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Access Through Peer Support: Implications of an Innovative Counselling Approach in German Jobcentres

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Abstract

This research approaches the theoretical discourse on accessibility from an empirical perspective using a qualitative study in a specific field of social services. In Germany, jobcentres are institutions responsible for promoting employment, providing benefits, and offering counselling to unemployed people. Due to their hierarchical structures, standardised processes, and orientation towards the paradigms of an activating labour market policy, jobcentres can be described as organisations that are difficult to access for clients, especially for people with mental disorders. Based on a qualitative analysis, this article examines an innovative model project that implements a peer support approach in this context. Peer support volunteers have experienced mental disorders themselves and support users on this basis. The analysis comprises 38 individual interviews and seven group discussions with peer support volunteers and users, addressing the research question of how the introduction of peer support has changed the perception of accessibility within the jobcentre institution. The empirical results show that changes are taking place both at a structural level and concerning the relationships and organisation of support. However, certain barriers within the organisation remain and restrict accessibility. With reference to Clarke's access theory, the majority of the identified changes can be understood as conservative active-outreach strategies aligned with the existing system and its normative orientations. Additionally, the involvement of the previously little-heard and potentially stigmatised perspective of people who have experienced mental disorders themselves reveals a transformative potential at certain points.

Keywords

accessibility; employment promotion; mental health; participation; peer support; unemployment

1. Introduction

This study examines German jobcentres as a specific institutional context in terms of accessibility, with regard to clients with mental disorders. As will be shown below, jobcentres can be considered as institutions where this group of people experiences access barriers on different levels. Following a qualitative research approach, this article examines the implementation of peer support for people with mental disorders within the jobcentre context. The analysis addresses the research question of how the introduction of peer support has changed the perception of accessibility within the jobcentre institution. The current section begins with an introduction to the institutional context of jobcentres and their accessibility as a theoretical framework.

Jobcentres in Germany are institutions of the German Public Employment Service responsible for clients who are affected by long-term unemployment (and have been so for more than one year) or who are not yet entitled to benefits of the unemployment insurance system (Brussig & Knuth, 2011). The jobcentres' logic combines elements of employment promotion and basic social security, essentially involving three tasks: The first is the assessment of entitlement to and payment of basic social security benefits, the second is the provision of job placement services, and the third is the provision of social work services (e.g., counselling, referral to other services; Kolbe, 2012; Kupka & Osiander, 2016).

Since the early 2000s, activation paradigms have increasingly played a role in the jobcentres' programmatic orientation. Activation strategies aim to emphasise the activity and personal contribution of those entitled to benefits and to expect active cooperation in return for the support services provided, which can be enforced with sanctions if this is not the case (Caswell et al., 2016). Accordingly, empirical studies show that counselling in jobcentres is characterised by a coercive, involuntary context, dominated by a focus on labour market placement, and that little consideration is given to clients' individual life situations (Bartelheimer, 2007). The latter often feel that they have little room for manoeuvre or their own decisions and rarely find support conditions within the organisational counselling structures that fit their needs (Hielscher & Ochs, 2009).

This is particularly the case for clients with mental disorders. This group of people represents a large proportion of benefit recipients in the jobcentres (Schubert et al., 2013) and is often affected by persistent long-term unemployment and its associated impairments in other areas of life (Stauder, 2019). Studies show that people with mental disorders can seldom be reached by the services and advice offered by jobcentres (Göckler & Rübner, 2019; Schubert et al., 2013).

Here the relevance of an accessibility perspective already shines through. For a scientific analysis, a theoretical contextualisation and the levels of meaning behind it is first necessary. Access and accessibility as theoretical constructs are negotiated in various discourses and disciplines and represent a central perspective with regard to the analytical approaches of social services. Nevertheless, due to the multitude of discourses that touch on them, they are not clearly defined in terms of conceptual and theoretical understanding. At this point, we can agree with Fargion et al. (2019, p. 628), who describe the literature on this topic as "dispersed [and] often linked to other issues."

The metaphorical connotation of the term accessibility can provide an initial approximation. Accessibility refers to an understanding of spatial conditions, which suggests an "inside" and an "outside." The connection

between the two, in the sense of accessing the "inside," marks a transition that is linked to certain conditions. Therefore, differences in access can be seen as a distinguishing feature between different groups of people and are associated with barriers and obstacles on a structural level that can control, restrict, and prevent access (Cortis, 2012).

When analysing social services from the perspective of accessibility, various practice-oriented emphases can be identified that help give meaning. For example, specific access conditions and access barriers can be considered, and services can be analysed in terms of the extent to which they enable or prevent access for their recipients (Arnold & Höllmüller, 2017; Mayrhofer, 2012). These can refer to infrastructural and architectural barriers (Bichard et al., 2018), limited resources that restrict access (Olsson et al., 2021), or barriers in knowledge, attitudes and awareness (Schwarz et al., 2022). Studies focusing on access barriers analyse how explicit and implicit barriers impede access and how these can be reduced or removed within organisational contexts. Furthermore, the question of reaching certain target groups and the associated constructs of so-called "hard-to-reach" populations (Cortis, 2012) or outreach work approaches (Grymonprez et al., 2017) are frequently discussed in the context of accessibility. Finally, the scientific discourse touches on normative issues relating to the realisation of an inclusive society in the sense of "access for all" (Bittenbinder et al., 2021).

While the above-mentioned aspects are more loosely related to the concrete practices of social services, John Clarke has developed a systematic theoretical perspective on accessibility. He distinguishes between liberal-passive, conservative active-outreach, and transformative forms of access policy (Clarke, 2004). Even though he draws on a classification of welfare systems that is today considered outdated in certain places (Bambra, 2007), his differentiation of forms of access still offers a valuable approach to this topic today, as it enables a systematic analysis of different strategies. Liberal-passive approaches to access place the responsibility for accessibility with citizens themselves by assuming that access is linked to an active effort. In consequence, institutions are assumed to be open to everyone. If citizens do not actively "knock on the door" (Clarke, 2004), the responsibility for a lack of access is attributed to them. In response to criticism regarding the hidden mechanisms of closure (e.g., social inequality, marginalisation, institutionalised patterns of discrimination), Clarke's second form comprises the active aim of removing barriers to access and reaching people who are assumed to have a specific need. While this approach can still be considered conservative, in the sense that it does not affect the normative "centre" to which participation is oriented, his third form (labelled as transformative) goes beyond this orientation towards assimilation and adaptation (Fargion et al., 2019). Clarke (2004) ascribes a transformative potential to access, suggesting that it can shift the "centre" by including the perspectives of marginalised, excluded, and subordinated groups of people. In the discussion section, reference is made back to Clarke's theory in more detail, to theoretically contextualise the empirical results.

The article is structured as follows: Building on the theoretical framework of accessibility, Section 2 comprises an analysis of the extent to which jobcentres in Germany can be associated with access barriers for people with mental disorders. Then, peer support is introduced on a conceptual level, followed by an insight into the specific approach that was researched. After the methods section, the empirical results are presented, structured by the categories developed in the course of the qualitative analysis. The discussion in Section 6 serves to contextualise the findings on a theoretical level. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings, discusses the study's limitations, and suggests directions for further research.

2. Accessibility and Jobcentres

Having presented the main characteristics of the institutional context of the jobcentre on the one hand and the theoretical considerations on accessibility on the other, concrete conclusions can now be drawn about access barriers in jobcentres for people with mental disorders. However, an accessibility perspective first requires a distinction with regard to the different tasks of jobcentres. If we consider the function of these institutions under benefit law (payment of basic social security benefits), questions concerning accessibility focus on entitlement to benefits and on groups of people that are not reached by the system despite their entitlement. This line of discourse is discussed in the literature and has become particularly relevant with regard to facilitated access conditions introduced in the course of the coronavirus pandemic (Osiander & Ramos Lobato, 2022; Schäfer, 2022). Nevertheless, it is not the focus of this article because the examined intervention refers to people who already receive benefits and have thus found access to this part of the system. Instead, this article's focus is on the domain of job placement and (social work) counselling. This raises the question: To what extent are existing services able—or unable—to reach people with mental disorders, and how are these services perceived by the individuals themselves?

From the literature three central aspects can be identified. First, job placements are a key target indicator for the jobcentre as an institution. As discussed, statistics show that people with mental disorders benefit little from fluctuations in the labour market and are often affected by long-term unemployment and its associated problems over long periods (Wabnitz et al., 2019). Since counselling and support services in jobcentres are essentially geared towards employment, people with mental disorders are not adequately reached in the sense of the organisation's programmatic orientation.

Second, the literature refers to the phenomenon of "creaming and parking" processes (Göckler, 2015). These are strategies used by jobcentre employees to deal with the high number of cases they have to process. Certain groups of people, perceived as particularly distant from the labour market, receive minimal or no support ("parking"), while the majority of available resources are directed toward those who are perceived to have strong employment prospects ("creaming"; van Berkel, 2016). It can be assumed that benefit recipients with health issues and complex problems are particularly affected by "parking" phenomena, and, therefore, experience limited access to support services.

Third, interaction situations and perceptions of clients can be taken into account. Empirical studies show that clients experience pressure, fear, and shame within the jobcentre context and that employees often do not take their personal concerns seriously (Englert et al., 2012). The possibility of sanctions also frames the asymmetrical interaction with employees, which leads to clients withdrawing in this context and shying away from contact with the institution (Ames, 2007). This aspect is reinforced by spatial and infrastructural settings in German jobcentres, as detailed in Bettina Grimmer's ethnographic study (e.g., controlled access structures, constantly closed doors within the authority, and employees who exploit differences in knowledge in their dealings with clients). From her analysis, Grimmer (2018) deduces that jobcentres are essentially designed to "create obedience."

3. Peer Support Within Jobcentres

The presented findings from the literature with regard to the inadequacy of counselling conditions in German jobcentres for clients with mental disorders form the starting point for a pilot project in four jobcentres in the German *Land* North Rhine-Westphalia (2019–2025), funded by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The project explores a peer support approach within the jobcentre context. The combination of peer support and the jobcentre is an innovation, both in terms of practical experiences and implementation, and regarding empirical research.

Peer support is the umbrella term for approaches and settings in which people who have had similar experiences to those of the service's users provide support (Mead et al., 2001; Repper & Carter, 2011; Solomon, 2004). Key elements are sharing experience, facilitating relationships built on trust, conveying hope and confidence, and transforming organisational structures by introducing the perspective of those affected (Cabassa et al., 2017; Vandewalle et al., 2016). In the case of this study, peer support volunteers who have experienced mental disorders themselves support users in their everyday life voluntarily. In each case, this results in a three-way constellation between a peer support volunteer, a user, and a jobcentre employee over one year. The approximately 500 users (throughout the whole project period) belonged to the group of people with diagnosed mental disorders and decided voluntarily if they wanted to participate or not. In terms of concept, the approach is quite open: It is not the primary aim to place users in the labour market, but to expand their opportunities for social participation in a subject-oriented manner. On the conceptual level, peer support volunteers act independently from the jobcentre, as they are not members of the organisation, but affiliated with a non-profit organisation. How the support is organised in individual cases is the subject of negotiation between the three parties involved. For example, peer support volunteers assist in everyday life, accompany users to appointments, or share certain activities in the community. The concept envisages jobcentre employees as responsible for the provision of necessary resources, the development of professional networks, and dealing with benefit-related matters (Lammers et al., 2022).

With reference back to the theoretical perspective of accessibility, it can be stated that, on the one hand, we have a high-threshold institutional setting, which is associated with access barriers for people with mental disorders. On the other hand, peer support is an intervention that is essentially based on informal forms of support and similar experiences between the people involved. This raises the question of the extent to which this constellation changes the perception of the organisational context and its accessibility. The study addresses a research gap in terms of empirical insights into an approach of peer support within the context of employment promotion as an innovation. It complements the existing body of research on peer support from a theoretical perspective of accessibility. While previous studies have focused on the benefits of peer support concerning different forms of "hard-to-reach" populations (Sokol & Fisher, 2016) or on improving the accessibility of health care services (van Amelsvoort & Leijdesdorff, 2022) or school curricula (Carter et al., 2005) through peer involvement, the present study is characterised by the fact that it focuses on a specific organisational context which, as described above, is associated with access barriers for people with mental disorders. Empirical results regarding the perception of accessibility in relation to peer support can help to improve services on an organisational level, in the sense of including perspectives of users and people who are directly affected.

4. Methods

To empirically approach the question of accessibility in relation to peer support in jobcentres, a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory methodology (GTM) is employed. This approach explores the perceptions and subjective patterns of interpretation of individuals who are directly affected by the peer support approach under examination (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The study is based on data from seven interviews with users and 31 interviews and seven group discussions with peer support volunteers, which were collected in the course of an iterative-circular research process (Bryant, 2017). The analysis represents an excerpt from a larger-scale GTM study on peer relationships within this empirical context (Lammers, 2025). Because accessibility as one thematic focus emerged in this process, a focused content analysis was conducted with the help of the three forms of coding presented by Corbin and Strauss (2008). As such, accessibility served as the main theoretical framework, and the categories (presented in the results section) were developed inductively from the data in order to gain empirical insights into users' and peer support volunteers' perceptions and interpretations.

The guidelines for the interviews with the users mainly consisted of an open narrative prompt ("Tell me about your peer support process from the very beginning until today/until it ended"), followed by additional questions on certain thematic aspects, in line with the principles of problem-centred interviewing (Reiter & Witzel, 2022). The interviewed peer support volunteers were asked to choose one process that they had accompanied and to talk about it in detail, also followed by questions on specific topics (e.g., how users and peer support volunteers got to know each other, how targets were negotiated, how they perceived the jobcentre and cooperation with employees). These themes also formed the discussion topics in the group discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study. Interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymised, and lasted between 20 and 101 minutes. In the results section, quotations are marked with "PSV" for interviews with peer support volunteers, "U" for users' quotations, and "GD" for group discussions among peer support volunteers. Within each category, interviews and group discussions are numbered consecutively.

5. Exploring Accessibility: Empirical Insights

In the data, aspects of accessibility with regard to the jobcentre as an institution and the support services located there emerge at various points. Firstly, the limited accessibility in the jobcentre context—derived from the theoretical section—can be traced on an empirical level. With regard to the regular counselling setting in jobcentres, the interviewees describe a lack of communicative accessibility, such as no direct "telephone extension number" (U_07, 21), sometimes not even a personal contact person, and that communication is only possible at a very high threshold ("Otherwise I can only talk to someone via a hotline" [GD_06, 526]). Furthermore, they experience appointments and locations as set by the organisation, and a failure to attend can lead to sanctions (reduction in basic income benefits). At the same time, the caseload per employee is perceived as high, so hardly any time resources are available for the individual. That leads to clients' experiences of being treated as a "number" (U_07, 57; PSV_15, 338), in the sense of standardised procedures. Additionally, interviewees perceive regular counselling at the jobcentre as being dominated by the goal of job placement and activation paradigms. They illustrate the pressure they experience with metaphorical expressions such as "this system, which then presses you into such tracks" (U_06, 159), "having someone standing behind you with a whip" (PSV_28, 563), or "this scourging, this pressure from the authority" (GD_03, 686).

As will be shown below, the implementation of peer support leads to changes in users' perceptions regarding the organisation and its accessibility. In the course of the inductive analysis using the coding processes from GTM, structural and formal aspects of support were identified as the first main category. These include communicative accessibility, location, intensity of contact, and time resources. Support and relationship-related aspects play an important role as the second main category. These involve changed requirements for the active cooperation of users, greater consideration of their individual life situations, and the importance of trusting relationships in counselling. To conclude the results section, the remaining barriers to peer support in the jobcentre, as perceived by users and peer support volunteers, will be examined as the third main category. All transcripts have been translated freely to produce coherent English texts. The original German transcripts are available on request.

5.1. Structural and Formal Aspects

The structural aspects of accessibility considered here relate less to the substantive design of support and the attitude, relationship-building between peer support volunteers and users, or understanding of professionalism of those providing support than to the formal structure of the approach and the defined framework conditions that users find within it.

A first central point here is *communicative accessibility*. In contrast to the jobcentres' regular counselling setting, users of the peer support service perceive flexible contact options, both with the peer support volunteers and the jobcentre employees (e.g., via mobile phone). Users feel that they are explicitly encouraged to get in touch if they have problems, are in crisis, or need support. One user paraphrases what her supporters told her in this regard:

> Get in touch if there's anything wrong. No matter what, no matter with what. Whether it has to do with the jobcentre or not. (U_07, 51)

This certainty of having a "contact person in the background" seems to make a difference for users and conveys a feeling of security and involvement. Additionally, low-threshold forms of messaging apps, emails, and video conferencing reinforce communicative accessibility. Particularly, users who have difficulties with face-to-face or telephone conversations find written forms of communication relieving, as one user describes:

> Um, I was asked by my [jobcentre employee] how I would like to be contacted. I was having extreme problems on the phone at that time and I said: "Er, it would be nice to have it in writing. Erm, for such and such a reason." And that wasn't a problem at all….I found that extraordinary, damn it. (U_07, 21–25)

Second, the *location* in which the support takes place plays a role. In the context of peer support, there is a move away from the official premises of the jobcentre, which are often associated with anxiety and pressure. In consequence, peer support volunteers emphasise the importance of a "local separation" (GD_06, 829) to make a clear distinction between the authority and the peer support and to reduce mistrust on the part of users:

> It [peer support] should definitely take place outside the jobcentre, on neutral ground, so to say, which I also think is good to take away the atmosphere of a jobcentre. (PSV_10, 165–167)

In addition, the peer support volunteers' aim is to choose meeting locations that are as close as possible to the users' everyday environments—for example, outdoors, in public, or in places that users perceive as safe. One peer support volunteer reports from his own experience:

> It's often like that, I only have to think about myself, and then I know what they [the users] want. Because they're in a similar situation to the one I was in back then. And once they can choose a room where they feel a bit safer or secure, that makes a big difference. (PSV_26, 125–128)

In certain cases, this also includes the users' or their own private home. Peer support volunteers have an ambivalent attitude towards meetings at the users' or their own homes, as it affects the balance between closeness and distance within their relationship. As a result, some peer support volunteers refuse to meet in their own home or that of their users in order to achieve a clear boundary between their private life and peer support:

> None of the people I will be looking after will come to me. This is my realm and not theirs. (PSV_22, 485–487)

Others use the opportunity to meet users in their own homes, if the latter express a preference to do so and perceive it as safe.

The *intensity of contact* and available *time resources* represent a third structural feature of support services. Different from the regular counselling setting, users of peer support experience that they can influence the intensity of contact by arranging appointments according to their individual needs, by having flexible contact options with peer support volunteers, and by having cancellations accepted and not sanctioned. The following quotation of a peer support volunteer emphasises the importance of voluntariness:

> When the [user] says: "Well, let's meet in four weeks," I say: "That's ok, get in touch when you need it." I did get in touch in between, but I didn't put any pressure on him, because I always think that if they only come because they have to, then it often gets out of hand. (GD_05, 250–253)

In addition, there are significantly more time resources available compared to the jobcentre's regular counselling setting, which leads to longer and less rushed encounters ("the [peer support volunteer] actually has time for you" [U_05, 828]) and the opportunity to accompany users to appointments. In addition, peer support volunteers emphasise the importance of reducing the time pressure put on processes and of accepting individual paces in change processes:

> And if on top of that—which is often the case with addiction—there is a mental disorder such as depression, etc., then it becomes even more difficult. At that point, I can't put any successes into a time frame. (GD_02, 728–733)

5.2. Support- and Relationship-Related Aspects

In addition to the structural and formal aspects described above, issues relating more to the relationship between users and supporters can be identified as the second main category. Firstly, the *reduction of*

demanding elements of employment promotion and changed requirements for user activation and cooperation can be mentioned. Even though the users of peer support continue to be clients of the jobcentre and receive basic income benefits to cover their costs of living, certain demanding elements of employment promotion are alleviated in this approach, and users experience less pressure, no sanctions, and increased agency, as one user describes:

> I found that, er, very helpful and, yes, it contributed a lot to the fact that I felt really good in between [during the peer support], er, because there wasn't that pressure, right? Nor this: "Oh God, what's in the letterbox now?" Nor: "Uh, they're calling. What do they want from me?" Rather, it was more like, yes, um, a bit anxiety-free. (U_07, 3)

This also means that users perceive their mental disorder to be accepted and taken seriously, and change processes to be normalised as non-linear and associated with relapses, as mentioned in the following sequence from an interview with a user:

> And, yes, it was precisely this, um, understanding () of the disorder that was crucial, um, because a lot of things just don't work for us. () And not having to explain it again and again or something, yes. (U_07, 3–5)

At this point, the importance of the peer support volunteers' perspective as people who have experienced mental disorders themselves becomes clear. They can understand aspects that are otherwise perceived as paradoxical and do not fit within the jobcentres' activation paradigm. Specific examples from the data are situations in which users have difficulties keeping appointments, making phone calls, or are confronted with addiction relapses. While users perceive a lack of understanding in the regular jobcentre context, peer support volunteers can comprehend these phenomena from their own experience and pass these insights on to the employees. This results in strategies like reducing pressure on users, choosing agreeable and safe locations for meetings, conducting exonerating conversations, or considering goals that are not directly focused on paid work. Accordingly, the peer perspective has an impact both in individual contact with users and at an organisational level.

This aspect leads to the second point. In the context of peer support, users experience that their *individual life situation is taken into account* and that counselling is also geared towards areas of life that are not directly related to employment.

> It [the regular counselling in jobcentres] is about a job, it's also called a jobcentre, but here [in peer support] it's perhaps also about other things. (PSV_20, 191–195)

Accordingly, success is not (only) measured by the jobcentre's usual success indicators (placements in the labour market or in programmes), but is oriented towards what the users subjectively experience as relevant. At this point, the peer support volunteers take on an important function as "translators" (PSV_13, 213), "interpreters" (U_07, 19), or "go-betweens" (PSV_01, 123). Based on their own experience with mental disorders and unemployment, they represent and advocate for the users' interests and perspectives. Exemplary situations from the data include raising awareness for a user who struggles with leaving their bed due to depression, supporting a user in a conflict with jobcentre employees responsible for payment of

social benefits, or criticising employees' strategies that exert time pressure on users. One peer support volunteer describes how he was able to make the employees "understand that I can't fit this into a time frame, any goals" (GD_02, 732–733), but that support processes in the context of mental disorders require an individual amount of time and can be associated with relapses. In doing so, peer support volunteers enable a better understanding among employees and aim to reduce stigmatising practices and attitudes. A peer support volunteer states:

> And that () people who go to the jobcentre () are not seen as losers, but that you still reach out to them and that you show them opportunities without having to do a job creation programme, the 150th, but to really change something in their lives. (PSV_13, 406–410)

This also includes peer support volunteers focusing on alternative lifestyles beyond gainful employment, for example, fulfilling forms of everyday life in receipt of social benefits or pensions—outside the labour market. One peer support volunteer reports on his own experiences in this regard:

> And I felt that receiving a pension was a relief at the time, and since then, I've also been doing a lot better. (PSV_06, 238–240)

In this sense, the peer support volunteers establish a counter-perspective to the jobcentres' activation paradigm. With regard to the target group reached by the peer support approach, it became evident that many users of peer support previously did not receive or accept any of the jobcentres' support offers because the users were considered too far away from the labour market by the jobcentre employees ("parking processes"). By focusing on individual life situations and the users' own goals, some of these people can regain access to support services through the peer support approach. In this context, one user depicts his motivation to participate by stating:

> Yes, because he [the peer support volunteer] just said: "There's no such thing here [in peer support], that you somehow have to write a minimum number of applications." He simply said: "You need a future." That was the point where I thought, yes, I'm in. (U_04, 161–164)

Third, the *relationship level* between the persons involved plays an important role in the perception of the support. While users experience counselling relationships in the regular jobcentre context as asymmetrical, fraught with pressure and with an "atmosphere of fear" (U_07, 33), the relationships with the peer support volunteers are essentially characterised by a special bond of trust based on shared experiences ("This quick build-up of trust…because we speak the same language" [GD_05, 753–754]). By talking about their own life stories ("Talking about myself" [PSV_26, 113]), peer support volunteers create a sense of belonging with the users and demonstrate that they can relate to them through their own lived experiences. At the same time, peer support volunteers describe how they demonstrate that they see themselves as independent of the jobcentre as an institution and thus offer their users discretion, confidentiality, and a safe space:

> And then to tell the [users]: "What we speak about stays between us. And the [jobcentre employee] will never find out unless you want them to." (PSV_26, 176–179)

In addition to the focus on the dyad between peer support volunteer and user expressed in the quote above, other extracts from the data reveal a broader perspective on the reduction of mistrust towards the entire

jobcentre organisation through the trusting relationship with the peer support volunteers. For example, one peer support volunteer illustrates his understanding of his own role in relation to the organisation as follows:

> For many clients, the door is closed at the jobcentres. They no longer want to be there. And then we [the peer support volunteers] are, in inverted commas, "the neutral person" who stands in between and then perhaps opens one or two doors. (PSV_21, 258–263)

Here, the metaphorical image of open and closed doors explicitly emphasises the reference to theoretical discourses on accessibility.

As an interim conclusion, it can be stated that, from the perspective of both users and peer support volunteers, peer support alters the perception of support in the context of jobcentres—both structurally and relationally. Essentially, positive, low-threshold developments brought about by peer support become evident. Nevertheless, the data clearly show that certain barriers remain or arise as a result of peer support in this context. These are analysed below.

5.3. Remaining Barriers

First, a perspective on remaining barriers includes the aspect already discussed that users continue to receive benefits from the jobcentre and are therefore still affected by benefit regulations and logics. The peer support volunteers feel that they only have limited room for manoeuvre in this area and are sometimes confronted with situations that cause stress and pressure for the users, but which they cannot change. This also includes the experience of peer support volunteers that their criticism, which they express from the perspective of those affected, is sometimes not heard or taken seriously. For example, one peer support volunteer reports on the reaction to his criticism of bureaucratic jobcentre practices that caused stress for his user:

> Because I tried to make myself heard. I was more or less listened to. But nothing happened. (PSV_25, 906–908)

This shows that even though peer support volunteers have the impression that they provide effective "tutoring" (PSV_07, 199) of the employees and thus influence the attitudes and behaviour of employees ("the attitude has changed quite a lot compared to the beginning" [GD_02, 734–736]), their influence and agency has its limits in the larger context of the organisation.

This goes hand in hand with the second point: Peer support volunteers perceive their role and position in the organisation to be insufficiently recognised and legitimised in various aspects, if at all. As a result, they have to justify themselves to other stakeholders and are not addressed and taken seriously as protagonists within the organisation. This also reduces their effectiveness and influence in the jobcentre context. For example, one peer support volunteer reports situations with other authorities in which he was initially not taken seriously and had to explain that peer support volunteers "are not weirdos who have made something up out of thin air" (PSV_15, 369–370). The quote illustrates that there is a perceived connection between organisational legitimacy and ascribed competence, which in turn makes it even more difficult for peer support volunteers and their perspectives to be taken seriously.

The third point refers to the limited duration of peer support. After the defined period of 12 months, the question of the users' transition back into the usual counselling structures of the jobcentre arises. In this regard, both users and peer support volunteers describe the danger that previous negative experiences with this context could be reproduced and that users would withdraw from contact again because the positive changes and access provided by the peer support are no longer available to them. For example, shortly before the end of her participation in peer support, one user describes her fears regarding the upcoming transition:

> How much pressure will there be again [in the regular jobcentre context] to be productive and to have to function? (U_07, 33)

Fourth, the data suggest that institutional objectives related to labour market placement, and in the sense of a quantitative logic ("quantity, i.e., mass, is demanded from above" [PSV_28, 546]), also have an impact on peer support in certain cases. The individual approach to users' life situations seems to reach its limits when the peer support volunteers perceive that they have to justify their support and its effectiveness towards the organisation and its employees. It becomes evident that peer support volunteers cannot act completely independently from the jobcentre, although they are officially not bound to organisational instructions. The empirical data indicate that they are embedded within this context, and as a result, dominant paradigms—such as activation policies—exert influence on them at certain points.

The peer support volunteers deal with these requirements and areas of tension in very different ways. Firstly, there are practices of demarcation and an emphasis on the dyad between peer support volunteers and users. In this regard, the jobcentre and its employees are kept out of the support processes, and the main focus is on the peer support dyad. Secondly, the efforts of peer support volunteers to bring about change within the organisation—some of which have already been described—can be mentioned, for example by voicing criticism, approaching managers, or communicating their own perspective to employees. As shown above, these are not necessarily successful due to the peer support volunteers' limited organisational legitimacy and the absence of structurally anchored participation opportunities. A third variant in the data is that peer support volunteers adopt organisational perspectives and orient their actions to the perceived requirements of the jobcentre—for example, by trying to place users in jobs, even if they do not state this as a goal themselves. In this case, there is a clear risk that peer support volunteers may abandon their unique, experience-based perspective as individuals with lived experiences in favour of adopting organisational logics.

6. Discussion

With reference back to Clarke's (2004) theory, his three access strategies can be traced in the empirically examined peer support approach.

A passive-liberal approach to access can be found in the regular counselling context of jobcentres and in the activation paradigm that has characterised German labour market policy since the reforms of the early 2000s (Kupka & Osiander, 2016). Above all, this is expressed in the fact that responsibility for life risks such as unemployment and poverty is passed on to individuals and regarded as self-inflicted by the affected people. Support and counselling services are linked to people's active cooperation and reinforced with the threat of sanctions (Clarke's image: institutions as "a door on which to knock"; Clarke, 2004, p. 220). Empirical studies have shown that this strategy does not counteract the entrenchment of unemployment and the associated

restrictions on participation, but that a growing number of people (especially those with mental disorders) are not being reached by support services and do not find suitable programmes (Göckler, 2015). On the one hand, this has an impact on an individual level in the form of limited opportunities for social participation and strains in people's life situations. At the same time, the fact that certain groups of people are not employed, which further entrenches complex problems, is having a far-reaching impact on society. This recognition forms the starting point for the development of alternative counselling and support approaches within the jobcentre context (Osiander & Ramos Lobato, 2022). One of these is the examined form of peer support for people with mental disorders.

Looking at the empirical results described here, with regard to access strategies, most of the changes identified can be categorised as rather conservative, active-outreach strategies in the sense of Clarke's theory. This means that they aim to remove barriers and promote access for certain groups of people within the existing system. Better accessibility through personal contacts, direct communication options, more time resources, trusting relationships, and meetings in locations outside the authority can be categorised as such. Here connections can be made to the construction of certain groups as "hard to reach" (Cortis, 2012). Even if these can legitimately be criticised due to individualised attributions (Fargion et al., 2019), the results of this study can be related to other research that has examined the impact of peer support approaches in working with groups commonly labelled as "hard to reach." In their quantitative systematic review, Sokol and Fisher (2016) analyse 47 studies that deal with peer support approaches and groups of people who are considered to be difficult to reach within the healthcare system. Their review found that 93.6% of the approaches showed significant positive effects on reaching their target groups (compared to regular healthcare services). The authors argue that peers are better able to build trust, provide flexible support, and encourage users to contribute their perspectives more actively (Sokol & Fisher, 2016). The results of the present qualitative study point in a similar direction: The involvement of peer support volunteers enables people to access support services in the context of jobcentres who were not previously reached because of, e.g., "parking processes" or mistrust and negative experiences within the regular counselling setting. While the identified active outreach strategies aim to break down barriers and promote participation, they can still be widely understood as remaining within the organisation's existing normative orientation. They are ultimately still geared towards activation strategies for employment promotion, which is reproduced by employees and, in some cases, also by peer support volunteers. From this perspective, peer support represents an opportunity to gain access to people with mental disorders as a group to then enforce and promote normative ideas of the established "centre" on this basis (Clarke, 2004).

The transformative potential of peer support becomes evident in some instances. By involving peer support volunteers who have been affected by mental disorders themselves, a previously unheard perspective is potentially incorporated and acknowledged, which enables changes in the "centre" described by Clarke. Illness-related experiences and ideas of what effective support and ultimately a "good" life look like are exemplified in the empirical data (e.g., less pressure, lifestyles beyond paid work). It becomes clear that individual perspectives on life do not necessarily match the normative orientations of the organisation or an activating labour market policy. Instead, a counter-perspective emerges which is, to some extent, taken into account and leads to changes in structures and approaches through its implementation within the organisation (Åkerblom et al., 2023). Ways of living beyond gainful employment, along with other forms of work (e.g., care work, voluntary work, housework), and critical perspectives on capitalist societies thus come to the fore. In the context of peer support, these perspectives are also carried into the wider organisation

through the interactions with its employees (Järvinen & Kessing, 2021). The fact that changes in the attitudes and ways of dealing with users take place (e.g., more flexible forms of counselling, less exertion of (time) pressure, and engagement with the individual users and their interpretation of their own life situation) indicates that the implementation of peer support may lead to transformation.

However, barriers that still exist within the organisation limit the transformative potential. The fact that users continue to receive benefits from the jobcentre means that questions of entitlement are dealt with in peer support and shape the interaction at certain points. At the same time, peer support volunteers implicitly perceive organisational objectives and partially align their actions with these aims in order to gain recognition within the organisation and justify their support, for example, by attempting to place users into the labour market. As a result, they reproduce the normative "centre," and user-oriented approaches move into the background (Lammers, 2024). Additionally, it has to be stated that the examined peer support approach represents a small intervention for a selective group of people and no organisation-wide introduction. Therefore, the transformative potential is limited due to a restricted range and a relatively small target group.

7. Conclusion

The study has shown that peer support has the potential to change the accessibility of jobcentres as organisations for employment promotion and counselling for people with mental disorders. Instead of a passive-liberal logic of access, peer support aims to break down barriers, facilitate access, and incorporate the perspective of those affected. Applying Clarke's theory as a theoretical framework, the peer support approach contains both conservative elements and potentially transformative elements. By strengthening user participation and incorporating the perspectives of those affected by mental disorders through peer support volunteers, this approach leads to selective changes that may impact the core around which participation is structured. Nevertheless, it becomes evident that the transformative potential reaches its limits when it comes to overarching logics and paradigms that contradict the users' and peer support volunteers' perspectives. This phenomenon is apparent both within peer support (regarding organisational goals or benefit regulations) and in the transition back to the regular counselling setting. From this perspective, peer support can be understood as a relatively small, separate area within the jobcentre which is associated with easier access conditions for people with mental disorders, while access barriers to effective support services remain concerning the overall organisation. However, there is a noticeable development regarding Clarke's theory: The potential for exclusion and marginalisation of neo-liberal access strategies in dealing with mental disorders is clearly recognised. Thus, ways to improve accessibility are being sought, for example, through community-based support structures, outreach work, or projects such as the peer support considered here. As the empirical data show, these strategies contain a degree of transformative potential concerning the inclusion of previously marginalised perspectives. However, the majority can be classified as rather conservative strategies that remain within the established normative orientation.

Limitations of this study include the in-depth qualitative analysis of a specific empirical setting, which makes comparability and transferability to other contexts more challenging. In addition, the analysis is limited to the perspective of peer support volunteers and users and does not include data from other actors within the organisation. As already described in the methodology section, the analysis in this article is a partial aspect of a larger-scale GTM study. This focus is necessarily accompanied by a reduction in complexity and the omission of other perspectives relevant to the data.

The study points to a need for further research, primarily due to the increasing need for effective forms of support in the area of mental health and the growing demand on social services to improve accessibility and participation opportunities for different groups of people. This article illustrates the connection between accessibility and peer support services by examining a specific empirical example. Further systematic research on peer support in different fields of action is needed with regard to the effects on access. Furthermore, while this study focuses on users and volunteers, there is also a need for studies with regard to the organisational and professional perspective in order to arrive at a deeper, theoretically anchored understanding of accessibility in peer support contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The original German transcripts of the quotations from the data material are available from the author on request.

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