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Debbie Rudman
Western University, drudman@uwo.ca

Rebecca Aldrich
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO 63103, USA, raldrich@slu.edu

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"Activated, but Stuck": Applying a Critical Occupational Lens to Examine the Negotiation of Long-Term Unemployment in Contemporary Socio-Political Contexts

Debbie Laliberte Rudman [1],* and Rebecca Aldrich [2]

[1] School of Occupational Therapy, University of Western Ontario, Elborn College 1201 Western Rd, London, ON N6G 1H1, Canada

[2] Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO 63103, USA; raldrich@slu.edu

* Correspondence: drudman@uwo.ca; Tel.: +1-519-661-2111 (ext. 88965)

Abstract: Background: Solutions for the problem of long-term unemployment are increasingly shaped by neoliberally-informed logics of activation and austerity. Because the implications of these governing frameworks for everyday life are not well understood, this pilot study applied a critical occupational science perspective to understand how long-term unemployment is negotiated within contemporary North American socio-political contexts. This perspective highlights the implications of policy and employment service re-configurations for the range of activities that constitute everyday life. Methods: Using a collaborative ethnographic community-engaged research approach, we recruited eight people in Canada and the United States who self-identified as experiencing long-term unemployment. We analyzed interviews and observation notes concerning four participants in each context using open coding, critical discourse analysis, and situational analysis. Results: This pilot study revealed a key contradiction in participants' lives: being "activated, but stuck". This contradiction resulted from the tension between individualizing, homogenizing frames of unemployment and complex, socio-politically shaped lived experiences. Analysis of this tension revealed how participants saw themselves "doing all the right things" to become re-employed, yet still remained stuck across occupational arenas. Conclusion: This pilot study illustrates the importance of understanding how socio-political solutions to long-term unemployment impact daily life and occupational engagement beyond the realm of job seeking and job acquisition.

Keywords: occupation; unemployment; neoliberalism; austerity; activation; precarious employment

1. Introduction and Background

Accompanying the rising influence of neoliberal rationalities in many nations, there have been marked changes in the nature of unemployment that have intensified since the 2008 recession [1,2]. In this period, unemployment has become more prominent, prolonged and inequitably distributed [3], as evidenced by the fourth quarter 2014 average unemployment rate of 7.1% [4], which is 1.6% higher than its pre-recession level. Moreover, rates of long-term unemployment, defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as being unemployed for 12 months or more, are 77% higher than before the 2008 economic crisis [4]. In Canada and the United States (U.S.) in particular, the proportion of unemployed persons who experienced long-term unemployment from 2008 to 2014 increased from 7.3% to 12.5% and from 10.6% to 25.9%, respectively, relative to the total number of jobless individuals [5].

Within many countries, the official unemployment rate has failed to consistently return to pre-recession levels [4,6,7]. Official definitions of unemployment only account for people who are out of work and actively looking for work; people who are involuntarily working part-time or classified as "marginally attached" to the labor force thus remain outside the scope of standard economic analyses. However, attending to these latter experiences reveals the extensive lack of secure access to sustainable employment [6–8]. For example, while the official 2012 average U.S. unemployment rate was 8.1%, incorporating marginally attached and involuntarily part-time employed people into economic estimates increased this rate to 14.7% [6]. In Canada, the official 2012 unemployment rate was 7.2% and increased to 10.3% when involuntary part-time and discouraged workers were included [7].

The individual and social impacts of unemployment have been compounded by increases in the average duration of unemployment and the prevalence of "long-term" unemployment [3]. Long-term unemployment presents immense challenges for individuals, communities, and nations, including social marginalization, stigmatization based on negative views of dependency, financial insecurity, and a range of health issues [3,8–11]. The challenges associated with contemporary long-term unemployment are even greater when insecure employment situations, such as chronic underemployment or cycling between precarious employment and unemployment, are considered [9,11].

At the same time as the nature, prevalence, and duration of long-term unemployment have been transforming, activation and austerity measures informed by neoliberal rationalities have come to dominate governmental responses to unemployment [2,12,13]. Activation-based policies set parameters for employment support services based on the rationale that citizens "at risk" of state dependency must be transformed into responsible, self-reliant citizens [14]. Such citizens, according to the logic of activation, comply with particular activity expectations that enhance work readiness and self-confidence, increase suitability and marketability for labor market opportunities, and enable the "quickest route to work" possible [8,15]. Activation measures are inclusive of a range of activity expectations such as workshop attendance, job searching, workfare, and job training, as well as surveillance and disciplinary techniques for those who fail to comply with expectations [16–18]. In concert with activation, austerity measures have attempted to control state costs by decreasing replacement rates of employment/unemployment insurance (EI/UI) and restricting eligibility criteria, resulting in declining benefit recipiency rates [19–21]. Overall, activation and austerity measures have restrained accessibility and shaped the provision of resources and services such as EI/UI and work training, creating an increasingly disciplinary approach to managing long-term unemployment [13,22].

In support of activation and austerity measures, the problem of unemployment has been primarily discursively configured as the "problem of the unemployed". Commensurate with a broader "responsibilizing ethos" [23], the problem of and solutions for unemployment have increasingly been framed in policy documents, government reports, and the media as residing within the unemployed individual rather than in social, economic, or political conditions. As articulated by Boland [17] (p. 1), "the unemployed" are reconfigured as job-seekers who are "required to manage, conceal and overcome the unpleasant economic and social consequences of unemployment and turn these negatives into a positive performance" in which they "present themselves as an ideal candidate for any job".

To date, policy analyses have highlighted the ways in which activation and austerity measures have been combined in official documents in various national contexts, and ethnographic research has begun to examine the enactment of such measures in service provision processes [2,17,20,24]. As highlighted by Brady [25,26], "bottom up" analyses that address what happens as neoliberal discourses, policies, and technologies are put into action via service provision are important vehicles for understanding how activation and austerity re-configurations are negotiated within multiple rationalities and discretionary practices. Ethnographic research has raised critical awareness of the unintended consequences and challenges of enacting activation and austerity measures within service provision [23,27]. For example, qualitative data collected with 75 long-term unemployed Australians receiving employment services illustrated that such programs are often experienced as paternalistic

and are "counter-productive to achieving the official policy goal of improving self-efficacy and gaining paid employment" [28] (p. 255). Riach and Loretto's qualitative study of employment support services in Scotland highlighted "the subtle complexities of the barriers to successful implementation of government policies designed to increase employment among the older out-of-work" [15] (p. 113). Particularly when expected to take up low-paid, low-skilled jobs, Riach and Loretto's participants faced several challenges to maintaining an acceptable working identity while simultaneously ensuring financial survival via compliance with benefits programs' activity expectations. Overall, research addressing implications of activation measures has raised key concerns regarding the homogenization of "the unemployed" and a potential "one size fits all" approach to addressing unemployment. Tensions and challenges from such implementation result from a failure to recognize the experiences of particular collectives, such as aging workers and immigrants, who face social conditions and forms of discrimination that work against secure employment [29,30].

Drawing on a critical occupational science [31] perspective, our pilot study explored the implications of activation and austerity-based policy and employment service reconfigurations for daily occupations during long-term unemployment. An occupational perspective views daily life as comprised of many types of occupations that people need and want to do to sustain themselves, their families, and communities [32]. Occupations are conceptualized as vehicles for health, well-being, and social inclusion that are continuously "shaped, embedded, and negotiated within, as well as contributing to the shaping of, social systems and structures" [33] (p. 55). While the occupation of work is often prioritized within Western societies given its economic value and it ties to identity and social status [34], other types of occupations—such as caring for children, other family or friends; procuring and preparing food; maintaining one's home; or socializing through activities—are also essential and meaningful parts of daily life. Applying a critical occupational perspective ensures attention to taken-for-granted assumptions about the multi-faceted occupations that comprise daily life, including and beyond activities directly associated with looking for and securing work. It also draws attention to the situated nature of occupation, that is, how possibilities for occupation are shaped through various socio-political factors and are often inequitably distributed. From a critical occupational science perspective, broader consideration of the implications of activation and austerity approaches thus requires expanding beyond a primary focus on work-related aspects of long-term unemployment such as job seeking, de-skilling, or precarious employment, as well as attending to differential possibilities to engage in diverse occupations [35,36].

From a critical occupational science perspective, there is concern that activation and austerity approaches to managing long-term unemployment that call upon individuals to prioritize work-related activities may set boundaries on how jobless individuals negotiate the range of occupations they need and want to do to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. Indeed, while not explicitly informed by a critical occupational perspective, research examining long-term unemployment for single parents underscores the need to explore occupations outside formal labor force activities. For example, Brady's [25] ethnographic work has highlighted the importance of examining how service providers actively negotiate governmental guidelines and enact discretion to help clients fit activity expectations and paid work within mothering practices and identities. Gazso and McDaniel's comparative study concluded that "both Canadian and American lone mothers' experiences of neo-liberal support policies can, in a largely counter-intuitive matter, expose them to greater rather than less economic insecurity and inequality" [16] (p. 369). Breitkeurz and Williamson's [37] research with welfare-to-work participants concluded that approaches premised on promoting self-sufficiency can be potentially harmful to low-income parents when policies fail to acknowledge the challenges at the nexus of child care, low-paying jobs, and non-standard work hours. Overall, via exclusion from the labor market, the use of narrow definitions of long-term unemployment, and the lack of recognition of activities outside formal work, people who experience prolonged joblessness and job insecurity may experience multiple restraints on their occupational participation.

The pilot study reported in this paper study analytically builds on previous research by using a critical occupational perspective to consider how long-term unemployed individuals negotiate not just the expectations associated with activation approaches but also the complexity of occupations that comprise everyday life. Applying such a perspective in our research has illuminated a key contradiction for people experiencing long-term unemployment: the experience of being "activated, but stuck". This contradiction involves being simultaneously activated in relation to policy-sanctioned activity expectations such as job seeking, marketing the self, and optimizing one's suitability for work while remaining stuck in one's ability to negotiate other occupational realms such as family life, leisure, and social life. As detailed below, our study included individuals in varying types of living situations, and thus also extended beyond a focus on single parents.

2. Methodology and Methods

This pilot study aimed to advance understanding of the implications of contemporary policy and service provision approaches for everyday life during long-term unemployment. The study was conducted in 2012 in two medium-sized cities, one in Canada and one in the U.S., with funding support from Saint Louis University. As a collaborative ethnography that emphasized community-engaged research [38], the study was conducted in partnership with a not-for-profit employment service organization located in each site. We used ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews, to generate data and obtained ongoing input from representatives of our partnership organization on the research questions, design, and findings.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

In this study, we drew upon Foucauldian-informed governmentality theory to understand how problems and solutions related to long-term unemployment are constructed within policy and organizational documents as well as within peoples' narratives of long-term unemployment. Using governmentality theory, we conceptualized discourses regarding unemployment, conveyed through policies and enacted in services and everyday action, as technologies of governance which aim to shape the subjectivities of "the unemployed". This led us to focus on the subject positions constructed in documents and narratives as ideal, possible, and appropriate for "the unemployed" [39,40]. Moreover, bringing together governmentality theory and a critical occupational science perspective, we drew upon the concept of occupational possibilities. This concept addresses how governance occurs through technologies and practices that shape people's abilities to engage in occupations through promoting some forms of doing as ideal, moral and possible, and other forms as non-ideal, immoral and impossible [33,41,42]. Thus, we also focused analysis on activity expectations conveyed within documents and narratives. To move beyond a top-down deterministic analysis of policies and services, we drew upon Lipsky's [43] ideas to conceptualize front-line service providers as mediators between government policy and clients [44]. Lipsky's work describes the interactions between service providers and service seekers as sites of policy making; accordingly, service provision interactions can be seen as "making" neoliberal activation policies that shape the lives of people who are unemployed long-term. As such, in this study we aimed to examine what happens when policies are enacted in services and everyday life, and attended to contradictions and tensions that arise when policies met the realities of everyday lives [45]. In uniting these frameworks, we sought to enhance understandings of how policies and programs aimed at "governing" the unemployed—in the sense of guiding their understandings of themselves and their daily conduct—are enacted, resisted, and negotiated within the multi-faceted occupations comprising everyday life.

2.2. Sampling

Primary study participants included people who self-identified as experiencing long-term unemployment. Recruitment occurred via flyers, posters, and word-of-mouth by employment counselors at our partner organization in each city. We aimed to recruit 6 to 8 persons experiencing

long-term unemployment to examine the feasibility of our methods and refine our analytical approach. The final sample consisted of 8 persons (4 in each study site) who self-identified as experiencing long-term unemployment and who were currently receiving employment support services. In each study site, we recruited 2 females and 2 males with varying ages, durations of unemployment, and levels of education (see Table 1 for further details). Two main differences across the sites were that all participants in the U.S. city were African American and 3 had criminal records while all participants in the Canadian city were Caucasian and none reported having a criminal record. Three of the U.S. participants and 2 of the Canadian participants had histories of cycling between unemployment and precarious, part-time positions. In addition, front-line service providers were recruited in each site as secondary participants to enable further understanding of the context, processes, and discourses of service provision. Three front-line service providers participated in the U.S. site, and 4 participated in the Canadian site.

Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants.

Pseudonym	Site	Age	Gender	Educational Level	Length of Unemployment
JR	U.S.	40s	Male	Less than high school	5 years
Chris	U.S.	50s	Male	High school equivalency	1 year
Sheila	U.S.	Mid-40s	Female	High school diploma	1 year
Michelle	U.S.	Late 40s	Female	Less than high school	Last full-time job 5 years ago
Kevin	Canada	Mid-30s	Male	High school diploma	5 years
Tate	Canada	Late 30s	Male	College certificate	5 years
Denise	Canada	Early 40s	Female	High school diploma	Last full time job 5 years ago
Eileen	Canada	Early 60s	Female	College certificate	Last full time job 15 years ago

2.3. Data Collection

The initial study design involved semi-structured interviews and participant observations in personal contexts with persons experiencing long-term employment. We ultimately omitted personal context observations when participants indicated discomfort with this option. However, some participant observations did occur within employment support service organizations: 2 participants in the Canadian site were observed during employment preparation workshops, and 2 participants in the U.S. site were observed during interactions with their employment specialists. One to three 30–90 min semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. In addition to asking questions about work history, education, available supports, and access to resources, we asked questions pertaining to the range of occupations a person needed and wanted to do as part of everyday life, as well as if and how these occupations were influenced by the situation of long-term unemployment. Interviews with these primary participants were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, except in one case where the participant preferred that only hand-written notes be taken during interviews. Field notes from observations and memos about interviews were written by hand.

Data were collected with front-line service providers through general observations, formal interviews, and informal discussions. Observations occurred within employment service workshops, one-on-one sessions with clients, case conferences, and open resource areas. Interviews addressed organizational procedures, the local network of services, understandings of long-term unemployment, and service provision expectations and practices. Field notes were recorded by hand for these observations and interviews. In the findings below, understandings gained from service providers are embedded in the descriptions of study participants' situations.

2.4. Analytical Approaches

After immersion in the data through multiple readings and open coding, we employed critical discourse analysis and situational analysis. A critical discourse analytic approach (CDA) [46,47] helped us understand how subject positions and characterizations of everyday life and long-term unemployment were constructed and negotiated. To conduct the CDA, we created a discursive guide

informed by the study's theoretical framework to support a critical reading of the data. This guide contained questions such as: What activity expectations are forefronted within descriptions of employment support services? How are these activity expectations understood, taken up, resisted, or transformed by persons experiencing long-term unemployment? What identity positions does the narrator embrace or resist, and how are these connected to everyday occupations? The first author critically interrogated interview transcripts and observation field notes using this discursive guide to attend to the diversity of ways that participants situated themselves and their occupations in relation to broader discourses.

Situational analysis [48] helped us define elements of the situation of unemployment and map relations between those elements. As an analytic tool designed to supplement understandings drawn from various types of data, such as policy documents and interview transcripts, situational analysis helps bring the full complexity of situations of inquiry into view. The "situation" in this analytical approach reflects the nexus of individual and social factors and emphasizes the presence and absence of discourses that shape ways of being and doing. Following the situational analysis approach, the second author created messy, ordered, and relational situational maps to represent and examine the individual and social elements, social worlds, discursive positions, actors and actions highlighted in each primary participant's interview and observational data. We compared maps across primary participants to understand the elements that constitute diverse situations of long-term unemployment and examined how those elements were interrelated [49] within and across primary participants' experiences.

Throughout the analysis process, we discussed insights gained within and across participants' data. Bringing the results of the various approaches together enabled identification and analysis of key contradictions between individuals' lives and dominant discursive constructions.

3. Findings

The most pervasive and all-encompassing contradiction within primary participants' experiences of long-term unemployment was that of being "activated, but stuck." To present this, we first illustrate how primary participants described being "activated, but stuck" as well as the implications of that tension. We then draw upon relational and ordered situational maps for two primary participants to unpack how various elements of their situations interacted to create this contradiction.

3.1. The Experience of Being "Activated, But Stuck"

From a governmentality perspective, neoliberal activation policies and the activity expectations they promote are technologies that aim to shape ideal subjectivities and discipline subjects who fail to take up such subjectivities [39]. Aligned with idealized subject positions shaped for persons experiencing unemployment, the primary participants positioned themselves as activated subjects who were continuously and consistently engaged in expected job seeking, job preparation, and job acquisition activities. However, their descriptions of negotiating daily life also revealed being simultaneously stuck, or unable to actively engage in or move forward in occupations in other life domains such as housing, recreation, or relationships. This situation of being "activated, but stuck" meant that participants ultimately experienced their lives as "on hold", with feelings of stuckness heightened when engagement in policy-sanctioned activities repeatedly failed to result in secure, desired employment.

Commensurate with the neoliberal focus on viewing oneself as a job-seeker [17], primary participants constructed themselves as actively taking up the responsibility to engage in ongoing job searching as an integral part of daily life. For example, when describing their typical days, both Michelle and Sheila described job seeking as a primary part of their typical daily routine in the U.S. and as something that was at the forefront when they were out in their communities. Sheila, who had been without a full-time position for about a year, stated: "I go out every day looking for a job. I'm out every day. If I'm on the bus or when I'm on the bus I ask people [about possible job openings]." Michelle, who had been looking for work since being released from a penitentiary about a

year previously, indicated that her current rehabilitation services required that she "had to be actively looking for a job". She, in turn, described job seeking as a daily activity: "So I always make sure I had time to look for a job. Call me some jobs, and do some footwork for myself". Eileen, who had been searching for a full time administrative position for a 15-year period in Canada, framed job-seeking as her main occupation, indicating that she put "100% of her time into job hunting" and that her life had become "looking for job".

In addition, in line with activation strategies, primary participants also described engaging in sanctioned activities such as employment services workshops, various forms of education, and volunteering to enhance their work options, readiness, and marketability. Eileen indicated she had "done everything I'm supposed to" to obtain full-time employment, and her employment counselor also framed Eileen in this way. "Doing the right things" for Eileen encompassed upgrading her skills and optimizing her suitability for a broad range of work sectors though completing three different certificate programs. Denise, who was searching for a full-time data entry position in Canada, considered volunteering a means to network and noted that "sometimes I think even if I starts (sic) as a volunteer, it might be able to turn into something else". However, despite following advice about volunteering from an employment services workshop and her employment counselor, Denise struggled to find a volunteer position that was specific to data entry. As well, Denise was not completely confident the strategy would work given that she had previously volunteered in a research lab for over a year and a job had not materialized. Kevin, who could not return to his previous employment as a long-haul truck driver given a back injury, focused on starting a small business in Canada after attending an employment services workshop in which he was advised to become an entrepreneur. He noted: "I've been doing the workshops, for the most part, almost every day. I had a couple of days with appointments for the doctor. But other than that, I've been doing a lot of research, a lot of digging for... about the business.... And so now I took it, and I'm running with the idea." Sheila, who was advised to enhance her computer literacy by her employment counselor, had recently taken "a couple of computer classes at the library" and was "just going to keep going and keep going until I get it, because I got a phone I can Google stuff with, but I want to know how to get into a computer."

Despite framing themselves as activated job seekers who met activity expectations, primary participants also described a pervasive sense of being stuck. This stuckness was not just about being stuck in unemployment or in precarious work, which was true for years for many participants; it also pervaded other occupations and aspects of life, such as being stuck in the present, in uncertainty, in survival mode, in financial dependency, in having lack of access to healthy food, in the life course, in housing, in relationships, and in options for leisure. The ways primary participants experienced and expressed stuckness varied depending on aspects such as age, gender, type of previous work, and factors that led to job loss, but all described occupational domains in which they were unable to move forward or engage. Thus, the findings point to tensions that arise when neoliberal policies, and the myopic focus on job seeking and attainment they promote, are enacted at "street level" within the complexities of everyday lives.

For example, Kevin, who hoped that self-employment was a way out of being stuck, described his stuckness as an overall sense of being in a "holding pattern": **"**It feels like you're just in a hole. I find it very hard to tend to everyday life. It's almost like a negative hole, trying to focus on what you might want to do. None of that really seems relative at the time when you're in a holding pattern. It gets very, very frustrating." Kevin described how several aspects of his life had not moved forward, or sometimes moved backward, since incurring a work injury in his early 30s. At the time, he had begun to save to purchase a house and was thinking about getting married and starting a family. During his extended period of unemployment, Kevin indicated that he "wasn't really thinking that far ahead"; the possibility of moving towards having a serious relationship and starting a family "was kinda on the backburner"; and previous plans to purchase a house were lost given that "all the money that I have saved for a down payment on a house when I was still driving the truck before my injury was gone." Kevin had also previously been involved in a number of physically active leisure activities;

he explained that he did not do many leisure activities anymore given that "you really don't have much leeway to do anything. Once you pay your rent, go get a little bit of groceries, you're pretty much done."

For Eileen, being stuck was expressed as being "caught in a vicious cycle" for which she "can't really see an end", involving alternating between part-time "temp" positions in which she was not treated like a "real person" and being unemployed. She indicated she was stuck in precarious survival work such that employers only contacted her "when they're desperate", and she had "exhausted" her options for employment support services and re-training. Eileen also described being stuck on the margins of society, indicating she felt "like you're on the margins, you're on the sidelines" and she was "out here watching the world go by". She explained that she used to do a "little bit of traveling" and a lot more social activities when she worked but had not had a vacation in 13 years, could not afford activities such as shopping with friends, and "would like to have a life". With respect to her housing, she felt "stuck" in her current apartment, which she described as being in a building that had "really deteriorated". She also felt stuck in planning for her future as she aged, indicating she was not able to "control my own destiny" and was "becoming less and less hopeful" in her 60s. Eileen powerfully articulated the implications of her stuckness for her sense of well-being and identity, stating, "[the] loss of control over my life is killing me", that the absence of full-time work meant "you lose your identity as working for a place", and that she was no longer developing as a person because "when you're not working, you're not getting memories or acquiring experiences".

As a final example, JR, who had been unemployed for five years following an on-the-job back injury, described being stuck in a life of struggling to make ends meet as a recipient of Social Security disability benefits. JR expressed wanting to move forward in obtaining employment in the U.S. as a means to not only improve his financial situation, but also to improve his housing, leisure options, and independence. Overall, JR described a pervasive sense of frustration: "I always used to work. I'm not really used to this style of not working. So like I said sometimes I get frustrated, you know, I can look at TV and just turn the TV off and say, you know, I've got to find me some work. So it's just been frustrating." Although he described his back injury as one limit on his ability to move out of his current situation, he also attended to how his stuckness was heightened because it was too risky to obtain full-time employment as this would mean his disability benefits would end and it would be difficult to re-qualify if he lost his job: "And I was talking to a caseworker and she said that it would be the best for me to [do] the part time [job], because these jobs are laying off a lot of people and once you're off Social Security, it's going to take a while for you to be back on there." JR expressed feeling confined and bored: "I get tired of sitting in the apartment and cleaning, because all I was doing is cleaning and cleaning." Following his work injury, JR experienced a divorce, lost his house, and lost his automobile. At present, he framed himself as stuck in an inadequate living space: "Like now I'm in an apartment. I've got a bedroom but I ain't got no living room furniture. I got a TV but I ain't got no TV for the living room.... It's frustrating but I can't go out and sit up there and say I'm going to go buy this for my living room because it would knock away my rent, and without my rent I'd be on the street". JR also shared that the loss of his car and his restricted finances lessened his control over what occupations he could do outside his apartment, promoting an unwanted sense of dependency: "It's frustrating... not able to do what you want to do. You've got to depend on someone to come and pick you up. I'm not used to that, but now I ain't got no other choice but to get used to it until I get back on my feet the right way."

3.2. The Socio-Political Shaping of Being "Activated, But Stuck"

Situational analysis, which involved mapping the human, non-human, social, economic, temporal, and cultural elements of each participant's situation of long-term unemployment [49], illuminated a range of socio-political factors that shape the contradiction of being "activated, but stuck". Examples of such elements include: racial or age discrimination; having a criminal record; being an "injured worker"; employers' power in setting job requirements; the growth of the precarious labor market; the

location of particular jobs outside the core of cities and public transportation; limited amounts of and eligibility for social services and resources; and a focus on "work first" regardless of educational status. To analyze the ways in which attending to occupational possibilities enabled a deeper understanding of "stuckness" during long-term unemployment, we focus on two participants: Michelle and Tate. As illustrated below, both Michelle and Tate were activated in the realm of job seeking and took up the responsibility of enhancing their marketability as potential workers; however, both experienced a complex array of socially shaped barriers which could not be overcome through activation. We highlight these two cases because they reveal different situational relations that manifest "stuckness" in diverse ways, and highlight various ways occupational possibilities become constrained within the situation of long-term unemployment.

Michelle was a 47 year-old female who described herself as a "C felon" and recovering drug user who was attending drug and vocational rehabilitation to "conquer all my demons and do what I need to do today." She indicated that these programs had helped her get "strength to go out and look for a job again". Her situation of being unemployed long-term in the U.S. is illustrated in her relational situational map (Figure 1), with key elements highlighted in her ordered situational map (Figure 2).
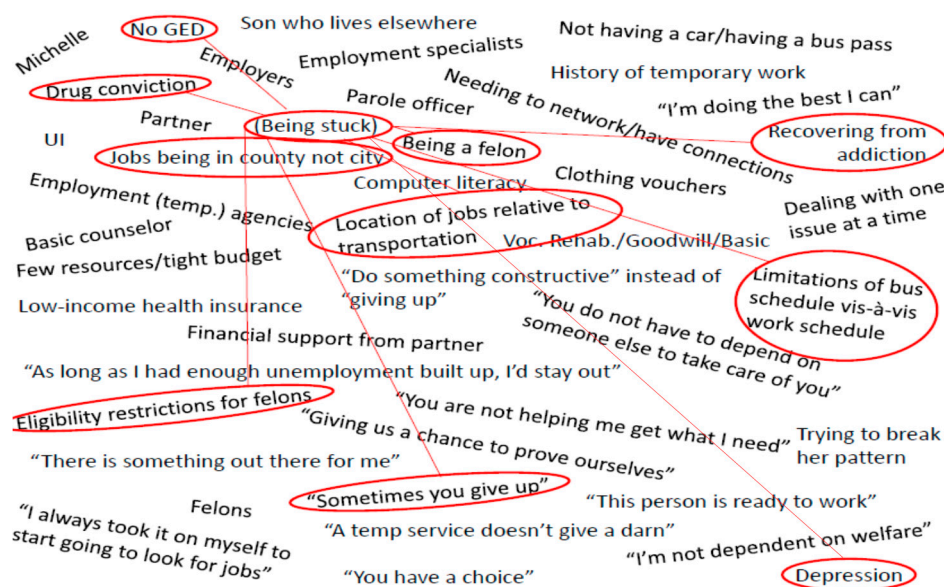

Figure 1. Relational situational map—Michelle.

Being a felon emerged as a key element of Michelle's situation. Michelle had been in "the penitentiary" for three periods of time over the past 14 years, with the most recent stint lasting three months and occurring about a year before her research interviews. She described feeling "fresh" each time she was released and being "focused on what I needed to do to go out and find a job". However, she also described repeatedly facing barriers to securing full-time employment and returning to drug use: "But sometimes you give up. What's the use? Nobody gonna hire me", and "when I stop trying, that's when I start worrying [about not staying clean]". Overall, she described being stuck in a pattern of struggling to find work, getting "stressed", and ending up taking "temp work" to get the resources required to care for herself and her child:

> "If I go out and look, I would get discouraged. And I would say, 'Forget it, this is not working' so I would go work for a temp service. And sometime I might work for six weeks straight. And then might be off for two weeks. You now, it was back and forth.... I want a full-time job or a permanent job where I know I have a pay check coming in to take care of my bills and my child and myself."

Individual human elements	Key events
Michelle	Felony conviction
Employment Specialist	Mother's death
Basic Counselor	Political elements
Partner	Eligibility limits for felons
Parole officer	Job restrictions for felons
Son	Other key elements
Organizations	Drug use
Goodwill	Depression
Vocational Rehabilitation	Discursive constructions of individual human elements
Basic	"I'm ready to work" but "I'm a felon"
Urban League	"If you don't have any faith in me, why should I?"
Temp. agencies	"I don't have everything I need to get that job"
Programs	"There is something out there for me"
Low-income Health Insurance	"Sometimes you give up"
Food stamps	"I'm not dependent on welfare"
Spatial elements	"If you're unemployed, you have a choice"
Lives away from son	"A temp service doesn't give a darn"
Location of jobs relative to public transportation	"A chance to prove ourselves"
Nonhuman elements	"You're not helping me get what I need"
Not having a car/having a bus pass	"I'm doing the best I can"
Needing to network/know people	"Because for the first time in a long time, I ain't got no warrants on me. I'm healthy, I can go to work, I can look for a job"
Having limited resources/tight budget	
Not having a GED	
Computer literacy	
Having a felony record	
Having health insurance	
UI	
History of temporary work	
Clothing vouchers	
Support from partner	
Sociocultural elements	
Being a felon	
Temporal elements	
Easier to get jobs in past	
Limitations of bus schedule	

Figure 2. Ordered situational map—Michelle.

Michelle's maps highlight various situational factors, inclusive of and in addition to being a felon, which set up barriers to getting out of her stuckness. Such barriers included employer hesitancy to consider someone with a criminal record: "It's harder sometimes because I'm a felon. It's harder for me to get a job because of my background." In addition, although she saw switching away from the service sector to the health sector as a potential way to get out of the cycle of temp work, she faced restrictions on this occupational possibility given her felony record and had to obtain a "good waiver" to more forward: "Certain jobs, having been a felon, they won't hire me, but this is one field [Certified Nursing Assistant or CNA] that I checked into to make sure—this is something I've always wanted to do to take care of people". Michelle also wanted to move forward in completing her high school equivalency as a means to become a CNA. However, attending GED classes conflicted with her drug rehabilitation program's expectation that she actively be looking for and willing to accept any type of available job. Michelle noted, "I want to go into the medical field, but I can't go until I get a GED. I can't get a GED and try to find work at the same time.... Plus I got my treatment. That's too much."

Apart from work and educational barriers, Michelle's stuckness was perpetuated by broader economic and social factors. Michelle's live-in boyfriend had a disability and could not work, and she was restricted from accessing particular types of social benefits that would have otherwise supported her: "If I'm a felon.... I got drug possession. I can't get food stamps." She described wanting to have her child living with her but only being able to afford a small apartment which meant her "son's staying with my in-laws". Her inability to change her housing situation, combined with limitations in the public transportation system, meant that she was unable to take a job outside of the core of the city.

She noted that "it's hard because there's not really a lot of jobs in the city. Most of the jobs are far away, where some buses don't run out that far or they stop to run at a certain time". Michelle also wanted to access further assistance to deal with stress and depression, which she saw as impeding her ability to work and putting her at risk of drug abuse. However, she was unable to get insurance that would cover such health services: "I get depressed sometimes, but I'm not medicated. I can still function, but it brings me down. So I have to regroup myself.... And that can also make you not have a job... and then I would have to pay $20.00 in order to go to [mental health services]."

Overall, Michelle described the demands of her daily life as "stressful" and hoped that this time she would not end up "just giving up": "I'm trying to stay somewhere in the middle, above that, because sometimes that does get kinda of hectic because I'm trying to find a job, I'm trying to do my treatment, I'm trying to take care of my child, I'm trying to take care of my home.... And sometimes I get stressed out." By her second interview, Michelle was starting a part-time job, arranged by vocational rehabilitation services as a way to build her resume, "prove herself", and counter discrimination. Michelle understood this rationale for getting and keeping the part-time job, commenting that "if this company hired a felon, and you see that I'm working and I am trying to get there on time. And I've been there on time and I'm there more than two weeks or month. That looks a lot better on my resume." She remained hopeful that this first step would help her get out of her pattern of temp work and enable her to "get myself together", but she had yet to move forward in obtaining a "good waiver" or completing GED classes by the time her study participation ended. Given the complexity of her situation, the mandate to "work first", and benefit restrictions aligned with activation and austerity measures, Michelle's repeated need to accept precarious work meant that she remained stuck in her overall life situation.

In the Canadian context, Tate was a single male in his 30s who had been without a formal paid job for about a year. Previously, he had held various temporary, entry-level, largely physically oriented jobs which had become increasingly less available and feasible as he aged and experienced several health problems. His situation of being long-term unemployed is illustrated in his relational situational map (Figure 3) with key elements highlighted in his ordered situational map (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Relational situational map—Tate.

Individual human elements	Key events
Tate	Left family household at 15 years old
Specific Employment Counselor	Accident
Grandmother	Ex-fiancé's deportation
Girlfriend	Jewelry business failure
Ontario Works case workers	Other key elements
Implicated actors	Depression
Father	Poor physical health
Corporations/businesses	Economic elements
Organizations	Recession
Goodwill	Lack of ESL jobs in London
Spectrum	Price of healthy food
Pathways	Dealing with debt/poor credit rating
Institutions	Sociocultural elements
Ontario Works	Expectations regarding marriage, retirement
Western	Discursive constructions of individual human elements
Fanshawe College	"Nobody told me that I was entitled to these things"
Westervelt College	"I want to know that I'm going somewhere and I don't want to have to worry all the time"
Global Tesol College	"You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours"
Revenue Canada	"The longer I'm not doing something, the harder it is"
Bank	"I'm just a name on a piece of paper that's getting pushed around"
Spatial elements	"I feel cheated and upset"
Potential mobility of small business	Personal success is in everyone's "best interest"
Willing to leave London	"I need to see myself moving forward and things progressing to be better, rather than being stale or stuck in the same situation
Risks of working internationally	
Nonhuman elements	
Subsidized housing	
GED + some college	
School debt + tax lien	
OSAP	
Help from girlfriend and grandmother	
History of temporary work	
Ontario Works	
Temporal elements	
Stage of life	
Personal relationship not progressing	
Concern about circumstances when older	

Figure 4. Ordered situational map—Tate.

Tate indicated that he started working young and was "out on my own when I was 15." He described his work history as largely consisting of "minimum wage jobs where you... live pay cheque to pay cheque." He also had a history of several small business failures. Tate expressed that his life was "stale and stuck in same situation", that it was "hard worrying all the time", and that he was frustrated:

> "You get burnt out. You're not moving forward and you're staying at the same spot or you're back-peddling and then its gets frustrating and you see, I mean you see your first gray hair or you see everybody you grew up with and went to high school or college with and they're married and with children and you wonder... life is just, its going by."

Unlike Michelle, Tate had completed his GED as well as education related to his desired career goal of being an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. About four years prior to his research participation, Tate had completed a college-level ESL teacher training program in line with activation strategies that promote optimizing one's marketability. However, this educational achievement had not materialized into enhanced occupational possibilities. Tate had only been able to acquire volunteer positions or positions that were not financially beneficial: "So I [completed a college ESL program] and at the time I was volunteering teaching English here at [this educational facility] and when I came back, I continued teaching [as a volunteer]. But being self-employed, I wasn't making any money. I was doing it more as a nice reference on my resume". Tate's financial situation was further worsened through investing a great deal of his financial assets into a failed jewelry business, "So I did that and I took a loss, more than half of what I invested... that money kept me going sparingly until now pretty much".

Tate had investigated several ways to get the start-up funds he needed to take an ESL job outside of Canada, but with no success: "the start-up is about $7000.00 to do that. They reimburse you, your airfare after your second month contract of working, so you've got to pay for your airfare and... rent. You've got to pay first and last month's rent". Due to his recently failed business, he was red-flagged "on the Credit Bureau" and not able to get "a grant or bursary to help me get to my career". He had recently connected with employment support services as an alternative way to

get start-up funds, but this also had not worked: "But I did go to [name of employment support service organization] and at the start, I asked them is there, do you have, do you know anything about grants or bursaries or something that could help me move forward and they didn't really know anything about that". Unable to move forward with this goal, Tate was "struggling" with what to do next, worried that the "longer you're out of the loop, the harder it is to bounce back", and knowing "you're never gonna be able to retire and live a decent life working at the 7-Eleven [variety store] or pumping gas."

In addition to not being able to move forward with this work goal, Tate felt that he was not where he should be in his life: "I'm here and I look at people that I went to school with or grew up with and they're married with children and they're close to paying their mortgage off on their house." He indicated that his relationship with his girlfriend was stuck "in the same spot and position as it was four years ago". He was also stuck in trying to improve his health. Although he wanted to "see a nutritionist and lose a bit of weight", he pointed out he did not have the financial resources to change his diet, "not necessarily eating as healthy a diet as I should because eating costs money". Ultimately, despite attempting re-training as a means to optimize his potential as a worker, Tate saw himself as not moving forward in many aspects of life and feared what his future would hold: "Even though I'm in my late 30s.... I'm beginning to think it's too late and I'm going to be in a cardboard box in 20 years.... I should be optimistic, but when I think about the future, it's a little bit depressing". Tate thus expressed his stuckness in relation to being unable to move ahead in his desired work goal, unable to do what he needed to do to improve his mental and physical health, having his life plans out of sync with his age, and being in survival mode.

4. Discussion

Within this pilot study, we aimed to examine the utility of a critical occupational science [50] perspective as a means to analyze how contemporary policies and programs aimed at "governing" the unemployed are enacted, resisted, and negotiated in daily life. Integrating a critical occupational lens into our theoretical framework, along with a governmentality perspective [39] and Lipsky's work [43], enabled us to explore the implications of austerity and activation measures not only in terms of job seeking and other work-related activities but also in relation to the range of occupations that make up daily life. In turn, this broader attention adds new insights to the body of critical work pointing to the challenges and tensions that arise when neo-liberally informed activation and austerity re-configurations are enacted [17,26].

Within this paper we focused on the key contradiction of being "activated, but stuck". This contradiction illustrates that "being stuck" for persons experiencing long-term unemployment extends beyond the realm of job seeking and acquisition into a range of other occupational and life realms. The findings also show that such stuckness is experienced by those who do not necessarily meet the narrow, official definition of long-term unemployment, such as those who cycle between precarious work and unemployment. The implications of this stuckness encompassed experiencing a life "on hold", pervasive uncertainty, unwanted dependency, feelings of isolation and depression, struggles to maintain a positive self and social identity, and fears regarding the future. As such, the findings add to the emerging body of work using a "bottom up" or "street level" approach to expose the limits of neoliberal governance [18,25,45]. In particular, this study exposes the limits of contemporary approaches to defining and managing long-term unemployment which focus on activation in one occupational domain—in this instance, activities framed as essential for managing and remediating the situation of joblessness. The findings also highlight the pervasive negative effects of activation and austerity measures within other occupational domains and for overall well-being.

In relation to policy and service implications, the findings raise awareness of the need to address the various occupational demands that continue to exist in the lives of those who are experiencing joblessness, and the importance of considering the types of resources required to support engagement in a diversity of meaningful and health-sustaining occupations. The boundaries erected by neoliberal

support services' activity expectations may be interpreted as shaping and perpetuating situations of occupational injustice, in which persons experiencing long-term unemployment are barred or restricted from occupations that promote health, well-being, and social inclusion [51]. Unemployment itself is understood to be an occupational injustice that deprives people of the opportunities to participate in a meaningful and valued occupation [52]; the compounding influence of activity expectations that govern occupational engagement may lead to more intensely negative consequences for health and well-being than the lack of work alone fosters.

In addition, utilizing critical discourse analysis and situational analysis enabled us to work against dominant discursive constructions of unemployment, consistent with neoliberal individualization, that locate the problem within attributes of individual participants such as motivational level, poor choices, or inactivity [2,15]. Such approaches helped us look at how the situation of "being stuck" within and outside the work domain is shaped in and through transactions with particular socio-politically shaped barriers. It also highlights how "being stuck" is faced even by those individuals who attempt to take up the ideal identity of an "activated job seeker". Specifically, the findings illustrate how the neoliberal emphasis on "work first", combined with restrictive benefits, can shape continuous precarity in relation to employment rather than create "productive", self-reliant citizens. As well, the findings illustrate how the enactment of contemporary policy approaches can set up tensions between policy-sanctioned activity expectations and the other occupations people need and want to do, and mark out boundaries on occupational possibilities related to education, housing, and caring for one's children, rather than leading to the resolution of long-term unemployment. Participants described few possibilities for engaging in leisure and social activities, which can also be framed as occupational injustices given that they were restricted from engagement in occupations outside the realm of work that could promote health, well-being and social inclusion [53]. Thus, in agreement with Breitkeurz and Williamson's [37] conclusions, this study reveals that managing long-term unemployment by creating "activated job seekers" can have harmful effects when such an approach fails to acknowledge the complexity of daily life, including the challenges individuals face, the resources they require, and their multiple occupational needs and demands.

Our findings also point to the limits of approaches that individualize and homogenize the solutions for long-term employment [15,17]. Even if such approaches may foster taking up the subjectivity of an "activated" job seeker, they fail to address, and often obscure, the diversity of socio-politically shaped barriers that have emerged in this and previous studies, including discrimination tied to characteristics such as age, criminal history, or being an injured worker; the dissolution of standard employment relationships and the rise of precarious forms of work; inadequate public transportation systems; and limited housing options for those with restricted incomes [15,25,31,37]. Taking age as one example, there is a substantial body of evidence pointing to ageism as a factor contributing to long-term unemployment and age-based discrimination in hiring, training and retention practices cannot be overcome through individual activation [54–56]. It is apparent that solutions for long-term unemployment need to extend beyond activating individuals or demarcating the "deserving" from the "undeserving" based on their activities, choices, and work histories [2,20] to consider such socio-politically shaped factors.

Our findings highlighted many promising contributions that can issue from our chosen theoretical and methodological groundings. Despite their richness, however, our findings were limited by our inability to conduct participant observation sessions with participants in their everyday lives. All participants in the pilot study expressed discomfort with participant observation, so we relied almost solely on interview accounts to understand their occupations, everyday lives, and contexts. We acknowledge that interview methods are a limited means to understand tacit and mundane aspects of everyday life and only reveal what people are able and willing to articulate [57]. Given that a key aim of critically-informed collaborative ethnography is to bring to awareness diverse implications that arise within particular contexts, we also acknowledge that the understandings achieved in this pilot study are bounded by the particular characteristics of the eight primary informants. Yet, given the

overall promising nature of pilot study results, we designed and are currently conducting a follow-up three-year collaborative ethnography to obtain more in-depth understandings through expanded data collection approaches. In addition to utilizing narrative and semi-structured interviews to generate data, participants in the follow-up study are asked to select complementary data generation options such as occupational mapping [57], completion of a time diary [58], and/or participant observation. As well, we have expanded recruitment strategies through working with several organizations in each context so as to obtain a more diverse sample of participants.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this pilot study highlight the importance of attending to contradictions that evolve out of current policy and service arrangements which can paradoxically set up barriers to the resolution of long-term unemployment. The findings also underscore the importance of looking at the implications of austerity and activation measures for the complexity of occupations that people need and want to do to survive, be well, and contribute to their families and communities. Although this pilot study illustrates the potential of using an occupational lens to raise critical awareness of the implications of contemporary neoliberal governance approaches, further research is required. Such research can fracture dominant understandings of long-term unemployment, raise stakeholder awareness of the implications produced through current policies and emphases, and highlight why it is crucial to re-think how long-term unemployment is understood and addressed at various levels.

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