise has however, received more attention, with particular interest being shown in the reasons disabled people choose to develop enterprises, the factors that proved helpful during start up and how success is calibrated (Brattström & Wennberg, 2022).

Motivation, facilitation and success

Many studies consider the “push” or “pull” factors behind disabled people’s entrepreneurial motivations. Here push factors symbolise an inability to access other working arrangements (Caldwell, et al., 2020a; Maritz & Laferriere, 2016), the unviability of other forms of employment (Adams, et al., 2019) and self-employment as ‘the option of last resort’ (Bates, 2009, p. 28). Pull factors on the other hand, position inclusive entrepreneurship (Shaheen, 2016) as an attractive option for disabled people to accommodate health needs, energy levels, working preferences (Jones & Latreille, 2011), and a way of constructing employment based on the business owner’s unique combination of skills and interests (Griffin, et al., 2014). Although neither appears to fit more comfortably with a DisHuman positionality, a consideration of the push/pull factors offers an early glimpse into the complex and contradictory systems which disabled entrepreneurs are forced to navigate.

Turning to the facilitatory factors prevalent in successful self-employment, Yamamoto and Olson (2016) identify a number of influences. These include the personal attributes and individual circumstances of the entrepreneur, the prevalent accountability systems (including funding and market conditions) and the levels of support available. Support similarly holds the attention of others, with Adams, et al. (2019) identifying peer mentoring as an ‘ideal’ source of practical support (p. 7). Others acknowledge the important role of families (Reddington & Fitzsimons, 2013), social and community enterprises (Shaheen, 2016; Ouimette & Rammler, 2017) and job coaches, employment advisors and enterprise facilitators (BASE, 2018; Hagner & Davies, 2002). These all suggest that self-employment is therefore not the solo pursuit imagined for the normative, independent and autonomous self, but rather an experience of networks, support and relationships.

Although self-employment is frequently measured in terms of size, growth and viability, Adams et al. found most disabled run enterprises to be small and lacking ‘growth ambition’ (2019, p. 5). However, Reddington and Fitzsimons (2013) suggest that people with learning disabilities do not always correlate success with self-employment income levels, while

1 others similarly identify alternative outcomes such as individual self-determination,
2 validation (Caldwell, et al., 2019) and quality of life (Conroy, et al., 2010). Here again, the
3 DisHuman becomes evident. While normative measures of success may dominate, self-
4 employment offers a new way to respect the capacity and assets of people with learning
5 disabilities (Beyer & Robinson, 2009).

6 However, framing self-employment primarily as a business development process offers little
7 insight into entrepreneurship from the perspective of everyday life and normalcy. By
8 highlighting multiple entrepreneurial identities, our DisHuman analysis reconceptualises
9 self-employment as a dynamic site of becoming. Here we think about entrepreneurial
10 “becoming”, not as a linear developmental process with a predictable sequence and certain
11 outcomes (Cameron, 2023) nor as the simple acquisition of entrepreneurial skills. For us,
12 becoming represents an explosion of the many possibilities that appear through self-
13 employment as people with learning disabilities navigate the economic and social structures
14 that shape their lives. This paper’s contribution therefore emerges as we apply the
15 DisHuman lens to the experience of self-employment for people with learning disabilities
16 from two simultaneous perspectives. Firstly as an appeal to the normative - of employment,
17 contribution and productivity - and secondly as a celebration of resistance - of social change
18 and challenge. Here we show how entrepreneurship meets disability and blurs into
19 something else, something more social, more community and more relational.

20 Methodology

21 We reflect upon the narratives of entrepreneurial experience co-constructed by the authors
22 and three people with learning disabilities. Narrative research takes as its starting point the
23 idea that people live and understand their world in storied ways, connecting lives as lived,
24 lives as experienced and lives as told (Bruner, 2004). Stories are co-constructed through an
25 interaction between the narrator and researcher that invites consideration of the meaning
26 behind experience (Wang & Geale, 2015) and the social, cultural and institutional contexts
27 within which that experience is set (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

28
29 While individual experience has always been the stuff of qualitative research, the
30 epistemological significance of narrative research stems from the role narratives play in the
31 production of knowledge. Where other qualitative approaches can treat narratives as a true
32 reflection of a participant’s life, narrative researchers consider the social construction of
33 stories and the transformatory effect the process can have on both the teller and the
34 audience. Narrative inquiry seeks to understand meaning making through the stories of
35 lived experience and how stories are influenced by broader social contexts. Thus, by
36 embedding these entrepreneurial stories within the space for critical enquiry presented by
37 the DisHuman positionality, we locate the production of knowledge within the intersection
38 of everyday interactions, relationships and settings.

39 Where narrative research’s ability (and desire) to represent truth demands some
40 methodological criticality, it offers clarity of process to facilitate academic and practitioner
41 acceptance that the research is worthy of attention. Accounts from the past will inevitably

be somewhat incomplete, but by offering alternative, partial, hesitant and interpretative readings, narrative describes the experience, context and setting through an 'epistemology of the particular' (Stake, 2000, p. 440). Researchers consider the power relations - between narrator and researcher and recognise their responsibility for building a sensitive and reflective approach, especially when constructing stories alongside people considered marginalised. However, as both method and phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), narrative becomes a deeply relational concern, capable of providing opportunities for stories to be told from an experiential rather than analytical perspective, foregrounding different worlds to challenge the 'comfortable dominant complacency' (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438).

Identifying participants

With fewer than 1% of jobs secured described as self-employment (Boss Employment, 2018), the identification of participants in this study was purposive (Stake, 2000) with participants sought who had both knowledge and experience of self-employment. After information about the research was circulated in an easy read format via the first author's networks, three entrepreneurs agreed to participate.

- Leah: Having been unsuccessful in attempts to find paid employment, Leah joined a small social enterprise established to provide employment for people with learning disabilities through the provision of services to local businesses. Leah later became a Director, developed new income streams, provided training for practitioners and raised the profile of the enterprise significantly.
- Ali: After a wide range of unpaid work experiences, Ali was eventually supported to develop his interests as an artist. Work was initially limited to a small number of local organisations but, with support from a PA and a business circle, Ali now works with a wide range of local, regional and national organisations producing innovative art pieces and films.
- Muna: When early experience of work did not lead to paid employment, Muna attended a design course and decided that was what she wanted to do as a job. A new local self-employment project gave access to a tutor, support worker and mentor. Muna's business was at an earlier stage of development, offering floral design and products to the public when the research began.

Names have been changed and enterprise information limited to protect anonymity.

Ethical considerations

Treating consent as the 'basic tenet of ethical research' (Cook & Inglis, 2009, p. 55) the research managed ethical considerations while seeking to avoid unnecessary assumptions about what people with learning disabilities can and cannot do. Partnership, participation and inclusion became the ethical triad on which the research was built, with disability assumed to be variable and situational. Although research is rarely neutral, good practice in interviewing people with learning disabilities was reflexively followed including, getting to know participants in order to develop a rapport (Hollomotz, 2018), conducting interviews at a time and place of their choosing (Atkinson, 1988) and recording conversations rather than

taking notes to facilitate active listening (Dowse, 2009). However, for us the pertinent question became what approach worked best for each participant in order to maximise their contribution to the research.

Constructing narratives and analysing experience

Using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions enabled participants to tell their stories, direct the discussions and cover a wide range of issues. Interviews were conducted via phone and video conferencing systems, chosen and adapted to suit participant preferences. Field texts – transcripts, reflective diary, marketing materials etc. – were coded using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space to conceptualise the experiences as continuous, interactive and situated. As initial analysis started to reveal characters, scenes and contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) further information was sought over seven months to develop the texts as the stories were shared, reshaped, clarified and explored with the participants. As we excavated the data, each story was analysed in relation to its parts and the parts of the story in relation to its whole (Josselson, 2011). However, while stories offer an important conveyance of individual entrepreneurial experience, the application of meaning must always be interpretive. The discussions about what we can learn from these stories were therefore led by the authors.

According to Polkinghorne, the analysis of narratives is often a search for common themes and categories. It is, in a sense, about taking stories apart to understand what they mean (Polkinghorne, 1995) - thinking *about* stories (Bleakley, 2005). Narrative analysis, on the other hand, is about creating stories from descriptions of events provided by research participants and is more about the construction of stories - thinking *with* stories (Bleakley, 2005). In this way, the product of research becomes the stories themselves, constructed in an attempt to answer how and why experiences come about (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Clandinin and colleagues (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) suggest that a singular search for themes and categories risks reducing the power of the complete narrative into something less. Others suggest analysis should aim to discover both the themes and how multiple voices, audience and researcher all disrupt and influence story telling (Josselson, 2011; Bruner, 2004). For us, narrative inquiry is about relationships and viewing people, places and things as becoming rather than being.

In this way, we thought *with* the stories as we used the theoretical mooring of the DisHuman, to consider how human becoming happens and to explore what the stories revealed about how disabled people engage in normative life whilst simultaneously developing new ways of being and doing. As we identified interweaving plotlines, tensions and places, we found the stories radiated entrepreneurial becomings - identities that enable, protect and challenge - at once desiring and rejecting normative notions of success while building new ways of being. Next, we consider what our DisHuman analysis revealed

Findings and discussion

Alongside the palpable sense of enthusiasm with which the entrepreneurs embraced their self-employment, the origins of these entrepreneurial becomings emerge from the storytellers' experiences:

At the age of 5, Ali didn't use speech but discovered that drawing had a calming effect that was helpful to him. At first he got into trouble for drawing on walls, but after his Grandmother encouraged him to use paper instead, he found that art gave him a way to express himself. As his artistic skills developed and his own distinctive style started to emerge, Ali was invited to become Artist in Residence for a local charity. It was then that the idea of using his artwork as a way to make money first came about.

Leah: A group was set up at the day centre to work on a project that would try to create jobs for people with learning difficulties ... I was asked if I wanted to get involved.

Muna: It all started with a level 2 (creative design) course I did at college. I realised I was good at it and decided from there it was what I wanted to do. That's what inspired me to run my own business and it just came from the bottom of my heart

Traversing the pressures of social expectation that all too often confuses human value with productivity, Leah, Ali and Muna each required multiple entrepreneurial identities to help their interactions with the social systems they encountered. These identities – DisHuman, relational and conditional – reveal both normative desire and new possibilities as the entrepreneurs find alternative employment arrangements and opportunities to redefine themselves through their enterprises. These, for us, are the DisHuman questions of meaning and significance and we will now consider these in turn.

1. The DisHuman Entrepreneur

Having a paid job is one of the normative markers of human value and seen as a key aspect of being a successful and contributing member of society. When Leah is told she is unable to work because of her learning disability, she is denied access to this defining aspect of social recognition and experiences the demeaning effects of exclusion:

Leah: I even tried the Job Centre, but they were no better and told me that I couldn't work because I had learning disabilities. That made me really angry and knocked my confidence.

Yet devoid of the standard prospects afforded to non-disabled people, Leah continued her search for employment and, in doing so, found new ways to gain normative recognition of her value.

Leah: I really liked the idea of joining because the company was run by people with learning difficulties and created paid jobs for people who could not get a job anywhere else. My support worker suggested that I try working in the office doing admin. I had to organise the company meetings, take minutes, work out the finances and pay the wages. It was important to have a job that suited me.

Previously defined by what she was considered unable to do, her supportive and well matched self-employed position reveals both acceptance of a desire to contribute and a

1 rejection of the standard approaches to employment. Extending our understanding of
2 community, it is her ability that is pushed to the fore.

3 Leah: Because companies for people with learning difficulties hadn't been done
4 before, lots of people wanted to talk to us about what we did. We were invited to a
5 number of conferences and training events, to talk about how the company worked.
6 I was not nervous about this and enjoyed travelling around with my support worker.

7 The inability to secure employment with an employer may well make self-employment an
8 attractive option – a push proposition. However, rather than assume simple push or pull
9 terms control the entrepreneurial impulse, Leah's story suggests both are in play. The push
10 of unemployment connects to the pull of appeal of finding new ways of being. Ali and Muna
11 too, operate within more than one motivational code. For them, enterprise was not the
12 option of last resort but a delightful prospect – and one they think might also appeal to
13 others:

14 Ali: I was really fascinated when I heard the word self-employed because it meant
15 like, not only I could run an organisation, I could run my own organisation ... I really
16 feel like if I can break down these barriers between unemployment, and
17 employment, and we can take these unemployed people out of homes, off the
18 streets and get them into a really good job.

19 Muna: I don't want anyone to feel like they can't apply when they actually can do
20 something that they enjoy. It happens to a lot of people with special needs and I
21 don't want them to feel like they're not capable; that they can't achieve anything
22 when they actually can.

23 Exclusion from work does not deter these entrepreneurs. By embracing the humanist
24 appeal of employment and its associated aspirations, Leah, Ali, and Muna engage with self-
25 employment in ways that reveal dynamic becomings. Their self-employment generates
26 alternative pathways to express and expand their human value through new opportunities,
27 innovative approaches, and novel forms of community.

28 Next we consider the cordial assumptions of autonomy and responsibility that also surround
29 the application of human value

30 2. The relational entrepreneur

31 As entrepreneurs, Leah, Ali, and Muna continually innovate, adapt, and create, discovering
32 new ways to operate within existing markets while pursuing opportunities for growth - both
33 for their businesses and for their own personal development.

34 Muna: The business is quite small still ... but I want to build up my business and keep
35 making progress so I can keep on improving my skills ... it's not all about money, but
36 about being confident and being creative and reaching out to more people. Building
37 the business bigger will be good for me personally.

38 Yet although entrepreneurship is strongly associated with liberal ideals of independence and
39 autonomy (Long, 1983; Boutillier & Uzunidis, 2014; OED online, 2020), their stories are

1 replete with the involvement of others - family, friends and supporters. Whether more
2 formally convened, like Ali's business support circle, or Muna's willing coalition of mentors,
3 coaches and trainers, having the right support has been significant in the execution of their
4 self-employment.

5 Ali: We set up a support group to help me develop my self-employment and to get
6 new contracts. It was made up of people that I knew and who knew about my
7 business.

8 Muna: The course introduced me to a mentor who really helped with my confidence
9 and helped me leave my comfort zone. I do most of it by myself ... but Mum helps
10 with wholesaler collections and deliveries, timings and tax returns as I struggle with
11 the paperwork due to my Autism.

12 By engaging support when specific personal or entrepreneurial input is required, each
13 presents an entrepreneurship that celebrates interconnection, interdependence and
14 collaboration. Their enterprises not only adapt to provide space for the entrepreneurs to
15 celebrate inclusion on their own terms, they allow and enmesh support into their very
16 fabric.

17 Ali: Sometimes I call my support worker, my boss but she's not really. A bit like a PA,
18 but more. Someone to help me plan my work and run my business ... to help me
19 keep organised.

20 Leah: My support worker helped by encouraging me and making me feel at ease.

21 Families, support workers, and others are embedded in the totality of enterprise, not as
22 some faceless apparatus, but as active participants with whom both enterprise and the
23 entrepreneur are continuously co-constructed. While networks increase the likelihood of
24 business success (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998), support plays a crucial role in shaping
25 entrepreneurial identity, not only strengthening operational competence but also serving as
26 both buffer and facilitator.

27 Ali: Having that support circle and that PA keeps me down to earth a bit ... it makes
28 you feel like I don't have a brick on my head because when I got, like, so much going
29 inside my head.

30 Leah: We had lots of forms to fill in but doing the admin helped me to really
31 understand how the company worked and what we had to do. It was really
32 important to have good support.

33 Again the DisHuman appears in these entrepreneurial stories through an interplay between
34 enterprise, support and entrepreneur. Invitations to view independence and autonomy on
35 humanist terms - the solo innovator - run concurrently with a relational glory that demands
36 a broader understanding of entrepreneurship. Here the entrepreneur celebrates the role of
37 others amid an autonomy that is distributed (Graby & Greenstein, 2016). Of course, all
38 human identity is emergent and relational (Donnellon, et al., 2014), but these stories show
39 how self-employment allows the space for the entrepreneurs to develop - to become - on
40 their own terms. Some days the infrastructure of support is at the fore and the

entrepreneur can remain quiet, while other times the business takes the back seat while the entrepreneur leads.

Leah: I wanted to tell people it was possible and to show how we did things. When I was speaking, it felt like I was a different person, like a different character.

Connections built around the individual suggest that any attempt to identify an entrepreneur, disabled or otherwise, in isolation from the enterprise or their networks is futile. Self-employment may sometimes be about employment, certainly, but it is also about connection, wellbeing and ability - inclusion for the relational entrepreneur.

However, Leah, Ali, and Muna's entrepreneurial becomings are also shaped by broader social systems, as their self-employment requires the emergence of additional identities. We now turn to these reflections.

3. The conditional entrepreneur

Like many people with learning disabilities, Leah, Ali and Muna lead conditional lives, subject to the ebb and flow of systems, allowances and public opinion. They all describe previous engagement with various forms of employment, support and training. Some more progressive than others:

Leah: I went to a day centre which did some training for work, but getting a paid job was hard. I worked in a card shop, a supermarket and a couple of care homes but none of them lasted very long ... mainly because of people's attitudes and what they thought people with learning difficulties could and couldn't do.

Muna: I was supported to try work as a waitress for three weeks, but it wasn't really good and didn't work out. I tried applying for other jobs but employers didn't reach out back to me.

Ali: My social worker made links with the local employment support team so they could talk about how I could be supported. After a few meetings, it was agreed that my personal budget that could be used.

However access to all these supports are conditional on meeting, often opaque, eligibility criteria – to be “disabled enough” to justify the additional resources – even where the resource was not that helpful. Muna and Leah experienced additional forms of conditionality as well, in people's attitudes and assumptions, even from those who were there to support:

Leah: A couple of support workers at the day service suggested it wasn't worth bothering ... that [the business] would 'never last'.

Yet self-employment offered a route to opportunity from exclusion. Here the presence of conditionality demands the management of further DisHuman tensions. For Leah and Muna, this was about the expectations and assumptions of co-workers, support staff and

1 employers. For Ali it was about funding and the broader conditionality that arrives as self-
2 employment interacts with welfare rules that dictate income levels and the expected
3 behaviour of individual claimants.

4 Ali: In fact money is a bit of a worry and I have to keep an eye on how much I earn so
5 that my benefits won't be cut. My family are worried too about this.

6 As they develop their enterprises on humanist terms, seeking to expand, increase income
7 and build their own employment opportunities, the entrepreneurs absorb social
8 expectations, claim benefits and traverse the performative role of assessments for support
9 and training. Become too successful and any later assessment might deem the support no
10 longer necessary - leaving them at risk of losing the very support that enabled success in the
11 first place. Yet focusing on what someone cannot do is steeped in the medical model of
12 disability rather than in the factors, conditions and arrangements that foster disability.
13 Conditionality therefore restricts entrepreneurial objectives, replacing job security with a
14 more precarious existence within welfare, social care and employment support systems.

15 Yet, as well as creating jobs, Leah, Ali and Muna's self-employment invites others to think
16 differently - about employment certainly, but also about what people with learning
17 disabilities can and cannot do. Evoking the conditional entrepreneur enabled each to
18 navigate the contradictory systems of ambition and security so that the push and pull of
19 their enterprises acquired an altogether different meaning. Here the DisHuman becomes
20 evident again – even as self-employment invites a vision of competence, inclusion and
21 respect, the required systems of support frequently remain conditional.

22 Conclusion

23 By inviting both the challenge to, and aspiration for valued participation and citizenship the
24 stories simultaneously emphasise and re-story what human value should mean. As they
25 interact with both business and support, the storytellers reveal multiple entrepreneurial
26 becomings that not only reshape conventional understandings of entrepreneurship but also
27 provoke a rethinking of disability. These DisHuman narratives reveal how self-employment
28 can help people with learning disabilities reject conceptions of disability apparent in
29 dominant social structures while at the same time invite new ways to embrace
30 opportunities for inclusion. Here the entrepreneurs celebrate interconnection,
31 interdependence and collaboration through the development of skills and interests, while
32 navigating the normative ideals of perfection, autonomy and contribution (Goodley, 2001).

33 These emergent entrepreneurial becomings - the DisHuman, the relational and the
34 conditional - expose the fluidity of self-employment (Caldwell, et al., 2019) whilst re-
35 storying Leah, Ali and Muna as competent, engaged entrepreneurs who draw 'upon a
36 multitude of skills, experiences, [and] repertoires of themselves to reach their goals'
37 (Wennberg & Henrik, 2014, p. 1). As well as opportunities for work, self-employment offers
38 people with learning disabilities new ways to engage with community life and the systems
39 within it. Offering the power to disrupt both what we mean by disability and what we mean
40 by entrepreneurship, the application of DisHuman embraces the multiplicity of human-ness
41 contained within these stories – at once entrepreneurial, disabled, employed, capable and
42 connected.

1 However support for self-employment needs constructing in ways that recognise the
2 evolving nature of enterprise, with measures of success that go beyond the narrow confines
3 of job creation and business growth. Existing systems of employment support need
4 expanding to include enterprise facilitation and for practitioners to understand the edges of
5 their own competence. Research needs to elicit an understanding of how self-employment
6 comes about within place-train-maintain models, designed to match an individual's skills,
7 interests and aspirations with the right job (Baxter, et al., 2024; Burke & Bates, 2019).

8 People with learning disabilities are already pursuing self-employment, but a DisHuman
9 reading of their experience provides a lens through which to recognise all lives as emergent,
10 interconnected, and relational. Doing so unsettles the conventional, the impossible and the
11 ordinary - never being, always becoming,

12 Muna: Being self-employed means that not everyone knows I have learning
13 difficulties. To them, I'm just a creative.
14

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