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The value of competitive employment: In-depth accounts of people with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

Background: Increasing the societal participation of people with intellectual disabilities via competitive employment requires a full understanding of what this means to them. This paper aims to provide an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in competitive employment.

Method: Interviews were conducted with six participants with mild intellectual disability or borderline functioning and good verbal communication skills. Interviews were analysed according to the guidelines of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Member checks were conducted.

Results: Analysis yielded three main themes: (a) Building on my life experiences, (b) My place at work and (c) Being a valuable member of society, like everyone else.

Conclusions: Competitive employment could make a substantial contribution to the sense of belonging to society and quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities. Nevertheless, they must cope with stigma-related obstacles and feelings of being dependent on others in the work environment.

KEYWORDS

competitive employment, intellectual disabilities, interpretative phenomenological analysis, participation, qualitative research

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the importance of full and effective community participation for people with intellectual disabilities has gained increasing recognition, from the perspective of both emancipation (UNCRPD, United Nations, 2006) and quality of life (Verdugo, Navas, Gómez, & Schalock, 2012). As is the case in the general population, employment is considered important for people with intellectual disabilities, as it allows them to experience community participation. Moreover, it is also thought to make a substantial contribution to people's quality of life (Beyer, Brown, Akandi, &

Rapley, 2010; Lysaght, Cobigo, & Hamilton, 2012). More specifically, people who are employed experience a more structured and meaningful use of time, increased social opportunities and the possibility of using and expanding their skills (Donelly et al., 2010; Jahoda et al., 2009), in addition to benefits to their physical and mental health (Robertson, Beyer, Emerson, Baines, & Hatton, 2019). People with intellectual disabilities perceive employment as a critical element of their community participation, as a source of social contacts and as a means by which to experience a sense of being appreciated (Cramm, Finkenflügel, Kuijsten, & van Exel, 2009; Donelly et al., 2010).

The employment of people with intellectual disabilities varies across different work environments. More specifically, it can take place in a sheltered or integrated environment (Metzel, Boeltzig, Butterworth, Sulewski, & Gilmore, 2007). Sheltered employment has been described as "employment in a facility where most people have disabilities, with ongoing work-related supports and supervision" (Metzel et al., 2007, p. 151). Its forms include sheltered workshops, day centres and vocational rehabilitation centres (Metzel et al., 2007; Migliore, Mank, Grossi, & Rogan, 2007). Integrated employment has been described as "taking place in a community setting in the general labour market where the proportion of workers with disabilities does not exceed the natural proportion in the community" (Migliore et al., 2007, p. 7). Its forms include competitive employment, supported employment, entrepreneurship and self-employment (Metzel et al., 2007; Visier, 1998). The specific characteristics of sheltered and integrated work environments, including wage rates and how wages are paid, can vary widely both within a country and between countries (Migliore et al., 2007; Visier, 1998).

Several studies have examined whether the work environment affects the job satisfaction and quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities. Some studies suggest that the job satisfaction (Akkerman, Kef, & Meininger, 2018) and quality of life (Blick, Litz, Thornhill, & Goreczny, 2016) experienced by people with intellectual disabilities are similar in both sheltered and integrated employment. As indicated by systematic literature reviews, however, people with intellectual disabilities generally experience higher rates of job satisfaction in integrated employment environments (e.g. competitive employment) than they do in sheltered employment settings (Akkerman, Janssen, Kef, & Meininger, 2016; Kocman & Weber, 2016).

In line with these findings, international policies have focused on increasing the rate of competitive employment among people with intellectual disabilities. European countries are giving positive and negative incentives to both employers and people with poor job prospects (e.g. people with intellectual disabilities) (Borghouts-Van de Pas & Pennings, 2008). For example, quotas might be imposed on employers to oblige them to hire people with poor job prospects, and people with poor job prospects might receive positive incentives to find jobs (e.g. through financial and other forms of support).

Despite the focus on increasing participation in competitive employment among people with intellectual disabilities, the rate of paid employment for this group remains low in comparison with people without intellectual disabilities. In the general population, worldwide employment rates range from 42.6% to 85.5% (OECD, 2019). In contrast, the employment rates of people with intellectual disabilities in Western countries are estimated at between 7% and 49% (Holwerda, Van der Klink, De Boer, Groothoff, & Brouwer, 2013; McGlinchey, McCallion, Burke, Carroll, & McCarron, 2013; Rose, Saunders, Hensel, & Kroese, 2005). It is clear that there are still unequal employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities compared to people without intellectual disabilities.

In order to optimize the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in competitive employment, it is essential to explore the experiences in competitive employment settings of people with intellectual disabilities themselves. However, in-depth investigations of the perceptions and experiences of people with intellectual disabilities with regard to employment participation are scarce (Ellenkamp, Brouwers, Embregts, Joosen, & Van Weeghel, 2016; Lysaght et al., 2012). The small number of qualitative studies examining the work experiences of people with intellectual disabilities revealed, for example, that being paid, staying busy and feeling connected to others in a community (Lysaght, Ouellette-Kuntz, & Morrison, 2009), feelings of belonging and a sense of contribution and enjoyment of work (Lysaght, Petner-Arrey, Howell-Moneta, & Cobigo, 2017) were experienced as the most important benefits of work by this group. However, these valuable studies did not exclusively address the experiences of people employed in competitive work environments. A focus on competitive employment would, however, be valuable since competitive jobs in particular potentially offer the type of employment that is closest to full inclusion (Lysaght et al., 2012). In addition, establishing detailed accounts of the competitive employment experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in the context of their broader lives might result in a better understanding of how competitive employment is perceived in relation to aspects of quality of life and feelings of participation, as broadly defined by Lysaght et al. (2009, 2017). As such, scientific research might help to create competitive employment that fit the needs of people with intellectual disabilities in order to increase their emancipation and quality of life (and to prevent the negative consequences of unemployment). In addition, it might encourage governments to adapt their policies in order to realize their effort to achieve full participation and equal opportunities in the labour market for people with intellectual disabilities.

Given the potential impact of work experiences on other life domains, it is imperative to examine the work experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in relation to the context of life beyond work (Jahoda et al., 2009). To this end, we draw on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2008) to examine what participation in competitive employment means to people with intellectual disabilities. This qualitative research method explores in detail how small numbers of individuals make sense of their experiences in a specific situation, in consideration of their life context. The method corresponds well to the aim of this paper—to provide an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities themselves with respect to their participation in competitive employment, embedded within the broader context of their lives.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Prior to conducting this study, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of [Tilburg University] (EC-2017.101). Participants were recruited through a [Dutch] service organization

for people with intellectual disabilities. As is common in [The Netherlands], this organization both provides residential and community-based support to people with mild to profound multiple disabilities at all ages. Psychologists and job coaches employed by this organization were asked to select potential participants from file information, based on the following inclusion criteria: (I) a diagnosis of mild intellectual disability or borderline intellectual functioning (IQ scores between 50 and 85); (II) a paid job in a competitive employment setting and work experience of at least one year in such a setting and (III) little to no support from a job coach—one or fewer sessions every six weeks (based on the lowest frequency of coaching offered by job coaches from that organization to clients).

Potential participants were informed about the study by a familiar support worker and asked whether they would be willing to participate. The first author (MV) contacted those expressing willingness to participate by telephone to gather additional information and to answer any questions that arose. The job coach of one participant indicated that this individual would feel more comfortable receiving additional information about the study from someone more familiar. This participant was therefore contacted by the job coach rather than the researcher with a view to providing additional information and answering questions. Afterwards, an information and consent letter was sent to the participants, detailing the key aspects of the study and measures that would be taken to safeguard the confidentiality and rights of participants. Before starting each interview, the interviewer explained the content of the information letter to ensure that the participant understood the intention and procedure of the study and was aware of the option of terminating their participation at any time without giving a reason. Each participant signed an informed consent form.

Six individuals participated in this study. In IPA studies, a focus on a limited number of accounts is desirable. Small sample sizes allow for in-depth engagement with each individual case and a detailed exploration of similarities and differences between participants. A sample of six is generally considered to be appropriate (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The research team considered the data obtained from the participants in the current study to be sufficiently rich and detailed to answer the research question in accordance with IPA guidelines. Demographic information was collected from the participants' files (see Table 1), with their consent. Each of the participants received a salary, in some cases supplemented by state benefits. How their wages were paid depended on applicable legislation and their specific employment situations. Five participants were subject to the provisions of the [Dutch]Disabled Assistance Act for Young Persons. This law regulates that people who are born with or who acquire a disability before the age of 18 can receive a financial benefit if they are completely or partially unable to work. The legislation is implemented by UWV, the organization charged with administering work-related benefit schemes in [The Netherlands]. The provisions of this law are tailored to reflect the needs in each individual case, depending on age, degree of disability and capacity to work. They therefore apply differently to each of the five benefit recipients who took part in this study.

TABLE 1 Descriptive personal data of participants

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	IQ score[a]	Type of work	Work hours (weekly)	Payment arrangement	Job coach	Service years	Work experience in years[b]
Mason	M	36	71	Order picker and forklift driver in a distribution centre	37	Regular payment	No	18	18
Luke	M	26	72	Host at two different restaurants	24+	Supplement to social benefits	No	6	6
Ryan	M	26	64	Short-term jobs as order picker and forklift driver via employment agencies	40	Regular payment (relapse into social benefits when unemployed)	No	0	>7
Damian	M	27	81	Car polisher at a car cleaning company	40+	Supplement to social benefits	Yes	1,5	10
Nancy	F	32	72	Supermarket employee (in addition to an unpaid job as an expert by experience)	16	Regular payment for working hours (supplemented to the level of social benefits)	Yes	1	>10
Elsie	F	35	74	Employee in the linen room of a nursing home and supporting tasks in day care activities	27,5	Regular payment (employer receives wage cost compensation)	Yes	12	>12

[a]Based on file data.

[b]At least 1 year in a paid competitive employment setting.

242 | WILEY—JARID
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VOERMANS ET AL.

TABLE 2 Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate themes	Building on my life experiences	My place at work	Being a valuable member of society, like everyone else
Subordinate themes		I feel people have a certain image of me	What I do is useful
		I don't have much choice	I don't know what I would do without my work
		I want to be treated as an equal by my co-workers	I want to earn a living, like everyone else
			I don't want to work among people with intellectual disabilities

2.2 | Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted according to IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009). The comprehensibility of the interview schedule was pilot-tested with three individuals with mild intellectual disabilities (other than the six participants), after which minor adjustments were made to the wording of the interview questions. The interview started with an open question—"Can you tell me something about your work?"—after which the interviewer followed an interview format consisting of key topics (i.e. type of work, tasks assigned, description of a workday, role in the team, support received), in order to explore the work experiences of the participants. The interviews lasted an average of 57 min each (range 44–80 min), with all but one of the participants being interviewed alone and in their own homes. One participant was interviewed at the office of the service organization with the job coach present (but not interfering in the interview), as the participant felt more comfortable with this arrangement. Because of the iterative character of IPA, the next participant was not recruited until the interview with the previous participant had been conducted and analysed.

After the interview of a participant was analysed, the preliminary results were subjected to a member check with the participant. The member checks had a more structured character than the initial interviews. Because of the time interval between interview and member check (range 3–12 weeks; mean 7 weeks), the researcher started each member check by explicitly reminding the participant of when and where the first interview had taken place and what had been discussed. Subsequently, each personal theme identified by the research team as emerging from the initial interview was explained and presented to the participants both orally and in written format. The participants were then asked whether they recognized each theme and, if so, to provide additional information about what that theme meant to them personally. In cases where themes were not recognized, participants were given the opportunity to describe their own experiences. In addition, during the member checks, participants were asked to clarify any ambiguities that had emerged in the analysis of the main interview. With regard to the member checks we tried to minimize the risk of social desirability bias, by explaining to the participants prior to and during the member check session, the importance of telling the researcher if they did not recognize a theme or missed information. Member check sessions lasted an average of 42 min each (range 30–54 min). One participant was not able to participate in the member check due to unexpected personal circumstances. The interview with this participant was analysed and interpreted with additional care and prudence. Audio recordings were made of all interviews and member checks, with the consent of the participants, and these were transcribed verbatim by MV.

2.3 | Analysis

All interviews and member checks were analysed according to the guidelines of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The analyses were carried out by the first author, in close cooperation with the third author (SG). To ensure that interpretations made during analysis remained as close as possible to the narratives of the participant, the researchers frequently discussed the analysis until consensus was reached about interpretations and potential uncertainties. During the research process, the analyses were regularly discussed in meetings with the full research team as an extra audit and to refine the analysis. In addition, MV kept a reflective journal describing and explaining all decisions made throughout the research process.

After analysing both the interview and member check of one participant, the analysis of the member check was integrated into the analysis of the initial interview, thereby resulting in a more nuanced and in-depth elaboration of the overarching themes. In addition, several separate superordinate themes were merged into single superordinate themes after the member check. In other cases, broader superordinate themes were separated into several subordinate themes, based on additional information obtained during the member check. After all of the interviews and member checks had been analysed and integrated, the cases were compared and discussed to discover patterns (i.e. superordinate themes) in the experiences of participants in discussion with the full research team.

3 | RESULTS

Three interconnected superordinate themes emerged, with several subordinate themes distinguished within each. All of the themes are presented in Table 2 and elaborated below. The participants are referred to by pseudonyms, in order to protect their anonymity.

3.1 | Building on my life experiences

Participants report both positive and negative life experiences that have had a major impact on their work aspirations and their present and future working lives. Participants appreciate how previous work (and other) experiences have helped them to discover the types of work that they prefer, the job (and other) competencies that they possess and the preconditions that they need within the context of work. For example, Luke's childhood memories of cooking with his grandfather inspired him to become a cook. Through several jobs as a cook, however, he has discovered that working as a cook in a kitchen does not suit him and that he prefers the personal contact with guests he experiences when working as a restaurant host. In contrast to Luke's positive personal experience, Ryan talks about an unpleasant life event that forced him to relocate and to give up his permanent job. Years after moving, Ryan continues to work in rapidly changing, temporary jobs through employment agencies, even though he would prefer to have a permanent job, without the uncertainty of temporary employment.

Other participants also talk about obtaining or keeping a permanent job as being an important element in securing their goals for the future. Mason is determined to hold on to his current, permanent job for years to come, as he does not want to run the risk of feeling less comfortable in a new workplace. Nancy wants to obtain a permanent job, in order to build a retirement pension to ensure security for the future.

> Nancy: I've been trying to find a permanent job somewhere for a long time, because I've also been working hard on building my future and those kinds of things, you know, but I always tell my job coach, I say that if I can only work a certain number of months each time, and then it's not renewed, you know, then I always say, 'But how? How do I build up a pension?'

In order to achieve the (future) work situations to which they aspire, all of the participants express a certain work ethic and awareness of the importance of aligning their behaviour. Participants talk about the importance of being motivated and demonstrating their drive and commitment to their employers and their willingness to accept tasks they would rather not do. Some participants exhibit their work ethic, more or less consciously, in order to influence their work environment and enhance job opportunities. For example, Ryan describes how he actively shows his motivation, flexibility and skills each time he starts a new temporary job, with the goal of ensuring that the employer will be satisfied and willing to keep him as an employee. In addition, Nancy is determined to go to work even if she feels sick, as she has been frightened by stories about other people losing their job due to illness.

For other participants, the work ethic seems to be driven purely by internalized standards or personal characteristics. For example, Elsie experiences completing her tasks as a personal responsibility. She feels uncomfortable when she fails to complete her tasks during a working day.

> Elsie: Just the things that I'm assigned to do, I have to make sure that they're done before I go home. It's my responsibility. They assigned it to me, so... yeah, otherwise you won't feel right going home, at least I don't.

Overall, the results reveal both similarities and differences between participants in terms of life experiences, personality, characteristics and skills. All of these aspects have an effect on how the individual participants experience employment, as well as on the ways in which they try to make an impression and sustain themselves in their jobs.

3.2 | My place at work

3.2.1 | I feel people have a certain image of me

In both their personal and work environments, participants experience stigmatizing attitudes expressed by people without intellectual disabilities. For example, Elsie talks about how colleagues have disregarded her, overruled her and made her feel dependent, which has left her feeling insecure and has made her lose her focus and motivation to work.

Although experiences of stigmatization have affected the self-confidence of Damian and Luke as well, these experiences have also strengthened their ambition to apply their capabilities to the fullest and prove other people wrong. Luke has done this by obtaining his diploma, thereby freeing himself from the negative perceptions of others and regaining his ability to believe in himself again. Luke also talks about how the unconditional support of his mother, grandfather and girlfriend has provided a base for growth and has helped him to counterbalance the negative views of other people. Additionally, Damian states that he sometimes experiences the well-intentioned behaviour of others as stigmatizing and painful, as is the case when they take over his tasks. He feels an urge to prove himself in order to change such stigmatizing attitudes and to build a relationship of trust with his co-workers.

> Damian: Then it seems like, 'You can't handle it'. In other words, 'Well, sorry pal, but that? You can't do that'. That hurts me... when someone tells me, 'Someone else will do that', then I think, 'No! Heck, no! Absolutely not. I'll do it myself, even if it takes me three or four hours'. I'm just going to do it. And when it's finished three or four hours later, they come back and say, 'Is it taken care of?' or 'Is it done?' 'Yeah. Look!' Then they stand there like, 'Huh? Okay, you can do it after all'. Yeah, that gives you a kick. That gives you a kick. And again, that's the confidence that you can inspire in someone, and that someone can inspire in you!

For Damian it is important that his employer demonstrates trust in him and his competencies when assigning new tasks. He explains how

excessive efforts on the part of employers to adapt to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities could lead them to underestimate the capacities of these employees.

> Damian: Because people do have a certain image, like, if they say, 'Yeah, he's disabled', then yeah, the first question people ask is 'What can he do?'. Right? And I think that's the wrong mindset, because I think, you shouldn't ask, 'What can he do, what can he do?' You should just ask things like 'How far is he willing to go?' Right? I can ask someone something like, 'Can you handle that?' or 'Do you want to try that?' Those are, those are two different things with, with an entirely different underlying thought.

The experience of stigma thus triggers different feelings and responses among the participants, which subsequently have positive or negative effects on their work situations and careers.

3.2.2 | I don't have much choice

Although all of the participants describe feelings of dependence, they experience this dependence as part of their relations with different individuals or authorities.

Elsie feels dependent on her co-workers, as she constantly needs their guidance and instructions during the course of her work, due to her lack of planning skills and insight into tasks. This nevertheless does not seem to bother her very much. In contrast, Ryan does not like the dependence he feels on the employment agencies for which he works. He experiences hardly any freedom of choice or control when it comes to choosing a temporary job. He feels that he has to take on any jobs that are offered him, because he can not run the risk of being unemployed or damaging his relationship with the employment agencies.

> Ryan: When they, for example, if they call and say, 'We have this for you', then you almost have to accept it, because otherwise…

Like Ryan, Damian feels dependent on the state benefit agency (UWV) and limited by the way the institute implements the government's legislation. In [The Netherlands], the benefit agency determines how much salary individuals receive in addition to their social benefits. Damian does not consider this proportionate to his efforts. He feels that his capabilities and performance are undervalued financially and are not sufficiently recognized by the benefit agency. He feels unable to influence this situation.

> Damian: The UWV… they've drawn a line, something like, yeah, someone with a disability can only do this, or can only do that, but this, no you can't ever say that… yeah, and then I think to myself, 'I drive to A. On my own. Z. on my own. I work 60 hr', but yeah, then,

I could bring it up at the UWV, because you can also do that yourself, but yeah, it can be three years before you get an answer. So…

As the observations presented above illustrate, the participants differ in terms of their characteristics and skills, particularly Damian and Elsie. These differences seem to be related to the ways in which participants deal with their work environments, which in turn seem to influence their opportunities. Damian's reflective ability and confidence in his potential seems to create a critical attitude towards employers and the benefit agency, while strengthening his capacity to create his own opportunities. In contrast, Elsie seems to be dutiful and insecure, thus rendering her more accepting of less desirable work situations.

3.2.3 | I want to be treated as an equal by my co-workers

The participants attach considerable importance to a working atmosphere in which they experience equality, thus allowing them to feel comfortable and safe at work and to carry out their work properly. Both Nancy and Damian refer to past work experiences in which they did not feel that they were treated as equals. Nancy feels people treated her differently once they knew of her intellectual disability. Because she can not bear the feeling of not being treated as an equal, she has developed a tendency to conceal her disability from other people.

> Nancy: I'm actually hiding my disability more, but I do that on purpose, because I just want to be treated normally, like anyone else…that happens an awful lot, because, if they know that you have a disability, they'll start treating you very differently, and that's not always good. Some people may be able to deal with that, but I can't.

Elsie does not feel treated as an equal in her current work situation. She has nevertheless chosen to accept the current situation, as she feels that equality has improved in recent years.

> Elsie: They accept me more, yeah, well, they, they, they react normally to me, just like they do with other people… uh, it could be a bit better [more equal], but I just think, like, 'That's how it is'.

3.3 | Being a valuable member of society, like everyone else

3.3.1 | What I do is useful

Competitive employment makes the participants feel useful, although they differ in their perceptions of exactly what makes their work useful.

Some participants associate feeling useful with seeing concrete evidence of the added value of their efforts. For example, Damian is eager to perform tasks that are visibly useful, and he perceives this as a precondition for job satisfaction. He dislikes performing tasks that he does not feel make any substantial contribution (e.g. sweeping up leaves in autumn). Mason became aware of his added value to the company when he began to notice that less work gets done on his day off than on the days on which he works.

The participants further relate feeling useful to feeling appreciated by supervisors and customers. In particular, some participants appreciate the contribution that their work makes to the lives of other people. For example, both Luke and Elsie associate feeling valuable with caring for others. More specifically, Luke loves working as a host in a restaurant. By giving personal attention to his regular guests, he tries to make them feel welcome. In turn, he feels personally valued when guests enjoy his attentiveness. Elsie supports elderly people with daytime activities in the care home where she works, and she is aware that she can contribute to their quality of life by giving them personal attention.

> Elsie: Then you have time for that resident, and that's what I really like about it... hmm, contact, just having a chat, for the resident, that in itself means a whole lot and, yeah, for myself, well, I think like, 'Now I've done something useful again', just because I also know that those residents get hardly any attention, and then I can do that myself, and they like it a lot.

Thus, in addition to the actual utility of the work, the ways in which their work is appreciated by others makes the participants feel valued.

3.3.2 | I don't know what I would do without my work

All of the participants report that the need to spend their time working is important, although they differ in the level of importance they attach to this aspect. Luke, Ryan and Nancy note that it is difficult for them to get through holiday periods. Due to a lack of sufficient additional activities to which to devote their time, they often experience emptiness and boredom during these periods. In this regard, both Luke and Damian try to devote as much of their spare time as possible to work-related activities. For example, during holidays, Luke regularly performs chores as a volunteer at his girlfriend's workplace.

> Luke: I can't live without work. I just can't sit at home for a whole week... I'd be bored to death. No... I really can't handle boredom. I, yeah, I just have to stay busy.

In addition to giving them a way to spend their time, employment meets the social needs of participants. Damian, Nancy and Elsie all say that their social contacts would be reduced if they were unemployed. Damian regards work as an important place to meet people, and he therefore expects that he would not meet as many people if he were unable to work.

> Damian: Yeah, if I didn't work, what would I do then? I think that I would just sit at home all day. It would be harder, it would be harder to, say, just go into town or things like that, because once I'd get there, yeah, no one would strike up a conversation with me, like, 'Hey, how's it going?' Yeah, right, yeah, you don't meet people anywhere, so it gets a lot harder to, to meet people.

Overall, the participants predict that they would experience emptiness in their lives, in terms of activities and social connectedness, if they did not work.

3.3.3 | I want to earn a living, like everyone else

Participants say that being in competitive employment makes them feel like less of an exception. It gives them an ordinary place in society, making them feel able to participate in society like 'everyone else'. For example, Ryan values having a job in a regular company, as it makes him feel part of the regular workforce. He expresses how important it is to him to be seen as a regular employee by emphasizing that he and his co-workers regard the same issues as important. Mason considers earning a living to be the standard for every human being, including himself.

> Mason: Yeah, [to me, an income means] the same as for anyone else, I guess. Yeah... we all have to work for our money, so, yeah. So, it's not just important to me. Any normal person probably thinks, like, 'It's important to work in order to have money'.

Although Damian also expresses feeling connected to society through his paid job, he emphasizes that his experiences differ from those of co-workers without intellectual disabilities. As noted previously, Damian experiences feelings of dependence on the benefit agency, but he also expresses feelings of injustice and inequality in the workplace. These feelings are based on the financial inequality that he experiences relative to his co-workers without intellectual disabilities.

> Damian: Yeah [I have just as much to offer] as a regular co-worker, yeah, who earns a full salary, yeah. I don't see the difference. The only difference, and I'm not afraid to say it out loud, I think that, if you put me alongside a regular co-worker and we were both to wash a car, you wouldn't see any difference at all

in terms of work, but if you put our pay slips alongside each other, you would immediately see who is on state benefit and who isn't.

Despite their experiences of inequality, the participants regard having a competitive job as an important means through which to feel part of society.

3.3.4 | I don't want to work among people with intellectual disabilities

Taking their place in society often seems to pose a challenge to people with intellectual disabilities (e.g. Damian's experience of unequal treatment). In some cases, participants feel a need to differentiate themselves from other people with intellectual disabilities, in order to belong to the group of co-workers without intellectual disabilities in the workplace. For example, Ryan stresses that he prefers not to work among other people with disabilities or to be identified with people with disabilities. For this reason, he regards working in a sheltered workshop as a last resort.

> Ryan: Yeah, just... they are different people and, uh, in an [...] ordinary company, the people who work there are not always 100% either, and that's not what I'm saying, but, but at [sheltered workshop], it's different from an ordinary company. At [sheltered workshop], everyone has a disability and, uh, well I'm not saying, I might be able to work there, but if I had to go to work there every day, it might just drive me crazy.

Nancy also distances herself from other people with intellectual disabilities. She considers herself more skilled, and she does not want to be associated with the group of "people with disabilities." At the same time, however, she is clearly aware of her own intellectual disability, and she seems to struggle to explain her paradoxical feelings concerning working among and being associated with other people with intellectual disabilities.

> Nancy: You know, the thing is, I've worked at B. [sheltered workshop] once now, but, you know, the thing is, I, I have, it may seem odd, but I have a problem with it, with working with people who have disabilities..., it often gets on my nerves, yeah... yeah, but for me, yeah, it sounds really odd to me, because I have a disability myself, yeah, not such a severe type, but a very, very mild type, but I just can't do that.

The stigma that the participants experience with regard to their intellectual disabilities seems to have caused them to struggle with accepting or rejecting their identification with the group of people with intellectual disabilities, given their need to be fully recognized for their capacities and to take their proper place within society.

4 | DISCUSSION

The results of this study illustrate that the participants experience competitive employment as important to feeling like part of society. For them, participation in competitive employment created social value by enabling them to make a valuable contribution to society. It also protected them from experiencing emptiness in their lives. In contrast to most people without intellectual disabilities, however, the stories of the participants clearly illustrate that such social value is not always self-evident. The participants also described experiences in which they felt dependent in relation to others, in addition to having been affected by stigmatizing attitudes in the work environment.

The participants had been able to achieve participation within a socially complex, competitive work environment. They recognized that previous work and life experiences had helped them to discover the types of work that they preferred, the competences that they possessed and the preconditions that they needed to successfully participate within the context of work. However, such a development process is not self-evident for people with intellectual disabilities, as their career choices are often determined by their environment rather than by themselves, at times resulting in personal wishes and goals being ignored (Lysaght et al., 2009). The personal accounts presented in this study reveal similarities that may have contributed to their successful participation in employment. First, the participants shared a strong work ethic, as well as a desire to secure their future goals. These aspects (i.e. feeling responsible and being goal-oriented) have been associated with work performance and sustainable employability within the general population (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Van Ruitenbeek, Zijlstra, & Hülsheger, 2019). Due to reduced cognitive and adaptive ability, unmet support needs and other factors, however, people with intellectual disabilities are less likely to develop these required skills for sustainable employability (Nouwens, Lucas, Embregts, & Van Nieuwenhuizen, 2017; Snell et al., 2009). Second, the work motivation of the participants and their ability to adapt their behaviour to the requirements of their work situations apparently contributed to their successful participation in competitive employment (Holwerda et al., 2013; Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji, & Karon, 2018). In addition to their own motivation and characteristics, simply being offered the opportunity to work also needs to be recognized as a key factor for participation in competitive employment.

The participants in this study shared the desire to occupy an ordinary place in society in general and in the workplace specifically, a place in which they strive to be treated as equal and recognized for the valuable contribution they make to the company or their customers. However, they also reported experiences of stigmatization that seemed to impede them in realizing these wishes and which triggered a variety of feelings and responses among participants. For example, the urge felt by Luke and Damian to prove their abilities when they experienced stigma contrasts with Elsie's insecurity and loss of work motivation due to stigmatization. Other behaviours and experiences among the participants could also be linked to stigma, such as their strong work ethic and ability to adapt their behaviour, which

might have been due to a desire to please others and might therefore have served as a means to feeling accepted or liked by others (Snell et al., 2009). This might have been the case for Elsie, who showed herself to be dutiful, with a tendency to be accepting of unequal situations. In addition, the participants' tendency to distance themselves from other people with intellectual disabilities—as reported in this study by Damian, Nancy and Ryan—has also been described by Snell et al. (2009), along with an adaptive response to experiences of stigma. More specifically, to reduce the experience of stigma, people with intellectual disabilities might deny their disabilities and attempt to present themselves as someone without disability. For example, Nancy talked about masking her disability in order to be treated as an equal. Similar individual strategies are also seen in people with other types of disabilities, such as physical and sensory disabilities, in response to stigma (Nario-Redmond, Noel, & Fern, 2013). Such denial, however, could result in a reluctance to accept support in the workplace (Ali, King, Strydom, & Hassiotis, 2015), and this could have a negative effect on their success in competitive employment.

In the experience of the participants in this study, human relationships in the direct work environment sometimes entail feelings of stigma and dependence. Participants seem to experience these feelings as interconnected, and this corresponds with existing definitions of stigma. In line with studies by Pelleboer-Gunnink, Van Weeghel, and Embregts (2019) and by Cavanagh et al. (2017), the realistic needs that people with intellectual disabilities have for assistance in the workplace and the assumptions (either implicit or explicit) of co-workers, supervisors and support workers (e.g. job coaches) with regard to this need for assistance are likely to influence the opportunities that individuals are given to realize their full capacity to work. A customized work environment is therefore essential, with an inclusive attitude on the part of people without intellectual disabilities in the workplace (Lysaght et al., 2017; Nelissen, Hülsheger, Van Ruitenbeek, & Zijlstra, 2016) and supportive relationships with supervisors and co-workers apparently being key elements (Embregts, Taminau, Heerkens, Schippers, & Van Hove, 2018; Flores, Jenaro, Orgaz, & Martin, 2011). In this study, Damian experienced the well-intended behaviour of co-workers as stigmatizing and painful at times. In addition, he felt that this behaviour could lead to underestimation of the capacities of people with intellectual disabilities and, reducing their opportunities as a result. Damian's experience is in line with the public stereotype attributed to people with disabilities. In line with studies by Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu (2002) and Pelleboer-Gunnink et al. (2019) people with disabilities are viewed as a subordinate group by the general population, a view which can encompass both positive stereotyping such as "warm" (likable) and negative stereotyping such as "incompetent," resulting in feelings of "pity" and "sympathy" towards people with disabilities. Assigning socially desirable and non-threatening characteristics to people with disabilities serves to justify and maintain their subordinate status. This paternalistic reaction arises from a feeling of superiority and engenders a tendency to take care of the other person. At the same time, the combination of positive and negative stereotyping ensures that those who stigmatize do not experience discomfort. As such,

processes of stigmatization may maintain feelings of dependence and remove opportunities for independence for people with intellectual disabilities in the workplace. In Damian's case, stereotyping triggered an urge to prove himself in order to change such stigmatizing attitudes. However, many people with intellectual disabilities, for example, Elsie, are not able to adopt such a robust attitude in these kinds of situations. This highlights the importance of defining the concept of inclusive behaviour not only from the perspective of co-workers without disabilities (Nelissen et al., 2016), but also from the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities themselves, in order to enhance their opportunities in the workplace.

This qualitative study contributes to the creation of in-depth knowledge about the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in competitive employment. In line with previous studies (e.g. Giesbers et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2019), this study demonstrates the value of IPA in research on intellectual disabilities by providing rich data on their lived experiences. In this study, we subjected our findings to member checks with participants—an element that is increasingly being used for purposes of validation in IPA and other qualitative research methods (e.g. Groves, Rayner, & Muncer, 2017). The participants also experienced the member checks as valuable, indicating they provided a sense of being recognized.

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. First, we examined what participation in competitive employment means to people with mild intellectual disability or borderline functioning and good verbal communication skills. However, the work experiences of people whose disabilities are more severe and who are less proficient in verbal communication might be different. Second, despite our efforts to minimize social desirability, we cannot exclude the possibility of bias, in the sense that participants may have been inclined to express agreement with the themes we proposed. A third limitation has to do with the average time of seven weeks between the interview and the member check. This period could be considered long, given the cognitive limitations of the participants. It was nevertheless necessitated by the time-consuming, in-depth analysis prescribed by IPA guidelines.

The results of this study have implications for both practice and research. First, they could help to raise awareness among public authorities and employers, with regard to the impact of stigmatizing attitudes on the opportunities and position of people with intellectual disabilities in the labour market. For example, strategies of educating the general public about inequalities experienced by people with intellectual disabilities (as opposed to interventions that focus on the similarities between people with and without intellectual disabilities) have proven effective in reducing stigmatizing attitudes in the general population (Walker & Scior, 2013). Second, companies might embrace human diversity and implement inclusive HR strategies that encourage openness (Bartram, Cavanagh, Meacham, & Pariona-Cabrera, 2019), and public authorities could support and compensate employers who provide customized guidance to people with intellectual disabilities. A great deal of sensitivity is required on the part of the direct work environment in order to adjust to individuals with intellectual disabilities and to offer them opportunities to perform to the best of

248 | WILEY—JARID
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VOERMANS ET AL.

their ability, without underestimating or placing excessive demands on them and, moreover, without making them feel stigmatized and dependent. Third, people with intellectual disabilities themselves should be able to receive training and support in order to increase their self-confidence and develop skills that could help them to create their own opportunities. Expert-by-experience programmes offer one example of this approach (Verbrugge & Embregts, 2013). The skills of job coaches in the accurate assessment of the capacities and personal wishes of people with intellectual disabilities could be further expanded, thereby optimizing the support provided to people with intellectual disabilities (and their work environments) in the process of finding and maintaining suitable employment.

Given the relative lack of knowledge concerning the emergence and evolution of the complex process of stigma relating to intellectual disabilities in the workplace (Ellenkamp et al., 2016; Scior, 2011), this area is in need of further exploration. Future studies could focus on how interactions between people with and without intellectual disabilities are assessed and experienced from both perspectives, as well as in a variety of integrated and sheltered employment settings. They could also examine how these interactions might interfere with stigma, a sense of belonging and the position of people with intellectual disabilities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors listed have contributed sufficiently to the project to be included as authors, and all of those who are qualified to be authors are listed as such.

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