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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



## Possibility and risk in encounter between people with and without intellectual disability

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Unpredictability, the risk of harm and possibility of rewards, are integral elements of encounter. Risk literature offers insight on the complex ways in which risk perceptions and attunements shape behaviours and interactions in encounter between people with and without intellectual disability.

**Method:** The paper draws on risk literature, encounter literature, and examples from the authors' previously published studies on encounter and work integrated social enterprises.

**Results:** Encounters between people with and without intellectual disability are shaped by perceptions of possible rewards and harms; skills and experience in attunement to risk signals; disposition towards, and strategies of, risk aversion, management or enablement; and, environmental attributes of encounter settings.

**Conclusions:** There is a need to shift community and disability services' understanding of risk in encounter, by developing a positive appreciation of encounter risk, and development of risk enablement strategies that are learned through experiential practice.

### KEYWORDS

Intellectual disability;  
encounter; non-encounter;  
risk; conviviality

Dictionary definitions emphasise the accidental, unexpected nature of *encounter*: “a chance meeting,” “a sudden clash” (Mirriam Webster). The word alludes to estrangement and difference (to encounter a stranger or even an alien), but an unexpected meeting with an acquaintance or friend is also often described as an encounter. Encounter is often used to describe meetings between adversaries or enemies but also romantic or sexual experiences (MacMillan Dictionary). Often, a first meeting with something or someone is retrospectively depicted as an encounter, evoking a sense of discovery of the other and of oneself (“my earliest encounter with the theatre,” MacMillan Dictionary). Retrospectively an encounter is sometimes recalled as a fateful transformative moment, a first meeting with long-term significance – for better or worse – that could have never been foretold. It is for these implicit meanings – unpredictability, difference, tension, connection, discovery and transformation – that encounter captured the attention of scholars and activists interested in social change (Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Wilson & Darling, 2016). As proposed by prominent urbanist Henri Lefebvre, the numerous encounters that happen

each day in a city stir a “permanent disequilibrium” (1996, p. 129), which constantly challenge its status-quo. The unpredictability inherent to the moment of encounter bears the possibility of social transformation – as improbable as this possibility is – but also, inherently, a multitude of risks.

People with intellectual disability experience a variety of everyday encounters with familiar and unfamiliar people, including other people with intellectual disability, support staff, relatives, and other members of the public who have no intellectual disability. Risk and possibilities are inherent to all of these different types of encounter. However, the policy imperatives about social inclusion have meant that encounter between people with and without intellectual disability has become a foci of scholarly attention. These studies chart some of the possibilities and risks embedded in such moments: the possibility of freedom that lies in unpredictability and uncertainty (Clifford Simpican, 2020 – this special issue), not least freedom from the rigid institutionalised routines in which many people with intellectual disability continue to live; the possibility of self-discovery and personal growth through a moment of conviviality with

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a stranger, that challenges static, flattened and often harmful identity labels (Bigby & Wiesel, 2019); the potential to break social isolation by making connections, even if only fleeting (Bigby & Wiesel, 2015); and the possibility that one of countless everyday encounters might in the future be recalled as an unexpected transformative moment which has set the course towards a significant friendship, an intimate relationship, a life-long hobby or a career. At a larger scale, cumulative encounters between people with and without intellectual disability, bear the promise of breaking the status quo in which people with intellectual disability are a stigmatised, feared, and socially excluded population (Bigby & Wiesel, 2011). Not all encounters are transformative – indeed these are a rare exception – and yet, transformations often do begin with a first encounter. And at the same time, encounters are valued not as a means to any particular end, but as “an end in themselves,” a valued social interaction in its own right even when it does not lead to any long-term outcome (Bredewold et al., 2020).

The most significant risk highlighted in encounter literature is that of reproducing social exclusion and oppression in encounters (or non-encounters) where people with intellectual disability are ignored, laughed or frowned upon, or abused by others (Bredewold et al., 2016; Bredewold et al., 2020; Wiesel et al., 2013). Indeed, people with intellectual disability, their formal and informal supporters, and others whom they encounter, all experience varying forms and degrees of anxiety before, during and after such encounters, and these shape both opportunities for, and the unfolding of, encounters (Wiesel & Bigby, 2014).

In this paper, drawing on insights from the risk literature about the complex ways in which risk perceptions and attunements shape behaviours and interactions, we reflect on risk as an element that is integral to encounter between people with and without intellectual disability. We explore the idea that risk is both essential to conviviality and a potential barrier to it, and consider how risk-enabling skills for encounter might be nurtured for people with intellectual disability, their support workers and other members of the public. We reflect further on the tension between the conception of risk as an element that is integral to conviviality, and findings from previous studies highlighting the importance of safe environments that are conducive to convivial encounter (Bredewold et al., 2016, 2020; Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Wiesel & Bigby, 2016). The conceptual discussion about risk in encounter is supported by examples from the authors’ work on both encounter (Bigby & Wiesel, 2011, 2015, 2019; Wiesel & Bigby, 2014; Wiesel et al., 2013) and work integrated social enterprises (Farmer et al., 2019, 2020).

## Risk, vulnerability and disability

“Risk” concerns uncertainty about the future, and particularly about future outcomes of choices and actions made at present. The word “risk” often carries an implicit negative meaning, and used to imply adverse future possibilities. To “take a risk” means to do something that exposes one to danger; implicit to “taking a risk” is the risk taker’s awareness of and responsibility or blame for the chance of a bad outcome (“at your own risk”) (Cambridge Dictionary).

The concept of “risk management” links risk to both positive and negative possibilities, and is premised on the notion that any attempt at gaining rewards inevitably involves the probability of failure and negative consequences. Managing risk thus concerns influencing choice making in the context of uncertainty through the weighting of possible rewards against probable harms. In our daily lives as individuals we run through such calculations instinctively and intuitively, rather than scientifically; we are aware of some risks and rewards, but blind to many others; some of the risks we intuitively respond to are “virtual risks” that are to some extent imaginary. Our propensity to take risk, and how we measure and weigh risk and rewards, are shaped by personal predispositions such as optimism or fatalism, and by our level of trust in people and institutions that present us with information about risk and rewards (Adams, 1999).

Past experiences play a critical role in shaping perceptions of risk and predispositions towards risk aversion or risk-taking. Past experiences of direct or first-hand harm tend to reinforce more precautionary behaviours (Barnett & Breakwell, 2001; Wachinger et al., 2013), depending to some extent on the severity of the harms experienced, and the time that has passed since the event (Kasperson et al., 1988). At the same time, indirect experience, such as hearing about a violent act committed in a public park, can also influence risk behaviour and perceptions, even in the absence of first-hand experience (Wachinger et al., 2013). Other biases in risk assessment concern whether the risk involves missing out on a potential gain (where people tend to risk-aversion) or whether it involves being subject to potential loss (where people tend to risk-seeking) (Khaneman & Tversky, 1979).

Over time, people’s ongoing first-hand experience with a certain type of risk can lead to development of what Epstein (1994) refers to as “experiential-expertise” towards risk. Such experiential-expertise does not eliminate bias towards risk-seeking or risk-aversion, but allows people to develop heightened capacity to attune and respond to particular risk signals (Kamstra et al., 2019).

In the context of support services for people with intellectual disability, front line workers are required to navigate requirements to comply with increasingly procedural responses to managing risk, on the one hand, and the need to make nuanced judgements based on reading of circumstances rather than firm rules, on the other (Robertson & Collinson, 2011; Sawyer & Green, 2013). A major challenge for good practice is the lack of coherence in organisational approaches to risk management and limited training or support available to front line workers to make complex judgements (Bigby, Anderson et al., 2018; Bigby, Douglas et al., 2018; Robertson & Collinson, 2011).

Risk and vulnerability are closely linked (Parley, 2010). Risk is understood as emerging from the interaction between exposure to a hazard – an object, event or situation that can cause harm – and the degree of vulnerability of the person who is exposed. For example, the level of risk in ice skating differs for children and older people because many children can recover easily from a fall that might be fatal to some frail older people. However, disability scholars are often critical of the labelling of people with disability as inherently vulnerable. While people with intellectual disability are exposed to significant risk – such as violence and abuse in institutions and in the community – their labeling as vulnerable implies that they are the problem, being unable to protect themselves and unable to make “safe” choices, rather than the problem being the situations in which they are placed. Consequently, the labeling of people with intellectual disability as vulnerable reinforces restrictive “safeguarding” practices that undermine self-determination and the prospect of a fulfilling life (Bigby, Anderson et al., 2018; Bigby, Douglas et al., 2018; Parley, 2010). Rather than a “risk-free” life, in many cases such over-protection merely exposes people with intellectual disability to different kinds of risk. For example, people with intellectual disability became exposed to risk of neglect and abuse in institutional care, which was presented as a “protection” from the risks of community living (Wiesel & Bigby, 2015). Likewise, adults with intellectual disability are “protected” from making poor decisions in their own “best interest” by others or through guardianship regimes, undermining their self-determination and opportunities to learn from the experienced consequence of such decisions that produce attunement to future risk signals in decision making.

Addressing the danger of overprotection, Perske (1972) coined the term “dignity of risk,” recognising risk taking as an act of self-determination:

Overprotection may appear on the surface to be kind, but it can be really evil. An oversupply can smother

people emotionally, squeeze the life out of their hopes and expectations, and strip them of their dignity. Over-protection can keep people from becoming all they could become. Many of our best achievements came the hard way: We took risks, fell flat, suffered, picked ourselves up, and tried again. Sometimes we made it and sometimes we did not. Even so, we were given the chance to try ... In the past, we found clever ways to build avoidance of risk into the lives of persons living with disabilities. Now we must work equally hard to help find the proper amount of risk these people have the right to take. We have learned that there can be healthy development in risk taking and there can be crippling indignity in safety! (Perske, 1972)

Perske’s recognition of the dignity of risk coincided with similar ideas about self-determination and normalisation that fueled deinstitutionalisation and the community care movement since the 1970s. Indeed, the institutionalisation and later deinstitutionalisation of people with intellectual disability parallels the rise of “risk society” (Beck, 1992). A growing concern with identifying and managing risk – what Beck termed “risk society” – initially saw the early modern state playing a primary role as manager of risk. In late modernity, with the advent of neoliberalism, responsibility for risk management has shifted to civil society organisations and to individuals who are increasingly expected to manage their own risks. Within this context, welfare states have shifted their focus away from policies that target collectives, and instead focus on individual behavioural change. Concurrently, individuals are increasingly skeptical of experts’ knowledge and ability to manage risk, magnifying an experience of the world as unstable and dangerous (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

### Risk and reward in encounter

In our previous work on encounter (Bigby & Anderson, 2020; Bigby & Wiesel, 2011, 2015, 2019; Wiesel & Bigby, 2014; Wiesel et al., 2013), through hundreds of hours of interviews and participant observations, we have exposed a wide range of motivations that drive encounter between people with intellectual disability, support workers, and other community members. These range from self-interested gains to altruistic motivations, and from small acts of kindness towards an individual to wider considerations about social change at scale. Likewise, risk is also assessed in relation to self and to others. In Table 1 we list a variety of perceived encounter risks and rewards for support workers, people without disability, and people with intellectual disability (Table 1).

While these possibilities and risks are common to many encounters, every encounter is different, with a

**Table 1.** Potential harms and rewards in encounter between people with and without intellectual disability.

	Perceived risk	Perceived reward
For support workers	Reputational harm to service	Interest and excitement at work
	Embarrassment in public if behaviour norms are transgressed	Satisfaction from, or incentives for, doing a good job in supporting inclusion
	Disruption to other service plans	Getting to know their own community
	Penalty if service policies and guidelines (e.g., Occupational Health and Safety) are breached	Promoting disability service's advantages in competition over new clients
For person without disabilities	Embarrassment for saying or doing something wrong	Experiencing belonging and inclusion
	Becoming committed to another person	Excitement of getting to know another person
	Difficulty to disengage	Learning about another way of life
	Being harmed by a person with threatening behaviour or appearance	Feeling good for reaching out to another person
	Disruption to community group norms/practices	Making a friend
For person with intellectual disability	Being abused, patronised, infantilised or mistreated	Experiencing belonging and inclusion
	Being embarrassed for failing to meet social norms and expectations	Getting to know another person, becoming known, making a friend
	Being penalised by family carer or support worker for inappropriate behaviour	Being recognised as a person beyond their disability

unique set of risks and rewards for each participant. When the potential for encounter arises, all the people involved make a rapid – mostly “instinctive and intuitive” (Adams, 1999, p. 5), not fully conscious, and always biased – assessment of the potential risks and rewards to determine whether and how they engage with those they meet. This assessment is influenced by their experiences of past encounters, their knowledge of or assumptions about other encounter participants, and the setting in which the encounter takes place.

In making a rapid assessment of risk and reward in encounter, people are attuned to varied signals. Disability support workers, for example, are likely to be more anxious of risk in community settings where they lack the level of control over the surrounding environment which they often exercise within disability day service or accommodation settings. Often, they are attuned to signals indicative of the service user's mood, and whether they are calm or agitated, before they enter an encounter with another person. They will also be attuned to appearances and behaviours that may indicate whether the other participant to a potential encounter is, for example in a hurry, or friendly. Support workers will be attuned to other risks in the encounter setting, such as presence of onlookers, or

an overly stimulating environment which could potentially distress some service users and lead to more tense encounters.

People without disabilities, are likely to be attuned to various signals of risk and possibility before entering into an encounter with someone who appears to have an intellectual disability. Signals may include visual cues of the person's impairment, their clothing, behaviour, whether or not they are with a support worker or in a group of other people with disability. For example, in our survey and interviews with people living in neighbourhoods where group homes were present, we learned that one perceived risk that prevents some people from entering an encounter with their neighbour who has an intellectual disability is the concern that it will be difficult to disengage (Wiesel & Bigby, 2015); we can speculate then that with such a risk in mind, people will be attuned to environmental risk factors such as the absence of easy “escape” routes should they wish to terminate the encounter (see also Brede-wold et al., 2020).

Reflecting back on our own work, and other studies of encounter, we are struck by how little we know about the way people with intellectual disability themselves attune to, interpret and act on risk in encounter scenarios. This is, we argue, an important area for further empirical research. We can only hypothesise that negative experiences of past encounters might lead some people with intellectual disability to avoid encounters as a risk aversion strategy, while others might have developed risk enabling skills such as ability to attune to particular signals of risk in certain encounter situations, without necessarily avoiding all opportunities for encounter. There has also been limited empirical research on the perceptions of front-line disability support workers about the risks of encounter or their strategies for enabling it.

### Averting, managing, and enabling risk

Risk management involves not only assessing the level of risk, but also determining what risk is acceptable (relative to the perceived reward), and whether there are practical ways to reduce risk to an acceptable level. Such personal risk calculations determine individuals' willingness to enter into encounter when an opportunity arises, or to avoid an encounter altogether as a strategy of *risk aversion*; how individuals curate settings and terms of engagement of encounter to minimise the possibility of harm as a *risk management* strategy; and the extent to which individuals accept the possibility of certain harms but seek to minimise their occurrence



or impact without altering the intent of the activity as a *risk-enabling* approach.

*Risk aversion* – by support workers, people with intellectual disability, and other non-disabled members of the public – is arguably the most significant barrier to encounter between people with and without intellectual disability. For example, it is common for disability support workers to prevent or terminate encounter as a strategy to minimise perceived risks. Our observations found support workers physically blocking interaction to prevent an encounter that they perceive as risky (Bigby & Wiesel, 2015). In such cases, support workers rapidly weigh risk to themselves (e.g., disruption to service routine impacting on their workload), to the service user (e.g., possibility of humiliation), and to the stranger they encounter (e.g., discomfort or fear), against possible rewards to themselves, to the service user and to the stranger (e.g., an experience of conviviality). Risk aversion can be understood as a bias towards overestimating the risk and underestimating the possible rewards, leading support workers to avoid encounters. This bias may be institutional, embedded in service policies that emphasise risk – and especially risk to the service itself – with little recognition of rewards. Other times, the risk aversion bias is personal, reflecting the support worker's personality and experience, or lack thereof.

However, risk aversion is not exclusive to support workers. Some residents without disabilities we interviewed admitted they find ways to avoid their neighbour with intellectual disability, because of the risk it might be difficult to disengage after the encounter has started (Wiesel & Bigby, 2015). These residents arguably weigh only the risk and reward for themselves – rather than those for the neighbour with intellectual disability – and their risk assessment is influenced by experiences of past encounters with that neighbour.

Little is known about the way people with intellectual disability perceive risk in encounter. A few participants with intellectual disability who we have interviewed noted that they would sometimes choose to go to places where they are less likely to encounter strangers (Wiesel & Bigby, 2016), a similar avoidance or risk-aversion strategy.

In cases of *risk management*, people with intellectual disability, their support workers and other community members enter an encounter despite the risks they have recognised, considering these justified by potential rewards. However, support workers practice a variety of strategies to manage risk and minimise the possibility of harm. For instance, using a behaviourist approach disability support workers often practice “slow sensitisation” through gradual exposure of service users to

risk, such as attending less crowded community settings as preparation for encounter in more sensory-stimulating environments (Gore et al., 2013). Support workers sometimes actively facilitate an encounter, as a strategy to reduce risk to themselves (service disruption), the service user (anxiety) and others in these settings (discomfort).

In contrast, when taking an *risk enabling* approach, support workers leave more room for uncertainty and unpredictability by standing back and minimising their intervention in an encounter between a service user and others. Doing little more than observing, their very presence provides some degree of assurance to both the service user and the other person, to interact on their own terms (Bigby & Wiesel, 2015). A risk enablement approach may reflect the support worker's low assessment of risk; but also the value and weight they place on the possible rewards associated with encounter, such as conviviality, freedom and the possibilities of the unexpected.

People with intellectual disability themselves can be risk averse or risk takers. Examples of risk taking include not only entering encounters with complete strangers, but also acknowledging their differences. Goffman (1961) wrote about the human tendency to try to “transmute” differences in encounter to avoid embarrassing oneself and others. In contrast, more recent encounter literature suggests conviviality arises not through the elimination of differences, rather through the formation of shared identifications alongside acknowledgement of differences (Fincher & Iveson, 2008). Indeed, in our research we observed instances where encounter participants made a point of acknowledging differences between them. In one of our observations in Melbourne, a woman with intellectual disability approached another non-disabled person in the shop with the question “do you think I'm stupid?” (Wiesel et al., 2013). Such a direct confrontation can be understood as more than acceptance of risk, rather as proactive enabling of risk that creates an opportunity for conviviality between strangers acknowledging their difference, while also seeking potential shared momentary identifications.

### Risk enabling spaces of encounter

In many ways the unpredictable, risk-laden and possibility-filled encounter with strangers in the community is the binary opposite of the segregation of people with intellectual disability in predictable, repetitive, familiar routines of institutions and many other “specialist” disability service environments. Yet, while the call for encounter is a call for risk-taking, encounter literature

highlights the significance of safe environments that are conducive to convivial encounter (Bredewold et al., 2016, 2020; Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Wiesel & Bigby, 2016). Fincher and Iveson (2008, p. 163), for example, argued safety is a crucial condition for convivial encounters, so that encounter participants “must not find the experience entirely threatening and fearful, even as it may involve risks and uncertainty.”

Yet Fincher and Iveson also point out that “safety” has often been pursued in oppressive ways. In policy responses to violence against minorities, safety has often been sought through practices of spatial confinement and separation, to minimise encounter between those who are different in terms of class, race, gender or other identity categories. Often, such safety measures involve confinement of those labelled as “vulnerable,” rather than those who commit violence. For example, a common response to violence against women in public spaces has been the confinement of women to the private domestic sphere, where in fact most violence against women occurs (Wekerle & Whitzman, 1995). Other times, these safety measures involve confinement of those perceived as threatening, often implicating entire populations, as in the case of policies to displace young people of racial minorities from areas of “urban revitalisation” (Iveson, 2006). People with intellectual disability arguably face a double disadvantage being perceived at once as vulnerable and dangerous, explaining perhaps their extreme form of segregation and social isolation, limiting their encounter to a “distinct social space” (Clement & Bigby, 2009) of relatives, support workers and other service users with intellectual disability.

Rather than separation and confinement, an alternative approach is the planning of spaces that facilitate safe encounter across difference. In doing so, the literature on “safe spaces” charts an approach to safety that does not involve separation and confinement of people based on their difference. Yet this literature continues to overemphasise “safety” as a normative value, an end in its own right rather than a means to end, in ways that ignore the value of risk. Thus, in the following paragraphs, we propose the concept of “risk-enabling spaces,” which contain some of the defining attributes of “safe spaces,” while also balancing these against the freedom of risk.

First, familiar or “knowable” elements in the environment can contribute to a sense of safety. This includes familiarity with or ability to learn physical features of the environment (see Wekerle & Whitzman, 1995, on safe cities for women). Writing specifically about people with intellectual disability, Bredewold et al. (2020) propose the term “built in boundaries”: clear rules and roles

for social interactions that do not require reflexivity or negotiation, facilitate anxiety-free encounter across difference. At the same time, when rules and roles become too fixed and predictable, and boundaries too rigid, the opportunity for risk-taking and convivialexperimentation with new possibilities beyond the status-quo is limited. Thus, we propose that risk-enabling spaces are those which are at once knowable and unknown; familiar but open for exploration and surprise; where boundaries exist, but are dynamic and never impenetrable.

Second, a sense of safety derives from trust in the people and institutions who control and manage a place. Feelings of trust are maximised when people participate in the production of spaces (Fincher & Iveson, 2008). Self-made spaces for people with intellectual disability are also perceived as safe (Hall, 2010; Nind et al., 2020; Power & Bartlett, 2018), however when these are also spaces of confinement and separation, opportunities for encounter with difference are reduced. But self-production or co-production of spaces is not merely a form of safety (from oppressive environments imposed by others), but also a form of risk taking that comes with the sharing of responsibility for places and activities.

Third, a sense of safety is achieved in environments where participants are free to enter engagement with others, and also free to disengage at will. Bredewold et al. (2020, p. 2058) highlight this “freedom to (dis)engage” as a critical condition for conviviality between people with intellectual disability and others, and note it is apparent in “(half) open spaces where people could easily walk in and out.” Here, the safety associated with one’s freedom to enter or leave an encounter at will, is balanced against the risk of being approached, or walked out on, by others who are equally free to engage or disengage.

Fourth, ability to see and be seen by others is an important element of safe spaces. Being able to see others in the environment reduces the real or perceived risk of unexpected harm by “invisible” others; likewise, being seen by others contributes to safety, as it assures people are able to call out for assistance if necessary (Wekerle & Whitzman, 1995). But seeing and being seen also entail risk, and thus also possibilities more promising than merely safety. To be seen is also to be judged for one’s actions or appearance. And to see others also involves a degree of responsibility for their safety, and thus both are as risky as they are safe.

Fifth, existing literature emphasises shared purpose activities that are non-competitive – such as a dance class or volunteering event – are often more inclusive, and more likely to enable convivial encounter for people with intellectual disability (Bigby & Anderson, 2020;

Craig & Bigby, 2015; Wiesel et al., 2013). But perhaps it is not competition itself (with its structured risks and rewards), that is exclusionary, rather the absence of a level playing field that skews the balance of risk and reward. Furthermore, risk exists even in a non-competitive activities, such as the risk of embarrassment in a dance class, or exposure of one's intimate art to others' judgement in an art group. Whether in competitive or non-competitive activities, such risks are not just negatives to be eliminated, but are opportunities for conviviality, for instance when participants in the dance class share a laugh when their routine goes out of sync.

Social enterprises illustrate some of tensions and ambiguities surrounding "risk enabling spaces." Social enterprises aim to enable disadvantaged individuals to develop social capability while also gaining work experience in commercial businesses (Barraket et al., 2010). Farmer and colleagues (2019, 2020) examined the experiences of social enterprises in regional Australian cities. Employees in these enterprises came from diverse groups, although a large proportion were people with intellectual disability. Within these hybrid specialist-mainstream spaces, employees with intellectual disability had opportunities for encounter with other people without disability, including both other employees of the social enterprise, and outsiders such as retail staff, council employees and café owners encountered through job tasks such as delivering food or catering. These encounters were carefully curated by the social enterprise supervisors to reduce and manage risk. Supervisors always accompanied employees with intellectual disability, and novice employees were mentored or partnered with more experienced employees (encounter experiential-experts). Being accompanied by a trusted supervisor or peer can produce a sense of security associated with trust, familiarity, and being "seen." The encounter interactions themselves were often brief and transactional, and as such framed by relatively clear rules of conduct (or "in built boundaries"). While risks were reduced, so was the potential for unexpected possibilities to emerge from such moments. Nonetheless, the study found that sense of security and safety experienced by people with intellectual disability in such encounters led to growing self-confidence and capabilities development that could potentially enable greater risk taking in less curated and protected settings in future encounters (Farmer et al., 2019, 2020).

## Conclusions

Each encounter between people with and without intellectual disability is shaped by a complex interaction of

diverse risk frameworks, perceptions and behaviours. At heart, such encounters are shaped by conflicting perceptions of people with intellectual disability as vulnerable individuals to be protected from others, as "hazards" to other community members they encounter, or as self-determining persons with the right to take on risk for the possible rewards, and exercise the dignity of risk itself. Likewise, such encounters are shaped by the interplay – and often misalignment – between the instinctive and intuitive risk attunements and behaviours of individuals involved, their predispositions towards risk aversion and risk taking, inevitable biases that shape risk assessments, and the more formalised risk management protocols (often risk averse) under which both specialist and mainstream services operate (Bigby, Anderson et al., 2018; Bigby, Douglas et al., 2018).

Entering an encounter is indeed an act of risk-taking. A common perception is that such encounters primarily benefit people with intellectual disability, while other community members enter such encounters as a form of altruism, accepting risk with little or no reward. In this paper we have sought to challenge this perception, demonstrating that encounters bear potential harms and rewards to all participants, even if these are unequally distributed. While some encounter harms – such as awkwardness and embarrassment – might seem mundane and insignificant, for many people with intellectual disability these are significant risks, and reinforced by past experiences of humiliation and abuse in encounter with strangers.

But the framing of encounter as "risky" must be balanced by acknowledgement of its inherent possibilities. Some encounter rewards, such as the sense of discovery, excitement, and conviviality, can be observed in the moment of encounter itself. Many other rewards from encounter will only become apparent retrospectively, sometimes many years later, when an encounter is recounted as the start of a long-lasting friendship, or an event that set the course to a new life trajectory. The method of participant observation that is often used to study encounter between people with and without intellectual disability is useful for capturing the immediate effects of the encounter, but limited in capturing these long-term outcomes. This understanding calls for experimentation with new methods in encounter research that move beyond participant observation. For example, more can be learned about encounter rewards by asking participants to reflect back on the first encounters that led to their present intimate relationships, friendships, jobs or favourite leisure activities. That said, people with severe or profound intellectual disability may have difficulties articulating



such narratives verbally, highlighting one of the challenges in studying encounters experienced by people with intellectual disability.

The risk of encounter is justified by the rewards against which it is weighed, but also as a reward in its own right, an act of self-determination, dignity and freedom (Clifford Simpican, 2020). Risk is an essential element of conviviality. Our analysis above suggests encounter participants – people with and without intellectual disability, and support workers – are highly attuned to the risks and rewards affecting themselves as well as other participants, whether they do so because of altruism or as part of their job requirements as support workers. Indeed, many of the harms (e.g., embarrassment) and rewards (e.g., getting to know someone new), are shared by all encounter participants. Such sharing of risk and rewards, we argue, can be understood as a form of momentary shared identification, which encounter literature defines as *conviviality* (Fincher & Iveson, 2008).

One important practice lesson from our analysis is the need to shift disability services' understanding of risk in encounter. This includes developing a positive appreciation of encounter risk, and development of risk enablement strategies that are learned through experiential practice, to replace practices of risk aversion that inhibit encounters and their potential rewards. Another challenging question is how risk perceptions and behaviours in the general public can be altered. While it is tempting to conceive of “public awareness campaigns” to educate the wider public on positive risk-enabling practices in encounter with people with intellectual disability, both encounter and risk literatures suggest that change is more effectively achieved through experiential practice (Kamstra et al., 2019). As mediators in such encounters, disability support workers play an important role in facilitating such experiential learning for both service users with intellectual disability and members of the public they encounter.

It is through multiple encounters with people with intellectual disability that other people without disabilities gain and perfect such skills. Little is known about how people with intellectual disability understand risk in encounter. Faulkner (2012), for example, found people with intellectual disability are often concerned that support workers value their protection and safety at the expense of dignity, autonomy, self-determination and family life, suggesting a willingness for risk-taking. Further empirical research is needed to learn what risk signals people with intellectual disability are attuned to before and during moments of encounter, and what risk enabling practices they already use or might be

supported to develop through experiential practice of encounters.

Risk enabling spaces for encounter are those where safety and risk are balanced one against the other: where a sense of familiarity or knowability, is balanced by unknowns and surprise; where boundaries exist but are permeable; where co-production brings both the safety and risks of control and responsibility; where people are free to engage in or disengage from encounters at will; where ability to see and be seen brings both security and risk; and where the balance between risk and reward in shared purpose activities is not overly skewed to some people's disadvantage (Bredewold et al., 2016, 2019; Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Wiesel & Bigby, 2016). For people with intellectual disability and those who support them, one challenge is to identify such places that already exist in the community. For government and the wider community, the challenge is to allocate funding for the development of risk enabling spaces for encounter, which are in short supply and unevenly distributed in the community.

In urban studies, encounter literature has often focused on encounter between strangers (Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Wilson & Darling, 2016). In intellectual disability research, a shift has occurred with greater attention to repeat encounter where people are no longer strangers to one another (Bigby & Anderson, 2020; Wiesel & Bigby, 2014). In such repeat encounters some of the risk of the first encounter with a stranger may no longer be present; and yet the repeat encounter can still be an “encounter” in the full sense of the word, with a degree of unpredictability and uncertainty about potential harms and rewards. An interesting direction for future research is to examine uncertainty and in repeat encounters, and whether and how these might be proactively enabled through changes to the setting, timing or nature of engagement as a means to throw up possibilities, including the possibility of a long-term friendship being formed.

The non-encounter is another emerging theme in recent encounter literature (Blonk, 2020). Whereas encounter analysis considers the risk and rewards in encounters that have eventuated, analysis of non-encounter considers similar questions in relation to the countless potential encounters that have never eventuated. Non-encounter literature highlights the risks when non-encounter reinforces the social exclusion and isolation of people with intellectual disability, but also the potential rewards in non-encounter such as the recognition that is practiced through civil inattention (Blonk, 2020). Indeed, the possible harms and rewards of encounter and non-encounter are intertwined in complex ways that await further unpacking by future research.

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