Social Policy & Society (2013) 12:3, 381–392
 doi:10.1017/S1474746412000565

Unemployable Workers? Comparing the Context and Contract in Voluntary Work and Regular Jobs

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In welfare societies, disability pensions or incapacity benefits provide income security to people who, due to health problems or disability, are assessed as being unemployable. However, it is sometimes possible for people on disability pensions to work, for instance on a voluntary basis in and on behalf of associations of disabled people. This article applies perspectives on employability and discusses whether voluntary workers, like representatives of associations of disabled people, could have been employed in the ordinary labour market or whether there are definite characteristics of voluntary work which allow their capacity for work to be utilised.

Keywords: Disability, employability, labour market, mental illness, work capacity, voluntary work.

Introduction

In all welfare societies, increases in the numbers of people receiving disability benefits, and especially the number of benefit claims because of mental health problems, have given rise to policies for enhancing the labour market participation of those disabled people who 'can and wish to work' (OECD, 2010). The OECD identifies shifts in policy: to assess work capacity not disability, to make use of people's 'remaining' work capacity, and to move to an activation stance where benefits are linked to willingness of the beneficiary to engage in employability-enhancing activities. Work capacity assessment and conditionality are part of the new policy in both the UK and Norway, together with economic incentives 'to make work pay'.

However, reducing benefits and imposing the responsibility of seeking work on to disabled people can hardly be justified if the root of the problem rests in the demands of the labour market and the attitudes of employers (Thornton, 2005). It is necessary to acknowledge that ability, disability and employability occur in a complex interplay between work capacity, working conditions and capability demands. Explicated by a social relational understanding and a social model of disability, although contested, is that disability occurs as a relationship between the abilities of individuals and the societal contexts which place demands and impose restrictions upon them (Oliver, 1990; Swain, 1993; Swain and French, 2000; Thomas, 2004; Shakespeare, 2006). Individuals become disabled by the standards and norms of conduct that society has set for its members '[w]hether people are declared/rendered disabled or not depends on the norm, not on their inherent qualities' (Bauman, 2007: 59).

Disability pensions are to be awarded to people deemed incapable of work. Thus, the complexity of the relationship between ability and disability is put on the edge when work capacity presumed lost still seems to appear, as is the case when voluntary work demonstrates that the work capacity of people receiving disability pension could still be nurtured and grow.

People on disability pension do work on a voluntary basis, including in and on behalf of associations of disabled people. Norway, a country with 4.9 million citizens, has about seventy-five nationwide voluntary associations of disabled people, many of which have regional and local branches. No national register exists, but it can be assumed that several thousand people chair and serve as board members in these associations. Presumably a fair number of them are on a disability pension. Similar associations of disabled people are found in thirty-one other European countries according to Disabled Peoples International.

Moreover, policies of user involvement oblige health and welfare services to involve representatives of their users in planning and evaluation of the services, in Norway as well as in many other European countries (Tritter and McCallum, 2006; Rose and Lucas, 2007; Alm Andreassen, 2009). In Norway, user representatives are selected from associations of disabled people, psychiatric patients, elderly people or substance abusers. Many of the representatives are in receipts of public income security. Ben, Hannah and Tom, who will be described later in the article, belong to this group.

The work of these representatives has a number of similarities to ordinary jobs. They make plans on behalf of the association; they arrange meetings, set up agendas, prepare discussions, present arguments and adopt resolutions. They prepare and deliver speeches, administer funding, draw up budgets and accounts; they study documents and plans, write up memos, reports and consultations. Even though they are assessed as being unemployable, they have a capacity for work, and the voluntary sector allows them to make use of it.

Presuming that these voluntary workers have not illegitimately managed to take advantage of the welfare system, they demonstrate the complex interplay between capacity for work, working conditions and capability demands. Thus a comparison of the two different contexts and contracts of paid and voluntary work provides an opportunity to understand the dynamics that possibly could enhance the goal of transforming disability into ability (OECD, 2003; Marin *et al*., 2004).

The aim of this article is to discuss the interrelationship between peoples' ability or disability and the demands and expectations they are confronted with in regular jobs and voluntary work respectively, in particular:

- How are people made disabled or able to work through the demands of the labour market that employees are expected to live up to?
- Could differences in the context and contract of voluntary work, when compared to the labour market, explain why workers assessed unemployable are still able to perform voluntary work?

The concept of employability is examined to highlight the expectations applicable to 'employable' workers. A discussion of the extent to which the context and contract of voluntary work differs from the context and the contract that regulate jobs in the labour market, and the policy-implications of these differences, follows. The work histories of three volunteers with mental health problems living on disability pensions offer an

in-depth description of these differences. The article draws on Norwegian experiences and context.

The concept of 'employability'

The concept of 'employability' has been used in business and management studies, in human resource management and career theory, often from the perspective that an improved focus on employability will benefit individuals' careers as well as employers' production (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). The concept has also formed the basis of policy making in relation to the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the labour market (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

Employability describes the capability of an individual to find initial employment, remain in employment and obtain new employment, and often also the capability to transfer one's skills from one job, work organisation or sector of the labour market to another.

The focus on employability is seen in the light of the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society and subsequent developments in the labour market: shifts towards service industries resulting in needs for 'soft skills', such as interpersonal and communication skills; shifts towards knowledge work requiring higher level skills and qualifications; and increasing pressure for reorganisation, rapid rates of change, increasingly more changes and new production regimes, such as total quality management, lean production and business process redesign (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006).

In a research brief to the UK government in 1998, employability was said to consist of four elements: the individual's assets in terms of the knowledge, skills and the attitudes they possess; the way they use and deploy those assets; the way they present them to employers; and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they see work (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). An individual's 'employability assets' include: basic skills and essential personal attributes (such as reliability and integrity); occupation-specific skills, generic or key skills (such as communication and problem solving); key personal attributes (such as motivation and initiative), and skills which help contribute to organisational performance (such as team working, self-management, commercial awareness etc.).

Van der Heijde and van der Heijden (2006) present a five-dimensional conceptualisation of employability, in which occupational expertise is complemented with generic competences. These are *anticipation and optimisation* (preparing for future work changes in a personal and creative manner and being able to enact one's own job and professional life); *personal flexibility* (adapting to and coping easily with changes in job content, conditions or locations, caused by mergers and reorganisations, for example); *corporate sense* (identification with corporate goals and acceptance of collective responsibility and *balance* which refers to the ability to compromise and handle competing demands that are not easily reconciled).

According to Fugate *et al*. (2004:17) employability is 'a form of work-specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities'. A key dimension of employability is *career identity*, which constitutes the driver providing energy and direction to two other components, *personal adaptability* and *social and*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746412000565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human capital. Personal adaptability is a result of optimism, propensity to learn, openness, internal locus of control and generalised self-efficacy. Social capital is networks; human capital is basically education and work experience, i.e. an individual's ability to meet the performance expectations of an occupation (Fugate *et al*., 2004).

The concept of employability as a basis for labour market policy has been criticised for focusing too much on individual-centred, supply-side solutions to labour market exclusion, for blaming the excluded for their personal inadequacies, and for forgetting the demand side, the labour market and the employers (Peck and Theodore, 2000; Barnes and Mercer, 2005; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Andrew, 2009). According to McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), a broad concept of employability is needed, to account for the full range of barriers impacting on the opportunities of workers and job-seekers, e.g. lack of infrastructure, such as child-care or transport, employer preferences or discriminating practices and the supply of appropriate jobs in the local economy. They propose an employability framework which, in addition to *individual factors*, such as the essential attributes of honesty, integrity and reliability, personal competencies, such as self-motivation and initiative, and transferable skills, such as adaptability and communication skills, also comprises *personal circumstances*, such as caring responsibilities and access to resources, and *external factors*, such as the labour market, macroeconomic factors, recruitment procedures and public support services.

The aim of this article is not to provide a comprehensive comparison of the conceptualisations of employability and a clarification of its dimension. The purpose here is to emphasise three points that the conceptualisations together display.

First, all conceptualisations underscore the view that although occupational qualifications and skills constitute substantial elements of employability, this is far from sufficient for someone to be considered employable. The additional attributes expected from employees are grouped and named somewhat differently, but all conceptualisations include *generic and transferable skills*, such as communication, problem solving, team working, self-management, motivation, initiative, corporate sense and business thinking; and *personal qualities*, such as reliability, integrity, and responsibility, and the ability to adapt to changing environments, such as flexibility, self-efficacy, optimism, propensity to learn, openness and internal locus of control.

Second, neither of the conceptualisations of employability explicitly underlines assets, such as the ability to meet demands for efficiency and pace in work performance, to keep up with work intensity, and to comply with working regimes that make demands on when, where and with whom work tasks have to be performed. Such assets – following management instructions, working hard, working long hours and when the firm requires – are essential in managers' images of 'good workers' (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009). These assets might be implied in most views of what employability means. Nonetheless, these are key elements of work capacity and could be affected by health problems and impairments that cause sickness absence which employers fear (Nice and Thornton, 2004; Falkum, 2012).

Third, because individualised conceptualisations of employability tend to take for granted the demands of the labour market and work places, a broader framework is necessary to understand how ability, disability and employability are shaped by capability demands set by the social and cultural contexts. Implicitly, individualised notions of employability point to the demands that confront individual employees. The reverse side is represented by the *structural and cultural factors* of the labour market, employers and

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workplaces that shape the demand for *the individual factors* that are expected of an employable worker.

The demand for occupational skills, such as education and work experience, reflects structural changes in the labour market, where more jobs are demanding professional skills and practice. The demand for adaptability, flexibility, self-efficacy, optimism and propensity to learn reflects changing and turbulent labour markets and work organisations, and unpredictable job content. The demand for attitudes, such as self-management, motivation and initiative-taking, reliability, integrity and responsibility, indicates work and work places where responsibility for production is delegated to individual employees and is dependent on their autonomous actions and internalisation of the goals of the organisation. The demand for generic skills, such as ability in communication and team working, suggests work performed in contact and communication with colleagues, customers and clients, and work places with norms and standards of culturally and socially proper behaviour. This point is neatly illustrated by accounting firms where displaying 'appropriate' forms of behaviour and appearance are even more important than exams and technical ability, and where uniformity and standardisation are emphasised more than diversity, and where disabled people who do not fit well with the norms are unlikely to be employed in client-facing roles (Duff *et al.*, 2007).

By inverting the supply-side focused descriptions of employability, the individual factors become not only inherent qualities that individuals may or may not have, they also become visible as a demand-side set standards and norms that work organisations may or may not hold.

Stories of ordinary jobs and voluntary work

The three work stories described below are selected from a sample of work stories from twenty-eight individuals, of both sexes, in different age groups and with different relationships to the labour market: within it as self-employed or employed in ordinary paid jobs (managers as well as workers); on the margins as unemployed, in vocational rehabilitation or providing child-care; and outside as retired, in receipt of disability pensions or supported by a male breadwinner or by investment income. They were invited to talk about their work, about jobs in the ordinary labour market and about voluntary work, housework and care work, and about how their work activities related to other activities and relationships in their lives. The aim was to understand if their participation in the labour market was to some degree related to the meaning and importance they attached to various forms of work.

Of the interviewees, these three stood out because, by their receipt of a disability pension, they were assessed incapable of performing paid jobs. This triggered an interest in exploring the question: when they still could demonstrate a work capacity, had this something to do with the context in which their voluntary work was performed?

The three work stories are situated in a political and cultural context with a dominant societal norm of self-sufficiency, where income benefits are only provided to those incapable of working for their living. In the stories, the individuals defend their entitlement to a disability pension by stating their health problems and presenting themselves as being unable to fulfil the demands of full-time jobs on regular terms. Their stories are moral tales, depicting individuals who would have preferred to be ordinary employees. Their stories involve employers and representatives of public authorities, who confirm the legitimacy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746412000565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of their disability pension and give them credibility in the eyes of the researcher. In that respect, they resemble other recipients of public income security (Sharone, 2007; Woodward, 2008; Patrick, 2011).

Their emphasis on individual health problems could also be seen in the light of their encounters with work and welfare agencies that emphasise personal abilities and disabilities, by ascribing income security rights to health defects and by encouraging those outside the labour market to enhance their employability and intensify their job-seeking efforts, which may cause the clients to define themselves as disabled and attribute their outsider status to individual shortcomings and failure (Sharone, 2007; Holmquist, 2008; Brown *et al*., 2009). Thus, the stories of recipients of disability pension may express an individualised understanding of their status of being outside the labour market. By emphasising their personal inability, the structural and cultural factors of the labour market become understated. Perceptions of demands made on employable workers appear more implicit and have to be envisaged through exploration of the stories.

The work stories of Ben, Hannah and Tom

Ben, Hannah and Tom have been troubled with mental illness since their teens. Ben is in his mid forties, Hannah and Tom in their mid fifties. Ben and Tom are single, Hannah is married and has two grown-up children. Neither Hannah nor Tom had been educated to a professional level; Ben completed tertiary education during his efforts to get a foothold in the labour market.

The work stories of Ben, Hannah and Tom have approximately the same content and chronology. First their histories consist of unsuccessful efforts to find, keep and meet the demands of regular jobs, telling them that in that respect they fail, which in part is due to and in part reinforces their lack of self-confidence. Ben's work career is full of temporary jobs, often supported by wage subsidies, vocational training and support, disrupted by periods of illness and hospitalisation, and an even larger number of job applications. Ben has worked in a bank, in the customs service, in a museum and in a research institution. In that respect, Ben's story reveals a tremendous effort from Ben and from the welfare system to keep Ben within the labour market. Tom's story corresponds to Ben's. Hannah's story differs because motherhood has moderated her efforts to participate in employment, but she shares with the men an experience of shortcomings, and the final outcome of becoming a recipient of a disability pension. Their long histories of mental health problems and low self-esteem signal a lack of self-efficacy, career identity and of the ability to anticipate and optimise, as noted in the literature. Rather than planning career paths, their pathways through life are punctuated by illnesses.

Then their stories present a turning point when, after years at home with a sense of meaninglessness, they almost coincidently become involved in local associations of people with mental health problems, which ask for their contribution, believe they are competent, appreciate their work and restore their self-esteem. Meaningful activity is essential in the recovery of people with mental illnesses; in that respect, the stories of these voluntary workers are consistent with previous research (Boardman, 2003; Onken *et al*., 2007; Morrow *et al*., 2009).

Ben, Hannah and Tom are now chairs or vice-chairs of local branches of associations of people with mental health problems. They are representatives of people with mental health problems in meetings, on user councils and in the project work of various

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healthcare organisations. Hannah, for instance, is the chair of the regional hospital's user council and, as chair, takes part in the meetings of the board of the hospital. Tom is a volunteer in a user-led activity centre, which he established together with other members of the association, also recipients of disability pension. Furthermore, all three give speeches and lectures, for instance at centres for patient education and coping, and on courses for healthcare workers arranged by the regional health authorities.

Ben, Hannah and Tom seldom describe their skills and competences directly; rather, their skills and competence emerge in stories of what they do, and how significant others react to their actions. As chairs of boards and user councils, they demonstrate motivation and initiative, abilities for communication and team working, self-management and problem solving. As spokespersons for mental health patients, they demonstrate a capacity to develop knowledge from personal experience as mental health patients and to communicate the patients' perspective to professional healthcare workers. Their careers in the voluntary associations bear witness to adaptability, flexibility and openness to new situations and tasks, which they are encountering for the first time in their lives. Their performance demonstrates a propensity to learn. As active board members, they identify themselves with, and are identified with, the goal of the association; as volunteers they have to balance their own opinions with the goals and standpoints of the association. Thereby they demonstrate corporate sense and balance.

To sum up, the tasks they are performing could have been tasks of ordinary jobs, and their voluntary work demands several aspects of employability. The voluntary associations have managed to make use of a work capacity and develop skills which the ordinary labour market did not. This directs attention to the conditions that have made possible the unfolding of their work capacity and the question of to what degree such conditions are distinct qualities of the voluntary sector.

Differences between voluntary work and regular jobs

Compared to regular jobs, voluntary work takes place in a different work context as well as under a different work contract.

The work context of the voluntary associations is characterised by an exchange of work for appreciation instead of payment. The stories of Ben, Hannah and Tom tell of associations that request and appreciate their work, ask for their contribution and ask them to take on assignments. Their labour is wanted and valued. Thereby the associations reinforce their self-confidence. In Ben's story, for instance, this experience of being wanted is contrasted to his seemingly endless periods of sheltered and subsidised employment that have always been terminated and never continued into regular employment, signalling that Ben is not the kind of worker that employers want.

The appreciation they receive as volunteers also contrasts with Hannah's and Tom's lifelong experiences of lack of self-confidence. When Hannah started doing voluntary work, she did not believe in herself, but 'since people believe in me, I feel I owe it to them to try'. Hannah recounts an instance of being asked to take notes from a meeting; she tried to explain that she did not know how to write a memo, but her protests were ignored. Later, in front of the laptop, Hannah looked at the result of her work, and said to herself out loud: You've done it!'. Hannah says: 'I didn't know I was capable of doing such things', and concludes: 'Now I know I am not stupid at all; actually I am rather bright.'

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The appreciative practice seems connected to the feature that voluntary work cannot be exchanged for payment. Instead, volunteers receive a different kind of reward – appreciation – the appreciation that has made Ben, Hannah and Tom into the self-confident and self-efficient workers they now appear to be. Presumably, appreciative practice may also be present in work organisations in the ordinary labour market. Employees are motivated by a lot more than their payment (Guevara and Ord, 1996). It is argued that employers in need of dedicated employees, employee engagement and organisational commitment need to reward, acknowledge and appreciate the skills and contribution of their workers not only through remuneration (Stairs, 2005).

Another significant feature of the work context is that these voluntary associations are founded by and for people with mental health problems. They are fellowships of people with similar problems where the members encounter 'their own', in Goffman's terms, people who bear the same stigma and for that reason accept the stigmatised (Goffman, 1963). The associations constitute a place free from stigmatisation where a non-stigmatising social identity can be developed (Høgsbro, 1992; Barnes and Walker, 1996; Barnes, 1997; Rummery and Glendinning, 2000; Bolzan and Gale, 2002). The associations are familiar with mental health problems, morally inclined to be sympathetic to their manifestations and are tolerant towards behaviour otherwise considered deviant.

A clash between a worker with mental health problems and a work organisation with standards for what is considered proper behaviour is prominent in Tom's story. He describes how his mental health problems pushed him into conflicts at work because he lacked insight into his illness. Hannah's story describes a worker continuously exposed to critique from managers and customers. And between the lines of Ben's endless efforts to turn temporary work contracts into regular employment, his story speaks of employers' scepticism towards an employee with mental health problems, a scepticism also documented in research: psychiatric disabilities are most negatively viewed by employers (Barnes *et al*., 1998; Duff *et al*., 2007; Zissi *et al*., 2007). Mental illness is the only invisible disability that impacts on employers' recruitment decisions when disclosed to the employer (Dalgin and Bellini, 2008). Where ordinary jobs demand culturally and socially proper behaviour in work performed in contact and communication with colleagues, customers and clients, the context of voluntary work does not impose similar strict norms of appropriate behaviour.

The *work contract* of voluntary work, in contrast to paid jobs, is the respective nature of voluntariness versus obligation. The contract of payment in exchange for performance represents the significant distinction between regular jobs and voluntary work. The premise of the job contract is the management prerogative, employment means a power to command and a duty to obey.

Employers have the right to instruct the work tasks of the workers, but voluntary work is also, in a way, instructed. In their voluntary assignments, Ben, Hannah and Tom do work which is given to them by others; the members who have elected them, the hospitals that have set up the user councils and the audiences they address. More problematic is the duty to obey, which seems connected to another aspect of the work contract, the use of time as a proxy for the amount of work expected, which gives management the task of ensuring that the employees' time is translated into effective work performance and production. The payment of ordinary jobs comes with *obligations*. The fundamental difference between regular jobs and voluntary work is that paid jobs imply a duty; it is payment in exchange for performance.

Regular jobs, as described by Ben, Hannah and Tom, are stressful, strenuous and demanding. None of them imagine that they ever will be able to fill a regular full-time job with regular working conditions. Compared to the demands of the ordinary labour market, their work capacity is insufficient, their illness exhausts them and their medication increases their tiredness. 'An ordinary job would be high pressure,' says Tom; 'you have to perform at a certain speed, do things within fixed time limits . . . and you also have to cooperate with others.' Society demands efficiency and, compared to others, Tom works more slowly. This is a subject Tom returns to in the interview.

The high intensity and strenuousness of regular jobs is linked to the compulsory nature of the job, because even their voluntary work can be exhausting. The fundamental difference is that, if the volunteers do not feel up to it, no one can oblige them to go on. Hannah emphasises that doing work for the association is undoubtedly tiring, but since it is voluntary, she can switch off her attention or leave a meeting if necessary. In contrast to a paid job, nobody can oblige her to stay. For Tom, the awareness of the voluntary nature of the work is a relief. Tom feels responsible for doing a proper job, and, if he does not, he might not be re-elected, but no one can enforce a contract of employment against him. If tasks are piling up, Tom can say 'no' with a clear conscience and it will be accepted. The stories bear witness to the voluntary nature of the work which makes demands on their effort illegitimate. The premise of the work 'contract' of voluntariness is that it promises not to compel them if they are not able, not force them on days when their illness troubles them and not demand their capacity on a regular basis.

While ordinary jobs come with a duty to live up to demands for work capacity at a certain standard in the amount of production, level of work performance or performance at a particular time, the fundamental nature of voluntary work is that of a gift. The nature of a gift implies that the standard of the gift is decided by the giver. The recipients, the associations, may turn down the gift, the representatives may not be re-elected, but although their roles as representatives comes with certain tasks to fulfil, decisions on the amount of effort to put in are fundamentally theirs.

Discussion

The impact of the context and contract of work is displayed when workers deemed unemployable still perform voluntary work. Compared to regular jobs, voluntary work in and on behalf of associations of disabled people both demands less and nurtures more of the abilities that make people employable. The differences demonstrate that people are made disabled or able depending on the demands, standards and norms they are expected to live up to. That work capacity is released in the context and under the contract of voluntary work, does not necessarily imply that this work capacity would be present in the labour market.

The ability to keep up with the intensity of work and demands for efficiency and pace in work performance are factors stressed by the recipients as the reasons why they receive a disability pension. Although understated in employability conceptualisations, these factors are key elements of the capacity to work.

Furthermore, in today's labour market employability is not only a matter of work capacity and occupational qualifications and skills. Paid jobs oblige employees to be subjected to working regimes that make demands on when, where, with whom and with which standards the work tasks have to be performed. Employable workers must live up

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746412000565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to culturally and socially defined norms of appropriate behaviour and appearance. These are demands that could construe disabled workers as unemployable.

The two different work contexts further demonstrate that the distinction between those who can work and those who cannot is not clear cut. Work capacity or employability is not an attribute that individuals either have or have not. Rather than being a 'remaining' work capacity that can be assessed, work capacity and employability are shaped by the context of work, in which abilities may be nurtured and grow, or be suppressed and diminish. Growth is enhanced not by compulsion but by being wanted, which these voluntary workers demonstrate and which is argued by many other disabled people (Patrick, 2011). Hence, increased labour market participation is not only a matter of the willingness of the beneficiaries to engage in employment-enhancing activities, but a matter of the willingness of employers to ask for their contribution.

Assessing work capacity in a narrow sense of the term omits the labour market's many social and cultural demands which construe people as employable or not. A policy for enhanced labour market participation should addresses such demands that shape disability and even may diminish employability. If only voluntary associations of disabled people provide working contexts and contracts that allow work capacity to be utilised, a policy based on the premise of a 'remaining' work capacity may ascribe people a work capacity that employers will not see.

Acknowledgements

This article is a product of a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. I owe a lot to the discussion with the project manager Hanne Heen at the Work Research Institute, Oslo, and our advisor, professor Judi Marshall from Lancaster University, UK. I thank them both, and I also thank the journal's two anonymous reviewers for very helpful suggestions for improvements. Every shortcoming in this text is caused by me.

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