

## **Sick at Work, Sick of Work - managing long-term ill-health in the contemporary UK workplace**

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### **Abstract:**

In contemporary society, paid employment functions as a powerful indicator of a person's perceived social worth. When asked, "What do you do?", we understand the question as one about occupation, and we intuitively recognise its deeper implications: our response will invite assumptions about our identity. Yet for those living with long-term ill-health, this question can be fraught. Health status often complicates conventional narratives of productivity and success, and so responding to this question can demand a careful negotiation of what to disclose – especially for those experiencing worklessness.

Yet long-term ill-health does not necessarily preclude participation in paid work. Many people continue to work while managing ongoing symptoms, navigating environments often defined by rigid expectations, limited flexibility, and normative assumptions about healthy, productive bodies. When we go to work, our symptoms come with us. In many contexts, work can exacerbate or worsen our symptoms.

In this talk, I will present research on the lived realities of those working with long-term symptoms, focusing on the tension between unruly bodies that experience pain, fatigue, incontinence and bleeding, and the structured, often inhospitable landscapes of many contemporary workplaces. I will consider how individuals strive to maintain credibility, job security, and professional inclusion while managing symptoms that are messy, unpredictable, and socially uncomfortable.

Drawing on concepts from medical sociology, disability studies, and the sociology of work, I will argue for a more expansive view of what work could be. In doing so, I aim to challenge employment practices that routinely deny or devalue bodily difference. I hope this will invite critical reflection on how we define work, value, and participation and whose bodies are afforded space, legitimacy, and support in paid workplaces under today's social, economic, and political conditions.

### **Biography:**

Jen remnant is a Senior Lecturer in the Scottish Centre for Employment Research in Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde. The Centre's purpose is to produce high quality academic research for policy use in public, private and voluntary sectors

focusing on workplace innovation; fair work and job quality; employability and; employment regulation and equality.

Jen's interests are focused on the intersection of health and work. She is interested in how ill-health is conceptualised in relation to paid labour, and how employers (mis)manage disabled and long-term ill employees at work, especially in workforces that provide health and social care. This includes understanding the influence of organisational policy on the experiences of ill employees, labour market changes, welfare reform, workplace environments, professionalisation and symptom management.

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