

# Treating disability as an asset (not a limitation): A critical examination of disability inclusion through social entrepreneurship

## Abstract

Social enterprises play an increasing role in providing employment opportunities for disabled people. This paper examines the implications of social enterprises' market-based approach to disability inclusion, which is characterized by viewing disability as an asset rather than a limitation. Taking our inspiration from critical disability scholars who have pointed out that inclusion agendas *produce* disability as a distinct social reality, we use a performative lens to examine how social enterprises variously 'do disability', for instance, by defining where the potentials of disabled people lie and how best to promote them. Drawing on an ethnographic study of Magic Fingers, a Nepal-based enterprise that employs blind people as massage therapists, we identify entrepreneurial 'doings' of disability that were guided by ideals of empowerment but that ultimately produced new and subtle forms of exclusion. By closely examining the case organization's founding phase, as well as its practices of advertising, recruitment, and day-to-day management, we show how Magic Fingers commodified disability in novel ways, reinforced the notion of disability as a negative condition that must be 'overcome' through work, and introduced new market-oriented evaluative distinctions between 'more able' and 'less able' disabled individuals. By exploring and evaluating these effects, this paper draws attention to the ways in which social enterprises, while challenging deficit-oriented representations of disability, can paradoxically solidify disability as something profoundly 'other'.

**Keywords:** Disability; Blindness; Performativity; Critical Disability Studies; Social Entrepreneurship; Work Inclusion

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## Introduction

Worldwide, people with disabilities face more challenges navigating the labor market than their able-bodied contemporaries and often do not even enter it (Ameri et al. 2020; Jammaers et al., 2016). Alongside welfare state and civil society actors that traditionally provide security, training, and access to employment for people with disabilities, social enterprises are at the forefront of a new paradigm for disability inclusion. These enterprises aspire to overcome deficit-oriented and paternalistic approaches to disability inclusion by creating work opportunities that match the unique capabilities of people with disabilities (Buhariwala et al., 2015; Di Domenico et al., 2010; Maravelias, 2022a, 2022b). Consider, as an emblematic example, the Danish social enterprise Specialisterne, which leverages the computer skills of people with autism who are allowed to work from home to avoid anxiety-provoking social situations. Research shows that Specialisterne has succeeded in combining ‘doing good’ (creating jobs for people on the autism spectrum) with ‘doing well’ (making money) (Laratta and Nakagawa, 2016; Wolf and Mair, 2019). Given the intuitive appeal of this ‘disability as asset’ approach, it is hardly surprising that social enterprises are being lauded for opening up a new era of inclusion that can boost the wellbeing of disabled groups through market-based activities (Chandra, 2018; Gidron, 2014; Ho and Chan, 2010; Hockerts, 2015; Maravelias, 2022a, 2022b). Beyond such positive recognition, however, the theoretical understanding of the inner workings of social entrepreneurial disability inclusion remains sorely limited (Chui et al., 2021). More precisely, we lack insight into the ways in which social enterprises, based on their market-based approach to disability inclusion, may also *produce* disability as a distinct social reality.

In response to this caveat, this paper explores the microfoundations of the ‘disability as asset’ approach pursued by social enterprises. Premised on the central tenets of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), we approach disability not as objectively given but as performatively produced. Representing a postmodern turn in disability studies, CDS challenges the relations between designations of ‘disabled’ and ‘able’ at a profound ontological level (Shildrick, 2012). To say that disability is produced is to acknowledge that disability is not a natural and stable state of human existence but is performed through the measures used to classify, support, treat, and monitor people as they enter and work in organizations (Bend and Priola, 2021; Holmqvist et al., 2013; Hughes and Paterson, 1997). Against this backdrop, we ask: How does an increasingly popular organizational form – social entrepreneurship – perform disability? How

do these 'doings' of disability relate to the emancipatory promise conveyed by social entrepreneurial endeavors?

Addressing these questions, we draw on an ethnographic study of Magic Fingers, a Nepal-based enterprise employing blind people as massage therapists. Our analysis unpacks how the 'disability as asset' approach employed by the founders of Magic Fingers precipitates four 'doings' of disability. Each of these doings is embedded in a distinct set of organizational practices and associated goals: a) designing an empowering work offering tailored to the specific talents of blind people, b) advertising the talent and excellence of workers, c) ensuring fairness during the hiring process, and d) using performance measures to treat massage therapists the same as 'nondisabled' workers. We contend that these four doings of disability converge in the intention to satisfy market demand by leveraging the natural talents of blind therapists (Kaul et al., 2022). However, viewing blindness as a capacity that has market value leads to the essentialization and commodification of disability (Jammaers and Ybema, 2022) while giving rise to new distinctions between high and low performers among blind persons. Our results suggest that the social entrepreneurial quest to 'do good while doing well' leads to a paradoxical situation in which disability inclusion is achieved at a formal (access to salaried work) and symbolic level (affirmative representations of disability), but new ways to restore disability as 'other' emerge.

Before presenting the findings of our ethnographic investigation, we first offer a tentative overview of the 'disability as asset' approach employed by social enterprises. This is followed by a brief discussion of the premises of Critical Disability Studies, which inform the performative perspective guiding our empirical analysis. In the third and fourth steps, we present our methodology and findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our analysis, followed by suggestions for future research.

### **Social Entrepreneurship and the 'Disability as Asset' Approach**

For several decades, social enterprises have served as a response to the structural unemployment of disadvantaged groups and the perpetual failure of the state and markets to effectively address this inequality (Nyssens, 2014). Using market mechanisms to create positive social outcomes, social enterprises have spearheaded the provision of employment for disabled people (Bacq and Lumpkin, 2022; Cooney et al., 2016). While some social enterprises rely on public subsidies to finance their social mission (e.g., charities), this paper focuses on social enterprises that rely on market-based revenues derived from providing employment opportunities for disabled people

in the mainstream labor market (Gidron, 2014). Popular examples include employing people with cognitive impairments for IT services or food delivery (Ho and Chan, 2010; Laratta and Nakagawa, 2016; Wolf and Mair, 2019), blind people for breast cancer detection and massage (Sánchez and Roy, 2019) or deaf people as parcel or food couriers and waiters (Hoffmann-Dilloway, 2011; Krishnamurthy et al., 2012). What unites these endeavors is that they treat disabilities not as negative deviances from an able-bodied norm (read: limitation) but as conditions associated with ‘hidden talents’ that can be unlocked through productive activities in the mainstream market (Maravelias, 2022a, 2022b; Yates, 2015). This type of employment is characterized by the provision of competitive wages rather than subsidies and a higher degree of interaction with nondisabled clients and/or coworkers (Chui et al., 2021; Gidron, 2014). Market-based (social entrepreneurial) endeavors of inclusion do not seek to protect disabled people from performance expectations (May-Simera C, 2018) but rather promote forms of work that ideally suit the (specific) talents of disabled people. In this way, social enterprises avoid the segregative tendencies associated with sheltered work or government-led disability inclusion programs (Chui et al., 2021; Hein and Ansari, 2022; May-Simera, 2018), instead promoting self-reliance, agency and equality. By focusing on talent and ‘special abilities’ (Maravelias, 2022a) rather than on deficits, social enterprises reflect an attempt to refute long-held conceptions of disabled people as naturally inferior in terms of their performance capabilities and economic value (Stiker, 2002).

As much as we welcome the shift away from deficit-oriented and medicalized views, we note that the ‘disability as asset’ approach has perhaps been seized upon too hastily and uncritically as a favorable opportunity to realize disability inclusion through the provision of work. Upon closer inspection, the search for ‘hidden talents’ underpinning social entrepreneurial endeavors may also *produce* disability as a distinct social reality. That is, emphasizing disabled people’s ‘assets’ has an immediate impact on how nonnormative bodies and minds are being perceived and known. Insights from a work inclusion project in Sweden, Samhall, are indicative of this (Holmqvist, 2009; Holmqvist et al., 2013). Even though this study took place in the context of sheltered work rather than social entrepreneurship,<sup>i</sup> the authors reveal how attempts to reintegrate disabled people into the secondary labor market performatively produce the disability to which they refer. For example, Samhall labeled their workers as ‘occupationally disabled’, offering them job opportunities that were not too complex (such as cleaning restaurant areas or restrooms) and thus adapted to their assumed capacities. However, labeling disability in diagnostic terms and as something that reduces workers’ capabilities to ‘simple’ work, Samhall created a reference that affected workers’ social categorization and

(self)perception. That is, workers who had initially considered themselves nondisabled and who believed they would soon be able to return to the mainstream labor market ended up staying with Samhall and considering themselves ‘actually disabled’. What becomes apparent here is how Samhall’s provision of work that ‘matched’ an administrative and diagnostic category produced shifts in the sets of capacities attributed to and experienced by these workers.

The Samhall case provides a privileged vantage point for anticipating how the market logic that resides at the core of social enterprises will bring about specific ways of ‘doing’ disability. Indeed, the business models, recruitment practices, training programs, and support mechanisms of social enterprises do not merely represent technical responses to existing problems but affect the knowledge that is produced about groups of people, their bodily conditions, and their role in society more generally. We will first outline the key tenets of Critical Disability Studies that provide the theoretical foundation for our discussion of the ‘doings’ of disability enacted by our case organization.

### **Critical Disability Studies and the Performative Production of Disability**

Our conception of disability is based on the performative theories developed by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Since the early 2000s, these theorists have inspired Critical Disability Studies (CDS) scholarship, an interdisciplinary set of theoretical approaches that engage with how disability emerges from or, more precisely, is *done* through the enactment of capitalist values, medical diagnoses, or bureaucratic practices (Schalk, 2017; Shildrick, 2012). Informed by a critical outlook, CDS’ principal aim is to critique and transform entrenched boundaries between nondisabled/disabled and normal/abnormal (Porkertová, 2021). Central to our interest are CDS studies that focus on how practices of valuation and inclusion position and reproduce disabled people as *other* (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015; Shildrick, 2012; Titchkosky, 2003). Processes of othering involve acts of defining, portraying and treating individuals and groups with disabilities as inferior to and as not fitting in with mainstream (able-bodied) society (Jammaers and Ybema, 2022).

CDS scholarship has both evolved from and counteracted a long-standing paradigm called the social model of disability (SMD). The SMD emerged in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s and was accompanied by a demand to reveal and overcome structural and material (rather than medical) conditions that lead to disability as a state of exclusion, such as difficult-to-access buildings, segregated educational systems, or discriminatory legal structures (Oliver, 1996; Porkertová, 2020; Shakespeare, 2004). Although the SMD approach has been criticized and

expanded from a variety of perspectives (e.g. Owens, 2015; Tremain, 2006), its central message has remained valid over time: The key to the empowerment of people with physical or mental impairments lies in removing the systemic barriers that lead to their exclusion. In terms of employment, SMD scholars have called for the creation of work environments that allow people to participate more fully in the labor market according to their abilities (Oliver, 1996). From this perspective, it seems fair to say that social enterprises form an ideal response to what the SMD approach has called for.

However, our empirical investigation of Magic Fingers will show that the SMD approach – when executed by social enterprises – involves the production of new attributions of value, ability, job aptitude and performance (Bend and Priola, 2021; Holmqvist, 2009; Maravelias, 2022a). Unlike other SMD-inspired interventions and offers that aim to make accommodations to the physical and mental limitations of people with disabilities (Blank, 2020), such as wheelchair ramps, quota regulations or the availability of sign language interpreting (Jammaers, 2022), social entrepreneurial endeavors create *new* forms of employment that draw on the perceived capacities of disabled people (Chandra, 2018; Chui et al., 2021; Gidron, 2014; Ho and Chan, 2010; Hockerts, 2015). As social enterprise scholars have argued, the particularity of these enterprises consists precisely of creating better ‘matches’ between what disabled people are perceived as capable of doing and what markets demand (Hockerts, 2015; Maravelias, 2022a). As Maravelias (2022a) observed, such entrepreneurial matchmaking between extant (but idle) capacities and market demand is a ‘doing’ of disability (Butler, 1990) that constitutes the (disability) ‘problem’ that it ‘solves’ (Hervieux and Voltan, 2018). Depicting how disability is performed through social enterprise bears analytical challenges given the intuitive appeal of ‘matchmaking’ and the optimistic language that surrounds social entrepreneurial endeavors. However, a CDS lens equips us with the tools necessary to examine how disability evolves not only through negative stigma and barriers but also (and more subtly and increasingly) through representations of the strengths and capacities of disabled people (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015).

CDS encourages us to look more closely at how the basic assumptions, employment categories and everyday practices of social enterprises produce disability as a social reality. Our case organization, which works with blind people and people with minimal residual vision, is well placed to offer granular insights into ‘doing blindness’ as one example of how entrepreneurial endeavors produce disability in new ways. At the heart of our argument is a critical stance that is prompted by the recognition that blindness often seems unambiguous in the popular imagination, and it is commonly thought of as a condition that fully defines the individual (Michalko, 1998; Shildrick and Price, 1996; Titchkosky, 2003). Such an

“encompassing, overarching, total” (Deshen, 1992: 2) vision of blindness conceals how societal premises differently shape understandings and experiences of blindness (Michalko, 2001; Schillmeier, 2006) and how these experiences affect and intersect with other features of ‘being’ (Erevelles et al., 2010; Stienstra and Nyerere, 2016). Apart from the fact that blindness is an umbrella term uniting a wide spectrum of eye conditions, we need to recognize that multiple *abilities* (or ‘assets’) are being attributed to blind people (even within a single organization) and that these can change depending on contexts (Deshen, 1992; Hammer, 2019; Lane et al., 1993). As we turn toward our case, we focus on how blindness is being (re)shaped by social entrepreneurial agendas. A focus on the various ways in which blindness is ‘done’ allows us to reveal essentializing tendencies that emanate from the ‘disability as asset’ approach and hence to problematize the rising trend of framing disability as productive and useful in economic terms (Jammaers and Williams, 2021; Jammaers and Ybema, 2022).

### **The Case of Magic Fingers: Context, Methods, and Positioning**

The social mission of our case organization, Magic Fingers, is to provide employment for blind people in Nepal. Like other disabled groups, blind Nepalis are disproportionately affected by larger societal challenges (Mauksch, 2021). Affirming the much-discussed ‘vicious cycle’ of disability and poverty (Grech, 2015), the prevalence of blindness in Nepal is linked to conditions of precarity under which large parts of the population live (Dhungana, 2006). According to the few scientific surveys that do exist, the prevalence of blindness in Nepal ranges from 0.8 to 2% of the total population, and the numbers range between 0.5% and over 6% in different districts of Nepal (Sangh, 2012). Since the 1980s, institutional bodies such as government agencies and NGOs have taken measures to reduce the medical or nutritional causes of blindness on the one hand and the social, educational and political exclusion of blind Nepalis on the other (Dhungana, 2006; Government of Nepal, 2006; Sapkota et al., 2006; Van Hees et al., 2014). Despite improvements in inclusive education up to the university level, blind graduates rarely find jobs that correspond to these now higher levels of education (Dulal, 2016). Social enterprises are thus considered essential for disability inclusion, especially as traditional businesses have been reluctant to adopt a more active role in this domain (Kaul et al., 2022).

In 2004, a British couple, here referred to as Jessica and Oliver, who had frequently traveled to Nepal in the past, spotted an opportunity to create work for blind people. By establishing blind massage as a tourist business, the couple tried to leverage blind people’s unique sense of touch, thus improving their material wellbeing and occupational situation. Jessica and Oliver left

behind their jobs in England, moved to one of Nepal's popular starting points for trekking tours in the Himalayas and set up their first clinic. Jessica was a marketing expert, and Oliver was a certified massage therapist; thus, the idea of blind massage services matched their competencies. The founders' long-term plan had always been to create an enterprise run by Nepali and, ideally, blind citizens. Thus, they returned to England in 2013 and handed over the clinics to their first blind therapist, Ram, and a sighted manager to continue and expand the social enterprise. During its nearly 10 years of existence at the time of the field research in 2014, Magic Fingers had grown into a viable enterprise employing 23 blind therapists in three branch clinics. Magic Fingers is frequently cited in travel blogs and reports as a pioneering example of disability inclusion. The blogs and reports perfectly reflect the scholarly belief that entrepreneurial approaches can help underprivileged individuals empower themselves (Alvord et al., 2004; Bornstein and Davis, 2010; De Clercq and Honig, 2011), as well as Jessica and Oliver's best hopes for starting a functioning enterprise.

In this paper, we interpret various materials produced and obtained by Author 1 between late 2014 and early 2015 as part of her study of Magic Fingers. Author 2 joined the project during an advanced stage of analysis. During two months of ethnographic fieldwork, Author 1 collected three types of material. First, ethnographic fieldnotes were collected on conversations and observations of events and routines that took place in the three clinics in operation at the time of the study. The main ethnographic setting was the newly opened third Magic Fingers clinic, where Author 1 was housed, while staff at the two other clinics welcomed her as a frequent guest. Second, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with one of the founders of Magic Fingers, referred to here as Jessica, two clinic managers, two leaders of blind associations in Nepal and a woman whom we call Amita, who served as a daily consultant for the enterprise. Third, texts and images were gathered from Magic Fingers' social media activities, travel experience platforms, and documentaries and blogs by journalists and travelers who have reported on the enterprise.

Author 1 analyzed the entire empirical material – diary entries, interviews, promotional material and online posts – based on an NVivo-based coding procedure that followed an iterative back-and-forth between empirical data and analytical concepts (Breidenstein et al., 2015; Nicolini, 2009). A first round of open coding along initial categories derived from the data was followed by an exploration of a diverse body of disability studies texts. This set the stage for a second round of theme-guided coding that led us toward more comprehensive observations (Emerson et al., 2011). As is typical of ethnographic journeys, the second step of analysis did not follow a strict sequence of predetermined analytical steps (Breidenstein et al., 2015) but was



interspersed with instances of puzzlement and counterintuitive discovery that drew our attention to the ambivalent nature of ‘doing blindness’. Our interest in this ambivalence was piqued, for example, by the way that the actors involved in the study simultaneously highlighted and denied blindness as a crucial category shaping their daily actions. Other instances involved relational tensions, such as the case of an emotional outburst by Amita caused by the deviant behavior of one of the therapists – a situation that will be explored more thoroughly later on in this paper. Cases such as Amita’s outburst triggered moments of astonishment (Van Maanen, 2011) that compelled us to reflect more deeply about the complex and varying ways in which social enterprises perform disability. Reflecting on the performative production of disability sparked our reading of research on CDS to help make sense of our emergent findings (Desken, 1992; Jammaers and Ybema, 2022; Maravelias, 2022a; Stienstra and Nyerere, 2016; Tremain, 2006). Given the ethnographic orientation of our research, we are aware of our own interpretive authority in the process of knowledge formation (Holmes, 2020). As both of us are temporarily able-bodied scholars from the global North, we are cognizant that we speak from a position of privilege. Nevertheless, the scope of this paper does not allow us to dive deeply into the experiential world of blind therapists (which is something that Author 1 has done elsewhere; see Mauksch, 2021). This caveat notwithstanding, we sense that Magic Fingers offers an apt opportunity to examine the ‘doing of disability’ based on entrepreneurial discourses that are widespread in our own Western worlds.

While our findings trace four ‘doings’ of disability enacted by Magic Fingers, we open our results sections by returning to the year 2004, when a young couple decided to start a social enterprise in their favorite travel destination. The first ‘doing of disability’, enacted during the start-up period, is related to the establishment of a viable business model. The second ‘doing’ consists of promoting blind massage to customers and the public through images and narratives. This is followed, third, by a ‘doing’ related to recruiting appropriate candidates. The fourth ‘doing’, then, involves the social enterprise’s evaluation practices aimed at ensuring the performance of its blind massage therapists. In each of the four sections, attention is devoted to both the emancipatory intent underlying the respective practices and the specific forms of disability they performatively produce.

### **The Founding Period: Blindness as ‘Natural Talent’**

When asked about the start-up phase of Magic Fingers, Jessica recollected the “cultural obstacles” she and Oliver faced in their attempt to establish blind massage as a tourist business.

Massage at the time had been a common practice in Nepal in the context of the family (children giving after-work foot massage to their fathers, for instance). However, unlike countries such as China and South Korea, there was no long-standing tradition of massage as a legitimate *commercial* health service. In conversations with Author 1, blind therapists recalled that the idea of massage as a paid job had initially seemed “unusual” and “strange” to them. Commercial massage services existed mainly in the tourism sector, where the term ‘massage’ was partially a euphemism for sex work. Furthermore, Jessica reported how she had tried to argue against karmic beliefs associating physical contact with a blind individual with ritual pollution (Hubert, 2013). Due to the perceived risk of religious impurity, there were doubts that Nepali clients would book a massage performed by a disabled person. The business idea of employing blind therapists was thus difficult to promote at the beginning, but Jessica remained confident that blindness and professional massage services could form an ideal combination. “One could not possibly consider this a bad idea”, she insisted, pointing out that blind massage flourished in other tourist hubs in South (East) Asia, such as Phnom Penh or Bangkok. In response to her difficulties in securing local support in Nepal, Jessica redirected her fundraising efforts to British donor organizations – a switch that proved beneficial as it suddenly made the startup phase “almost easy,” she said, since grants, private donations, international volunteers, and a growing number of clients kept pouring in. After a strategic refocus on a (Western) audience that shared the founders’ views on the project’s meaningfulness, Magic Fingers finally gained momentum.

Of note, the prospect of a stable source of income was extremely valuable to the (soon-to-be) therapists, who had little to no alternatives in finding paid employment in Nepal. Conceiving of blind people’s manual talent as a commodifiable capacity also worked against attributions of incapability to which blind people in Nepal are regularly subjected (Lamichhane, 2012; Lamichhane, 2016; Miles, 1999). What concerns us here, however, is how Magic Fingers’ focus on therapists’ touch sensitivity as a talent highlighted one particular capacity and rendered that capacity more ‘useful’ than others. To illustrate, the previous occupations, educational trajectories (some therapists held bachelor’s degrees in languages or pedagogical subjects), or prior hobbies, interests, leisure activities or skills (music, cricket, fashion, cooking) of their blind target population were irrelevant to Jessica and Oliver’s business model. Even the therapists distanced themselves from previous income-making activities and hobbies. For example, Ram, Magic Fingers’ oldest blind employee, opened one of the interviews with memories of his earlier work as a singer in a smoky restaurant until the British couple came to offer him what he now framed a “real job”. On another occasion, Author 1 had a conversation

about blind cricket with Amita, the entrepreneurial consultant. As indicated by therapists' reports and photos decorating the walls of one of the blind associations that Author 1 visited, cricket had been a time-filling, joyful activity for many therapists, but they all had stopped playing it. Shrugging her shoulders, Amita argued that she found cricket good as a hobby but that it failed to achieve what, for her, was the greatest good: economic independence.

Ram's mention of massage as a 'real job', and Amita's view that cricket was (only) 'good as a hobby', convey value assessments about the activities performed by blind Nepalis. It is important to note that the new occupation (blind massage) was tied to statements on the bodily condition of blind people that was now viewed as both 'nature' and 'value'. Viewing the blind body as particularly suitable for massage work, combined with a strong focus on skillful hands and superior touch (as compared to music or cricket, which demand other capacities and involve other body parts), were familiar associations for Western audiences but not for people in Nepal. Blind people in Nepal (as elsewhere) use their hands and arms to orient themselves (e.g., running their hands along walls to find their way); they use their fingers to read Braille or operate their phones; and they touch or grab the bodies of their friends and family members for orientation (e.g., placing a hand on the shoulder of a sighted person when walking). What is different in the case of Magic Fingers is that 'blind touch' was framed as holding *commercial* value (Jammaers and Williams, 2021).

The following two assumptions seem key to Magic Fingers' attempt to establish blind massage as a viable commercial offer. First, blind people themselves were perceived as holding the key to their empowerment. Their talent was thus viewed not as a product of their socialization but as a potential immanent *within* their body. Even if this talent must be discovered, honed and shaped by training (more detail on this aspect will be provided later), a tendency to naturalize capacity becomes evident from the way Jessica insisted "one cannot consider this (blind massage as a business) a bad idea". This unperturbed conviction about the appropriateness of Magic Fingers' business model suggests that the focus on blind people's 'affinity for touch' has become a hegemonic interpretation that excludes other ways of perceiving the blind body as skilled. Second, the founders believed that this hidden talent is best unlocked through *commercial* activity. These assumptions reflect the Euro-American 'disability as asset' approach to disability inclusion that tries to 'match' (and thus also reduces people to) a selective talent with employment opportunities in which those talents can be unlocked (Chandra, 2018; Hockerts, 2015; Maravelias, 2022a). More critically, such 'matchmaking' entails a risk of reenforcing and perpetuating extant stereotypical images of blindness (massage as a typical profession pursued by blind people) and profoundly distinguishes blind people from the able-

bodied majority which is not homogeneously perceived as having just one capacity or talent. Expanding on this critical train of thought – the question of how the blind body is rendered valuable in an economic sense in which images of blindness accompany and support the commercialization of disability – we now take a closer look at Magic Fingers' advertising activities.

### **Advertising Blind Massage: Different but Graceful**

Consistent with the ‘disability as asset’ approach, Magic Fingers refrained from depicting impairments in a pitiful manner to avoid the pathologizing and disempowering effect of humanitarian discourses (Berghs, 2014). Diametrically opposed to philanthropic endeavors that symbolize the reality of disability through images of misery, e.g., the blind man as a shabby-looking beggar (Deshen, 1992), Magic Fingers displayed eagerness, self-efficacy, and optimism in their visual narratives. For instance, photographs used in promotional material showed therapists in action, such as during massage sessions or participating in osteology classes with a skeleton, which conveyed a sense of enjoyment, individual agency, expertise and pride. Close-up portraits often used angles that looked upward toward the faces of the therapists, with their smiling faces evoking spectators’ empathy. This is reminiscent of Berger’s (2008) study of wheelchair sports, which argues that images of disabled athletes can have liberatory potential if they succeed in disrupting and breaking through the conventional aesthetics of impairment as misery and lack. In stark contrast, the blind therapists in Magic Fingers’ portraits seemed to say: “Look, here we are: different but graceful!”

However, these positive images also show the body *as* defective by foregrounding bodily signs of impairment. For instance, Magic Fingers’ photographs immediately draw attention to ‘clouded’ eyes, dislocated lenses, and typical objects of blindness, such as dark sunglasses and white canes. The viewers’ gaze is guided toward blind people’s physical impairment, thus emphasizing their ‘loss’ or ‘lack’ of sight. Magic Fingers’ depictions thus, on the one hand, bring into sharper relief the fragility of the human body while simultaneously signifying the defective body as holding potential (Berger, 2008; Liddiard, 2014). Similar to the way the business model orients attention toward the ‘nature’ of blind people (highlighting the lack of eyesight as a potential for massage), these images transmit the message that every blind person carries the seeds of her or his own empowerment *within* their own body. While Magic Fingers’ promotional material conveyed motifs of blind pride, the images also reinforced, if rather

elusively, the gap between an (implicit) nondisabled norm and its (visible) disabled deviation (Sherry, 2014).

Aside from portraying blindness as a preordained talent, Magic Fingers' asset approach at times evoked transcendental associations between blind massage and spiritual touch. Illustrative in this regard is the logo of Magic Fingers, which features a drawn hand with the letter OM in its center (a Hindu spiritual symbol that was culturally appropriated in the global West as a popular iconography of yoga and meditation) and associated slogans such as "[if you] touch a body, [...] you touch the whole person, the intellect, the spirit, and the emotions." Images showing therapists holding the palms of their hands up to the camera or scenes of them touching their patients' bodies are reminiscent of Hollywood movies and popular myths in which blind people are portrayed as having a sixth sense as well as a heightened sensitivity to hearing and touch that compensates for their lack of vision (Barnes, 1990; Crow, 2000; Hartnett, 2000).

Magic Fingers' images of magic touch and the asset approach more generally were effective in advertising the appeal of and creating demand for blind massage, as evidenced by client entries on travel platforms. Clients expressed excitement about blind therapists' superior tactile skills and expertise in examining, knowing, and healing their bodies. As one happy client wrote, "If someone is blind but has an incredible demonstration of ability, it is a good service, even if it is more expensive." The post goes on to mention that the therapist who treated him even correctly guessed his weight by feeling his body. What is reflected in this and many other comments from tourists is Magic Fingers' ability to present blindness as something natural and beneficial, a tangible deviance from able-bodiedness associated with 'magic' talent. Magic Fingers' advertising thus valorized selective features of blindness (notably extraordinary tactility, sensitivity, and the possession of a sixth sense) to the point of conceiving it as a homogeneous predisposition (all blind people are similarly gifted with talent). On the flip side, alternative ways of perceiving blindness and blind abilities (e.g., athleticism, musicality, or rhetorical excellence) were abandoned or not considered.

Magic Fingers' advertising activities, which are oriented toward clients and a wider audience, effectively worked against negative portrayals by stressing an underlying commercial and, to some extent, spiritual potential that resides in blind people. However, by viewing tactile sensitivity as a talent universally available to blind people, blindness was subordinated to a discourse of sameness. Such a focus on the sameness of blind people is both reductive and universalist at the same time. A singular focus on manual talent not only reduces blind people

to *one* distinct ‘productive potential’ but also assumes this potential to be similarly available to *all* blind people.

Having familiarized ourselves with how Magic Fingers' advertising enacted blindness as a universal condition associated with unique capacities, we will now turn to two additional practices – recruiting and performance evaluations. We examine how Magic Fingers differentiated and subcategorized individual members of the target group and how this in turn clarified and regulated what it meant to be a legitimate therapist.

### **Recruiting the Right People: Playing X-Factor**

Whereas advertising efforts produced a ‘doing’ of disability that portrayed blindness as a universal (‘magic’) talent, in other domains, Magic Fingers remained more ambivalent in its message. In their recruitment of therapists, founders abstained from using the category ‘blindness’ and instead focused on securing the quality of their services by selecting people they felt were most capable and guiding therapists to perform the work to the best they could. Jessica explained how the abandonment of the category ‘blindness’ was inspired by an encounter with a blind German woman whose advice stuck in her mind: “Treat the blind as if they were sighted.” Taking this advice to heart, the founders pursued the emancipatory ideal that the therapists should be treated as responsible workers and not as welfare recipients or objects of care. This is in line with the social entrepreneurial premise to avoid the infantilizing tendencies and overly-protective stances that we introduced earlier in this text (Chui et al., 2019).

Treating therapists as if they were not blind, while avoiding discourses of pity, was at odds with Magic Fingers’ provision of in-house residential facilities for blind therapists (allowing them to avoid daily commutes with public transportation) and training programs (involving braille learning material or touch-centered guidance), which were tailored to the specific needs of blind people. The omission of blindness was also in tension with how therapists’ blindness was immediately apparent in Magic Fingers’ advertising. As we noticed, avoiding the verbal address of blindness in the daily management of Magic Fingers did not neutralize disability from functioning as a process of exclusion. Rather, the segregative effect of disability emerged through the backdoor, as it were, as some people were considered less capable than others to deliver the massage work. New distinctions, based on performance standards and expectations, were being drawn between blind individuals and thus *within* the category of blindness (Puar, 2017).

A first practice that established such distinctions within blindness was the recruitment of therapists and the reflections on the eligibility criteria defining the suitability of blind people for massage work. In a conversation with Author 1 about the selection of their therapists, founder Jessica recalled how she and Oliver had discussed who they would be targeting with their job offer:

Jessica: Originally, we wanted to focus on blind people who come from very poor families. Later, however, we noticed that those who come from rich families are not treated any better. Due to cultural issues, all of them are deprived.

Author 1: So how did you select them?

Jessica: Well, you know the TV-show X-factor? It felt exactly the same. We advertised Magic Fingers through TV and radio and had a lot of applicants. Out of 100 applicants, we shortlisted those who had at least some English skills (C-level), sufficient physical fitness and a genuine interest in massage. Physical fitness also meant [having] a good build, strong hands and no other medical conditions or disabilities. (Jessica, Nov 18, 2014)

In this exchange, Jessica first points out that Magic Fingers had initially tried to focus on applicants from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, which was quickly abandoned due to the realization that affluent blind people “are not treated any better”. Suggesting that all blind people are deprived *ipso facto* of being blind, Jessica paints a picture of a cohesive group characterized by a state of oppression that overrides socioeconomic distinctions. In the second step, however, Jessica displaces this universalizing narrative by drawing distinctions within the population of blind people. She lists a number of criteria that applicants must meet to be considered for employment by Magic Fingers: a certain level of education, an authentic interest in massage, English proficiency, physical fitness, and health. The application of these parameters resulted in the selection of staff with a relatively high level of education and caste status. In Nepal, belonging to a high caste does not necessarily equate to economic prosperity; in fact, quite a few of Magic Fingers’ therapists came from Brahmin (the highest caste) families with very little financial means. Despite their relatively low level of wealth, these individuals nevertheless benefited from the cultural, linguistic, and expressive capital that came with their university education. Furthermore, Jessica’s comparison between the recruitment process and the franchised British TV music competition X-Factor is indicative of how the performance and capacity of applicants in interviews did play a crucial role in their selection. “Quality is our religion!”, another of Jessica’s self-set rules for running the enterprise, suggests that market-economic rationalities had a strong influence on how Magic Fingers was run and organized and how access was negotiated. The emphasis on quality resulted in a definition of basic

requirements, which had to be met by the applicants to be considered eligible. Hence, people from low castes, with less formal education, or affected by at least one additional impairment or chronic illness had little chance of being employed by Magic Fingers.

Jessica regretted that they were not able to recruit people exposed to the greatest challenges but pointed out that they needed to secure the viability of their social enterprise. By implication, and opposed to the universalistic view of disability alluded to before (read: every blind person has natural talent and is thus suitable as a therapist), the recruitment process at Magic Fingers drew new distinctions between different types of blind people. Such differentiations *within* the category blindness (Puar, 2017) was based on meritocratic and market-based criteria, a point we will further elaborate on in the next section.

### **Evaluating Therapists' Performance: Producing the Supercrip**

While the previous section dealt with the hiring practices of our case organization, we now focus on three additional sets of evaluative practices that were mobilized the moment the therapists began working at Magic Fingers. The practices in question bring about images of ideal workers and are tied to therapists' (1) communication skills, (2) leadership skills, and (3) will (and need) to constantly improve. First, Magic Fingers' founders and managers expressed hope that blind masseurs would adopt a client-friendly style of communication, which entailed the ability to engage in small talk with clients. However, as Author 1's ethnographic fieldwork revealed, male therapists seemed more at ease in adopting this style in the massage room. While making small talk with strangers was compatible with the masculine Nepali values of competence and independence (Kunreuther, 2014; Mishra, 2013), it was largely at odds with female ideals of modesty and obedience. This is also reflected in interviews with female therapists who reported that they had difficulty communicating with patients during the sessions, which led their male colleagues to judge them as "typical Nepali women" who were simply "too shy". Such reticence and reserve already materialized in group exercises during the therapists' training year and became even more palpable when the female therapists finally met their first clients. "I had to learn to be friendly" was therapist Gunita's apologetic response to Author 1's questions about her experiences during the training phase of her employment. According to Jessica, Gunita and other therapists, "talking to the client" was the most difficult part of what the women had to learn during the program. It is not as if the founders were oblivious to these gender differences. In fact, a quota rule requiring that half of the staff be women was introduced to ensure equal opportunity (Jammaers, 2022), and Magic Fingers also



took active steps to protect female therapists from sexual harassment. However, Magic Fingers' requirement that therapists be able to converse easily with clients indicates that its conception of equality was sometimes insensitive to culturally different conceptions of gender. By emphasizing the ability to engage in professional small talk, Magic Fingers established an ideal that female therapists seemed less able (or willing) to meet.

Second, the founders insisted that therapists must "learn to lead". As Jessica argued, it was essential that both male and female therapists develop a strong sense of responsibility and ownership so that Magic Fingers, once the founders had retired, would be led "by the blind, for the blind". This, too, marked an attempt to treat the blind staff "as if they were sighted" by holding the same expectations the British couple would express toward their able-bodied therapists. In turn, the requirement to act as a leader led to negative evaluations of therapists who failed to guide, educate and command other therapists. Although it was again mainly female therapists who seemed to lack a leadership attitude, there were also some men about whom negative judgment was passed. For example, Jessica described therapist Rajesh as "not assertive enough" because other "therapists sometimes just do not listen to him". By a similar token, his colleague Bibek maintained that Rajesh "still needs to prove his leadership skills". In promoting therapists as leaders, the founders had in mind a model in which the supervisor position (which was just below the position of the clinic manager) would rotate within the team. However, the rotation failed, and Jessica suspected that gender and caste relations might have played a role in this failure, combined with a general sense of awkwardness and reluctance in commanding (or being commanded by) blind peers. Apparently, the therapists assumed a kind of 'sameness' in a (blind) community of equals (Friedner, 2015). With the exception of Ram, the call to leadership failed to inspire therapists to adopt a 'will to lead'. Ram himself, when asked about the situation after Jessica and Oliver had left Nepal in 2013, was visibly upset that other therapists never even considered running the clinic themselves, resulting in one of the clinics eventually being led by a nonblind person – a situation that both Ram and the two British founders perceived as a regrettable breach of their original vision of "led by the blind". They are simply "afraid to lead," Ram said in frustration about the rest of the team in an interview with Author 1.

Third, Magic Fingers drew further distinctions between individual therapists based on their desire and will to self-improve. Let us examine this category at its polar extremes: while Ram had developed into a highly esteemed therapist and responsible leader due to his relentless work ethic and unsatisfiable thirst for knowledge and growth, female therapist Birsha was criticized for not showing even the slightest hint of engagement. Ram's massage skills were seen to far

exceed those of the other therapists, and people stressed how he had diligently worked his way out of poverty by accepting the role of clinic manager in two Magic Fingers branches. It appeared that Ram had wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity provided by Magic Fingers to grow into a ‘supercrip:’ a distinguished individual who had succeeded in erasing the ‘blemish’ of disability (Berger, 2008).

Since Ram exhibited some of the stereotypical characteristics of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, such as proactiveness, perseverance and resilience (Jones and Spicer, 2009), he became the yardstick against which the performance of all other therapists was measured. The use of Ram as a measure of excellence was particularly evident during a conflict between Amita, the consultant, and Birsha, the therapist. During the fieldwork phase, Amita frequently complained about Birsha’s apparent lack of motivation and ability to spot and seize opportunities for personal growth, stating, “You spend all your time outside in the yard, doing nothing; you do not even read the news.” Accusing Birsha of being a slacker who refused to learn and work on her personal development, Amita urged her to adopt a more proactive mindset and “use the computer, get informed, [and] Study a language” while waiting for the clients. One day, Amita became so upset that she made the following statement:

I cannot stand that I work my butt off from 8 am to 8 pm to help my social entrepreneurs [i.e., the enterprises she advises], while others do nothing. Look at Ram and Rajesh [another blind entrepreneur], they were always educating themselves. Everyone loves to talk to Ram because he has so much knowledge. He used to be an ordinary masseur like the others but look where he is now! He wanted more responsibility; he wanted to lead the business himself!

This quote vividly shows how Amita condemned Birsha’s apparent laziness, emphasizing her inferiority based on a comparison with male role models as well as with her own passionate attitude toward work. The anger expressed by Amita was probably the clearest sign of the expectation that therapists must become constantly self-improving and enterprising individuals (Chaudhry, 2019) capable of fostering the conditions of their personal self-actualization.

The distinction between good and bad therapists which emerged from these practices was a relational accomplishment and therefore provisional, open ended, and often ambivalent. Bibek, for example, was praised by Jessica for going beyond the call of duty, as evidenced by the fact that he had learned Shiatsu (Japanese finger massage) and some Japanese words. Such a mix of positive and negative comments was also evident in the judgments on other therapists, showing that becoming an outstanding therapist remained an ongoing and necessarily partial and fragile endeavor. Comparative assessments that highlight the precarious backgrounds of therapists, such as Amita’s statement “see where he (Ram) came from” or her expectation that Birsha

ought to engage in continuous learning, are indicative of how disability was implicitly retained as the ultimate reference point of overcoming hardship. In the discussion that follows, we elaborate on the distinct ‘doings’ of disability that underpin the various practices analyzed above, with the intention of identifying topics that demand further academic scrutiny.

## **Concluding Discussion**

This paper has taken a closer look at a new organizational form – social enterprises – that seeks to challenge prevailing images by leveraging disability not as a liability but as a unique talent and source of value (Maraveias, 2022a, 2022b). Our analysis has brought to the fore how the ‘disability as asset’ approach instigates a shift in the social imaginary of disability (Laine and Kibler, 2022) by drawing attention away from disability as a pathological medical condition that needs to be cured and rehabilitated toward a celebration of disability as a human talent that can be unlocked through employment. We have documented the SMD-inspired emancipatory intent underpinning Magic Fingers’ practices by tracing how founders tried to create a sustainable business approach that frames disabled people as capable individuals. At first glance, and if looked at from an SMD perspective that focuses on the extent to which disabled people are given access to work and opportunities for self-development, the ‘asset’ approach employed by Magic Fingers appears effective. Indeed, the social enterprise provided employment opportunities for blind people and helped overcome the negative stigma associated with blindness by emphasizing the positive characteristics of talent, capacity, and eagerness (rather than deficits). However, by adopting a CDS lens, our case analysis has shown that such an ‘asset’ approach, while increasing inclusion on the symbolic (i.e., establishing a more affirmative image of disability) and formal (i.e., providing job opportunities) level, might end up reproducing disability as something profoundly inferior and ‘other’ (Shildrick, 2012).

We conclude our paper by expounding the key implications of our study, thereby focusing on four critical insights that have evolved from our study. The first issue that strikes us as urgent is that the value of disability, due to the market-based approach to inclusion employed by social enterprises adopting an ‘asset’ approach, is considered *mainly* or even *exclusively* in terms of commercial value creation. There is hence a risk that new disability-oriented business models – by creating a market demand for the hidden talents of disabled people (Chandra, 2018; Chui et al., 2021; Hockerts, 2015; Kaul et al., 2022, Maraveias, 2022a, 2022b) – affirm *ableist* interpretations of what has value (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). This risk weighs heavily when, as was evident in our empirical case, specific characteristics of disabled people become not

only organizational resources to be harnessed for commercial use but also part of public proclamations about what being disabled means or entails. We have carved out problematic associations and ontological assertions, such as the universalizing claim that being blind automatically affords people a special affinity for touch. At closer look, these associations evolve in proximity to the British founders' own imaginations of useful occupations for blind people and clients' appraisal of the 'magic' of blind massage. This link between disability and a talent was initially at odds with therapists' own ideas about being blind, as they appreciated the possibility of paid work but were for the most part also hesitant to work on and touch the bodies of strangers. Overly self-evident claims about disabled people's 'natural talents' that now feature prominently in entrepreneurial business models show that 'doings' of disability often operate on the basis of taken-for-granted perceptions of impaired bodies (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1983). Creating business models around presumed talent thus comes with a risk of reducing disabled individuals *to* a small set of exceptional and commercially exploitable capacities and a related tendency to romanticize and mystify these capacities by consigning empowerment to the context of productive work. What is potentially lost, then, is a more open-ended exploration of the multifacetedness and heterogeneous potentialities and dispositions of disability seen from the vantage point of individuals' own sense of value, capability and desire (Chandra, 2018; Mauksch, 2021).

Second, while our analysis has revealed a tendency of social enterprises to homogenize disability as a source of talent and economic value, we have also pointed out that 'doings' of disability happen in diverse realms of organizational action. Next to the business model of blind massage, the second 'doing of disability' revealed in our analysis took place in the context of the advertising of blind massage through pictures of proud, skilled, and confident massage workers. The respective visuals are at once reductionistic and inspiring as they evoke feelings of both social distance and admiration. This positive imagery is an attempt to empower by showing work-related satisfaction, dignity and pride and again stresses natural talent and 'magic' touch. However, this imagery also renders blind people hypervisible and exposed. Magic Fingers' visual representations commodified the inherent difference of blindness and contributed to the powerful remaking of disability by presenting visibly disabled bodies (and bodies of color, for that matter) to able-bodied (and white) consumers (Liddiard, 2014). Furthermore, these imageries put forward a Western 'compensatory' narrative in which the presence of a disability is counterbalanced and offset by the hidden talent it includes. Images of disability such as those produced by Magic Fingers appeal to consumers because they show people who have apparently liberated themselves from the burden of disability by becoming

professional massage workers. While inspirational stories such as these may have a confidence-building effect (Berger, 2008), they continue to portray disability *per se* as something inherently ‘negative’ that must be overcome to titillate other (nondisabled) consumers of these stories (Grue, 2016; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). Our analysis leaves us with the paradox that disability only gains value and legitimacy if it is overcome through productive work.

Third, our study implies a need to examine how founders and managers of social enterprises might themselves be caught up in practical dilemmas that evolve from the commercial constraints under which they work. Although Jessica and Oliver, the founders of our case organization, were initially keen to establish an enterprise that was open to and inclusive of all blind people in Nepal, the high physical and social demands of the massage job, combined with the pressure to satisfy the demands of quality-conscious tourists, limited the practical realization of these ideals. Our analysis of the recruitment process has allowed us to understand what CDS scholars have described as the tendency of neoliberal agendas to create able-disabled exceptions among disabled groups (the ‘more able’ among a group) while leaving the majority of the disabled group in a position of inferiority and exclusion (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015; Puar, 2017). In Nepal, the ‘more able’ subgroup of blind people was characterized by a higher level of education and the absence of additional impairments or chronic conditions. While every organization, including social enterprises, needs to administer access to their offers, what strikes us as intriguing is the circular effect that arises from Magic Fingers’ market orientation. Founders’ considerations about empowerment were strongly driven by the delivery of a quality service (massages administered by blind therapists) that was itself essential to secure the work offerings (therapists would only keep their job if they were able to sell their services). Thus, employing ‘weaker’ applicants (with comorbidities, chronic illnesses, lower education levels, etc.) literally becomes unimaginable, as it would immediately threaten the overall viability of the social enterprises and thus also the jobs of those who were generally ‘fit for the task’. This shows the dilemmatic challenge of social entrepreneurs to simultaneously cater to the needs of vulnerable groups while (and through) employing these groups in market-oriented enterprises. While Magic Fingers officially (especially in its advertising and promotional activities) touted the skill and talent universally available to all blind people, their pragmatic pursuit of offering employment opportunities to blind people was available only to a rather small group among them.

A fourth perennial topic from our analysis concerns the seeming disappearance of disability through the mantra of ‘treating the blind as if they were sighted’. However, rather than disappearing, the ‘disability as asset’ approach gave rise to a new distinction between good and

bad workers. Our last empirical section on the emergence of the ‘supercrip’ figure has shown how evaluative judgments expressed by founders and lead therapists seemed antithetical to the commodification of blindness discussed in the first two empirical sections. Magic Fingers’ business model and advertisements toyed with images of a holistic state of blindness (as talent), whereas the day-to-day management abandoned blindness from the plane of attention. On the one hand, we find value in Magic Fingers founders’ decision to reject the signifier ‘blindness’ in daily interactions, as it helps avoid fetishizing blindness and corresponds to activists’ demands to be treated as people who happen to be disabled rather than people fully defined by their disabilities. The ideal to treat the employees in an unbiased and neutral manner opens up new opportunities for challenging a view on disability as an all-comprising feature of identity and ‘being’. On the other hand, our findings have shown that a terminological limitation does not in itself abandon social exclusion, as *new* signifiers take the place of disability in rendering people ‘other’ or of ‘lesser value’. Negative judgments were passed toward therapists who were apparently less entrepreneurial, less assertive and less able or willing to engage in small talk with their clients. Magic Fingers put in place an ideal of a fully committed, upward-striving, self-actualizing worker – embodied by the ‘supercrip’ Ram. The stylization of Ram as a supercrip illustrates how social enterprises potentially create a sphere of symbolic othering of those who are not able to meet normative ideals. In these ways, entrepreneurial inclusion entails a risk of perpetuating the structural inequality of workers who are already ill-equipped to fulfil performance ideals due to intersecting forms of disadvantage, such as caste, level of education, and gender. Such disadvantages became particularly evident from the way Magic Fingers unwittingly produced ‘shy’ Nepali women as a structural opposite to the supercrip figure. This implies a greater focus by social enterprises on the multiple dimensions of empowerment and disadvantage within a society and illustrates how new business models can marginalize disabled groups by turning a blind eye to the dynamic and complex ways in which disability intersects with other axes of power and privilege.

By implication of the above, our analysis encourages debate on social entrepreneurial disability inclusion approaches as engendering a discursive context in which it is not only possible, but strictly unavoidable, to judge people’s work performance based on meritocratic norms (Martinez Dy et al., 2018). Our findings animate relevant questions about how the evaluative practices of social enterprises enact disability as the ‘other’ to be left behind. Ram’s evolution at Magic Fingers was praised because he had achieved the farthest possible distance from ‘where he came from’, thus transcending his origin typified by exclusion, abject poverty and lack of opportunity. This reaffirms an understanding of disability as a state of misery that calls

for ‘overcoming’ as an overarching ideal. On the flipside, such an ideal trajectory from misery to empowerment largely ignores how disabled people themselves perceive their worlds (for instance, Birsha, who had divergent expectations of good work as routine rather than improvement). We sense a danger here that work opportunities for disabled people through social enterprises will raise performance expectations toward target subjects of entrepreneurial inclusion. In stark contrast to sheltered employment, where work is often described as dull, repetitive, low-skill, and nonchallenging, entrepreneurial jobs tend to bereave disabled people of the possibility to ‘just work’ and to be ‘normal workers’. A central concern for future research should thus be to further analyze the intensification of meritocratic work requirements and to explore whether less performance-driven forms of managing people with disabilities are available.

To conclude, our research expands nascent critical research on social entrepreneurial disability inclusion (Chandra, 2018; Maravelias, 2022a, 2022b) by adding nuance and critical grounding to downright positive renditions of the subject matter. It is worth reiterating that our paper deliberately focused on the different ‘doings’ of disability produced by social enterprises. Although this choice has yielded granular insights into the different ways in which social enterprises produce disability as a performative effect (Williams and Mavin, 2012), we see value in future research that looks at how disabled people themselves variously avoid, resist or appropriate the discourses of disability to which they are subjected (Jammaers, 2022; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). It is essential to include disabled people’s own views on their capacities, potential and ideals of work on the one hand and their reflections on the inner workings of social entrepreneurial interventions on the other (Chandra, 2018; Mauksch, 2021). Such embedded views bear potential, we think, for appreciating the complex realities that social enterprises must navigate to gain a fuller picture of the constituent dilemmas and constraints with which disability-concerned social enterprises are confronted.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Two recent articles by Maravelias (2022a, 2022b) focus on how Samhall has transformed itself into a social enterprise. So instead of running a sheltered employment program, Samhall now provides an individual placement program to integrate people with various disabilities into the labor market.