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To cite this article: Sarah Pearson, Colin Lindsay, Elaine Batty, Anne Marie Cullen & Will Eadson (2023): Relational approaches to employability, Journal of Education and Work, DOI: [10.1080/13639080.2023.2184466](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2023.2184466)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2023.2184466>



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Published online: 24 Feb 2023.



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Relational approaches to employability

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ABSTRACT

As policymakers consider how best to respond to increased labour market volatility in post-Covid-19 economies, there is concern that vulnerable groups such as lone parents may be left behind, and consensus that we need to develop more responsive and person-centred approaches to employability. Drawing on Cottam's (2011, 2018) work on 'relational welfare', and the principles of the capabilities approach that underly it, this article discusses the experiences of unemployed lone parents and stakeholders involved in an innovative employability initiative operating across five localities in Scotland. We argue that relational approaches are valuable in supporting such vulnerable jobseekers to achieve outcomes that they have reason to value in terms of employability, learning, wellbeing and relationships (with balancing work and family relationships of particular importance for lone parents). We also discuss facilitators of, and challenges for, relational approaches to employability before identifying lessons for future policy.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 April 2022

Accepted 21 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Employability; welfare-to-work; relational welfare; parents

Introduction

At the time of writing in 2022, the UK and many other national economies face the prospect of a prolonged period of labour market volatility as result of the economic and social crisis engendered by Covid-19. In this context, there is an urgent need to assess 'what works' in supporting vulnerable groups who may be disadvantaged in the labour market to maintain or regain employment. Lone parents are one such group, with many of these jobseekers facing specific and substantial barriers to progression (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp 2018).

Activation and employability services targeting unemployed lone parents in the UK have largely focused on a combination of welfare conditionality and 'work-first' activation that prioritises early entry into employment. Yet, the success of such policy interventions has been questioned, and the extant evidence base confirms that lone parents continue to face a range of barriers to work that are not effectively addressed by mainstream employability support services, and which mean that many of them are persistently disadvantaged in the labour market (Millar and Ridge 2020). Existing evidence confirms that lone parents are highly motivated to work but are prevented from doing so by a range of structural and/or personal barriers (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp 2018). Access to available, affordable and flexible childcare also remains a significant barrier for many (Lindsay et al. 2022). Crucially, however, lone parents often experience a 'mismatch' between their family-first priorities and the work-first emphasis of activation, with a resulting failure of employability programmes to take into account their caring responsibilities, implications for family wellbeing, or

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ability to balance work and family commitments to sustain employment outcomes (Millar and Ridge 2020).

In this article, we argue that alternative models of support may be worth exploring. Drawing on the principles of relational welfare (Cottam 2011, Cottam, 2018) and the capabilities approach (CA) (Sen 1993), we review the experiences of lone parents engaging with local, co-produced services that placed relational approaches at the centre of their work, and assess the extent to which such approaches can offer an alternative model of employability support that focuses not only on employment outcomes but also people's personal and family wellbeing. Drawing on 102 interviews with lone parents and 117 interviews with street-level workers and key stakeholders involved in these local initiatives, we find evidence of the themes that Cottam (2011, 2018) identifies as central to relational ways of working, and many of the benefits sought through capabilities-enhancing approaches. Specifically, our interviews with lone parents seeking to progress towards employability consistently returned to themes of empowerment and choice (framed by considerations around family wellbeing), and the crucial role of relationships of respect and mutual support as a route to achieving a broad range of outcomes that they valued.

Following this introduction, we discuss the relevance of the CA to the employability policy agenda, and consider how Cottam's (2011, 2018) related conceptualisation of relational welfare, which we seek to adapt to this policy area, is helpful in framing priorities for local interventions that can empower people facing labour market exclusion. We then present our findings, using Cottam's (2018) framing of four areas of capabilities that are key to relational approaches to welfare (and, we would argue, 'relational employability') – in doing so, we draw upon data reporting lone parents' priorities and experiences of participation in a programme of employment support, 'Making it Work' (MIW). Next, we draw upon our interviews with street-level keyworkers (who were responsible for leading the day-to-day delivery of MIW), other delivery partners and stakeholders involved in MIW to identify key features of the governance and organisation of services committed to relational employability. Finally, we reflect on the limitations of our study and the transferability of its lessons, while also identifying insights for future policy.

Capabilities-enhancing and relational approaches to employability

Our framing of research findings with lone parents and key stakeholders below draws on Cottam's (2011) ideas on the value of relational welfare. For Cottam's (2011, 142) 'resilience comes through relationships and experiences' and so relationships of respect and mutual support should be at the heart of any public policy intervention combatting poverty and social exclusion. Relational welfare would be defined by: a commitment to generating opportunities for learning and meaningful work that people have reason to value; a central focus on promoting health and a 'flourishing life'; collaboration with people who want to be part of and contribute to their community and a sustainable way of life; and (to reiterate) an acknowledgement of the importance of relationships of mutual support.

Cottam's (2018, 2020) has since elaborated on these ideas in publications that combine case studies of localised practice with 'How To'-type advice on future priorities for policy. Among the consistently identified lessons are: the need to place family and community interactions and reciprocal relationships at the heart of the institutional design of policies and programmes; the benefits in terms of trust-building and innovation in programme design of co-productive efforts where communities and policymakers listen to each other; the value of designing-in time to build collaborative relationships among stakeholders; and the importance of social networks as both a goal of, and asset for, local interventions. Similar themes emerge from an extant literature on relational approaches to education (James 2019), social care and healthcare that defines relational approaches as rooted in 'a network of relationships, not centred on any single individual, but encouraging individual wellbeing and resilience' (Kartupelis 2020, 14), with an emphasis on 'understanding how everyday interactions with people, places, services and cultural representations impact

on people's sense of their worth and their capacity to contribute as well as to receive' (Barnes, Gahagan, and Ward 2018, 131).

Cottam's (2011, 2018) work also draws upon, and perhaps seeks to distil, key ideas from the CA, and particularly that welfare states (and related local policy interventions) need to replace utility with capability as the object of value (for example, Sen 1993, 2009). For Sen (1993, 30), the CA means that wellbeing should be defined by what people are able to do (functionings such as being healthy or being able to contribute to the life of the community); and the extent to which people are free to achieve such functionings (capabilities) – that is, their 'ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being'. From this perspective, 'a person's advantage in terms of opportunities is judged to be lower than that of another if she has less capability – less real opportunity – to achieve those things that she has reason to value' (Sen 2009, 231).

A growing literature seeks to make connections between the CA and employability. The more optimistic elements of this literature argue for the recalibration of activation strategies to become capabilities-enhancing mechanisms to focus on 'what people can do rather than what they actually do, together with substantive freedom of choice, taking account of external factors and personal characteristics' (Egdell and Graham 2017, 1192). Other studies of street-level activation have made more implicit reference to the importance of a relational approach to professional practice, rooted in 'respect for clients, the facilitating of choice and the involving of clients in decision-making' (Berkel, Rik, and van der Aa 2022, 143).

Importantly, relational strategies would use employability as a route to other valued capabilities rather than activation (and/or entry into any job, irrespective of its quality) being an end in itself. This may involve accessing learning and employability-development opportunities, but also requires employability service providers to enable choices around health and wellbeing, and to empower people to form attachments to community and strengthen relationships within and beyond the family. The CA-informed principles underlying Cottam's (2018) vision of relational welfare can therefore also be applied to employability interventions that might seek to support lone parents in their choice to progress towards employment that they value (as a means of contributing to their own wellbeing, relationships and life in one's own community). In practical terms, relational employability providers would be able (and required) to support people to make choices around capabilities related to learning, wellbeing and relationships because they are valued in their own right and because they might contribute to the choice made by people to progress towards employability. Activities supporting people's employability, learning, wellbeing and community/relationships will be important, but need to be understood in the context of the presence or absence of complementary policies, for example, demand-side labour market interventions to ensure that there are decent job opportunities, (especially for people with caring responsibilities) formal care provision that allows for flexible working, and 'sufficient and unconditional cash resources' through the welfare state (Fernandez-Urbano and Orton 2021, 180). And, to reiterate, choice needs to be a defining principle of relational employability – street-level services need to be co-produced with users and communities based on 'the freedom of the individual to choose what they want to do ... and the provision of the means for that individual to achieve their ambitions' (Beck 2018, 6). It is clear that capabilities-enhancing approaches run counter to policy interventions that include welfare conditionality and high levels of compulsion – 'there is no genuine empowerment if an individual is coerced into work' (Egdell and McQuaid 2016, 3).

For some, the broader tensions between the CA and supply-side employability initiatives that are not complemented by demand-side employment policy are deeply problematic (Bonvin and Orton 2009). Nevertheless, we argue that the principles of Cottam's (2018) relational welfare, underpinned by the CA, provided an effective framing to explore lone parents' experiences of MIW – an employability initiative that sought to eschew conditionality and work-first activation, to instead co-produce new ways of empowering lone parents to progress in learning, wellbeing, relationships and the labour market. Our point is that capabilities-enhancing, relational approaches may have the

potential to help people to progress in employability and towards labour market outcomes and other experiences that they choose and have reason to value.

Context and methods

Policy context and the MIW programme

Lone parents were not initially a priority group for the UK's work-first activation, but during the latter years of the 1997–2010 Labour Government there was an increasing reliance on extending conditionality applied to more vulnerable groups, so that lone parents were required to do more and earlier work-focused activity (for a discussion of long-term policy trends, see Johnsen and Blenkinsopp 2018). Suffice to say that with the introduction of 'Lone Parent Obligations' in 2008 and successive reforms to Jobseeker's Allowance and then Universal Credit regulations, many lone parents have found themselves subject to roughly the same levels of welfare conditionality as any other unemployed person. Meanwhile, broader changes to the benefits system since 2010 have negatively impacted lone parents. A freeze on the uprating of income-based benefits and a limit placed on the number of children covered by the tax credits system (the so-called 'two-child limit') have reduced the income support available from the state.

With regard to lone parents' experiences of activation, the welfare conditionality regime policed by the public employment service, Jobcentre Plus, demands that benefit recipients evidence that they are actively seeking work. Lone parents who fail to demonstrate sufficient quantities of jobsearch activities risk facing benefit sanctions. As part of welfare conditionality, lone parents may also find themselves directed to participate in compulsory activation programmes (at the time of the research, the contracted-out 'Work Programme', since rebranded as the 'Health and Work Programme'). As alluded to above, there is concern that such programmes offer a standardised, work-first approach, with little acknowledgement of the needs of vulnerable groups such as lone parents (Fuentes et al. 2014). Grassroots organisations have pointed to the negative and sometimes demeaning experiences of compulsory activation reported by lone parents (Skills Network 2014). There is further concern that work-first activation may not prove sufficiently responsive to the challenges, and perhaps new opportunities, encountered by lone parents in post-Covid-19 labour markets. While the rapid rise in unemployment post-Covid-19 feared by some had not materialised in the UK at the time of writing in 2022 (with overall unemployment rates similar to pre-Covid-19 levels), there is some evidence of increased vulnerability among lone parents. Employment rates fell by more than three percentage points from pre-Covid-19 to mid-2022 – from 69.7% in March 2020 to 66.4% in June 2022. This is likely to reflect increasing insecurity and sometimes contraction post-Covid-19 in sectors such as retail (Smith and Reis 2022). Meanwhile, increases in home working in response to COVID-19 and its aftermath arguably have the potential to create more opportunities (and potentially more choice) for lone parents seeking to return to work. At the time of writing in 2022 the proportion of employees who worked from at least some of the time remained at 38%, compared to 12% immediately prior to the pandemic (ONS 2022). There may be opportunities to engage with employers who have pivoted towards more flexible and family friendly work norms, but mainstream activation at the time of our (pre-Covid-19) research and at the time of writing has demonstrated limited interest in supporting lone parents to choose forms of employment that might help them to balance work, home and family.

Yet, despite a national-level policy agenda dominated by welfare retrenchment, intensified conditionality and work-first activation, more progressive policy alternatives have emerged at local level. The initiatives that we discuss below in some ways reflect a long-standing tradition of locally embedded, voluntary employability and training initiatives, often funded by local government and/or EU programmes, in many cases with strong third-sector input in the design and delivery of services (Bonvin and Perrig 2020). It is one such initiative, co-produced with lone parents in five localities, that provided the focus for our study. MIW sought to support lone parents facing complex

barriers to employability (such as those with health or disability-related barriers, multiple or complex caring responsibilities, or with little or no previous labour market experience). Its aims were to assist participants to progress towards employability and employment, as well as other outcomes valued by lone parents themselves – many of our interviewees described benefits in terms of, for example, wellbeing, learning, family relationships, expanded social networks and access to financial resources. Participation was voluntary.

MIW was delivered through locally based collaborations in Scotland's five most populous local authorities (and also local areas with large populations of lone parents): (1) Glasgow; (2) Edinburgh; (3) Fife; (4) North Lanarkshire; (5) South Lanarkshire. Multi-agency services were designed collaboratively following extensive consultation with lone parents' groups and local stakeholders from the public, private and third sectors. MIW provision typically involved a combination of employability and skills development services, signposting to vocational training provided by further education colleges, debt and money advice, health and wellbeing services, and financial support to access childcare. All MIW participants were able to access support provided by a dedicated keyworker. Extensive local engagement work was undertaken to reach out to lone parents in low-income communities. MIW was supported by the Big Lottery Fund, a non-departmental public body charged with distributing funds raised by the UK National Lottery. The funder was clear that MIW should be delivered through local collaborations, with a co-leadership role for third-sector organisations (usually partnering with local government-funded agencies). Another priority was that grassroots organisations run by and for lone parents, alongside other non-profit stakeholders with specialist expertise such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and community wellbeing charities, should be included. The Big Lottery Fund supported MIW through up-front grant awards, rather than the 'payment-by-results' contracts favoured by the UK Government. The funder's preference for up-front grants meant that local stakeholders in the five target areas were incentivised to work together to identify how they could complement each other's expertise, rather than competing against each other to register job outcomes.

Fieldwork research took place over 4 years, 2014–17, during which time MIW engaged 3,115 lone parents. Most participants reported positive outcomes in terms of learning and/or progression towards employment. Across all areas, an average of 30% of participants entered paid work, surpassing the funder's performance expectations and comparable with job entry rates achieved by UK Government activation programmes (although direct comparison is difficult given the specific aims and target group of MIW). We have provided further quantitative analysis of the programme's performance elsewhere, concluding that MIW was successful in achieving its stated aims (Batty et al. 2017).

Research methods

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with MIW keyworkers and other key stakeholders involved in the governance, design and delivery of MIW. A purposive sampling frame was developed and we identified interviewees following consultation with the funder and local partnerships, and having reviewed local delivery plans. Our interviews focused on the aims, approach and content of MIW (including any gaps in/problems with services); how the programme engaged and developed relationships with lone parents; the role of lone parents in shaping relationships and content within MIW; and outcomes achieved by participants. One hundred and four key stakeholder interviews were conducted.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with MIW participants, again based on a purposive sampling approach, so that we connected with lone parents at various stages of their engagement with MIW, including those facing multiple barriers to work, as well as those who had successfully re-entered employment. Interviews with lone parents focused on perceived barriers to employability; experiences of UK Government activation and welfare services; and their views of MIW. The age of

participants ranged from 20 to 47. Interviewees reported caring responsibilities for between one and four children. All but one were female.

Thematic data analysis involved members of the research team identifying key themes from an initial review of the data and reflecting on the conceptual framing discussed above; this led to the assembling of pertinent data thematically, along with the identification of useful verbatim quotations. We have previously published evidence from our research that focused on the value of MIW's co-production-focused approach in delivering more personalised approaches to engaging with lone parents (Lindsay et al. 2019). However, we believe that offering additional analysis of our substantial qualitative dataset – deploying the new lens of relational approaches – adds value in terms of insights and priorities for post-Covid-19 employability provision. Our previous analyses have represented the voices of lone parents but largely sought to consider MIW within the parameters of mainstream approaches to employability (Lindsay et al. 2021). While we have previously acknowledged that MIW delivered other positive wellbeing outcomes, the focus has been on employability, sometimes measured using long-standing frameworks for considering (barriers to) labour market participation (Lindsay et al. 2022). In this article, we want place the focus squarely on a broader range of capabilities and outcomes valued by lone parents, but to suggest that these can contribute to employability and that employability-building services can in turn be re-tooled to contribute to many other relational benefits. We also seek to add to the literature on relational and CA-inspired approaches to engaging with unemployed people by identifying our own 'How To' lessons on the governance and delivery of co-produced services, based on the hypothesis that collaborative governance may be important in providing the context for more person-centred (and perhaps relational) approaches to employability to emerge; and exploring the potentially vital role of street-level workers who are able to exhibit relational skills and practices (Mulgan 2012).

The discussion that follows focuses on: the challenges faced by lone parents, but also the benefits of engaging with MIW, based on Cottam's (2018) four-theme relational welfare framework; lone parents' and key stakeholders' reflections on the effectiveness of MIW versus experiences of mainstream employability programmes; and stakeholders' reflections on the governance, funding and organisation of MIW as a context for the emergence of a relational employability initiative.

Findings

As discussed above, Cottam (2018, 204) focuses on four areas of capabilities that she sees as fundamental to relational approaches to welfare, and which might also be seen as central to relational employability:

learning: the ability to grow through enquiry and meaningful work – the chance to develop our imaginations; **health:** our inner and physical vitality are central to a flourishing life, and good health implies a delicate balance between the acceptance of our minds and bodies and a commitment to good habits; **community:** being part of and contributing at the local and planetary level to a sustainable way of life, working alongside others in an effort to bring about change or to make something together; and **relationships:** a supportive and close network with others, some of whom are similar to us and some of whom are different".

Our interviews with lone parents suggested that these capabilities were indeed central to the things that many valued, and were key themes in the encounters and services that they co-produced as part of MIW. The literature discussed above also highlights the importance of inter-disciplinary collaboration in the establishment of relational services and the crucial role of empowered frontline employees rooted in local areas and co-producing with people and communities. These themes were again present in our discussions with MIW participants and key stakeholders. Accordingly, these themes provide a framing for the findings presented below.

Relational employability: the experiences of lone parents and key stakeholders

Interviews with MIW stakeholders, keyworkers and participants identified substantial challenges faced by lone parents, but also that MIW represented an approach to employability that places people, relationships and communities at its centre. First, in terms of Cottam's (2018) interest in capabilities for learning and meaningful work, both keyworkers and participants drew a distinction between MIW's approach, which encouraged lone parents to consider a wide range of work and learning opportunities, and the focus of Jobcentre and mainstream activation on moving people into any job as quickly as possible. A consistent theme in interviews with lone parents centred on how keyworkers (and the broader MIW programme) supported people to choose trajectories that were appropriate for and valued by them – this meant that MIW participants targeted only job opportunities that would provide sufficient pay and (equally important) allow them to manage work and caring. Many lone parents returning to employment found themselves in relatively low-paid jobs in sectors like social care and retail, and the continuing risk of in-work poverty should not be understated. But the absence of the threat of benefit sanctions still created a sense of that they were choosing their own pathways (Lindsay et al. 2021), and money advice and signposting to childcare services ensured that lone parents transitioning to employment reported being better off and generally good levels of satisfaction.

Some lone parents were supported to take up grants, training and advice to start a business. There was again a sense that such varied, ambitious forms of support represented a distinctive approach. Some interviewees compared this with being discouraged by Jobcentre advisers from pursuing ambitions to start a business; while those who had succeeded in building a business commended the support and encouragement that they had received and spoke of their sense of achievement.

What [my keyworker] and all that [support] showed me is how it can be possible to run your own business ... You don't actually think of yourself as, "I run my own business". Folks like me don't do that, but you do ... You're like, "That's quite good, and you've been running it for three years". These are skills that they've let me attain and given me the confidence to do it myself. (Amy, Area 5, Year 4)

MIW also encouraged participants to consider a wide range of learning opportunities. Relatively few of our interviewees had taken up long-term further education, but most had engaged in some form of accredited training/learning as part of MIW, and some described gradual progress from confidence-building courses to more structured learning, and then how that learning had helped facilitate a return to employment.

In terms of enhancing capabilities for health and for a 'flourishing life', MIW's partnerships shared a strong commitment to promoting individual and family wellbeing. In all areas, keyworkers and MIW partners invested in developing networks with, and signposting procedures linking service users with, National Health Service professionals and community health providers. In some areas, community organisations specialising in mental wellbeing were funded partners and engaged with substantial numbers of MIW participants. And many keyworkers and MIW partnerships developed structured interventions of their own, in collaboration with service users, designed to help lone parents to make positive steps to improve their own and their families' wellbeing.

A focus on health and wellbeing seemed appropriate given that mental health problems were reported by many MIW participants. Our interviewees spoke of complex mental health problems, sometimes rooted in and/or linked to experiences of isolation, poverty and stigma, which were in turn exacerbated by a punitive benefits system and stigmatising encounters with Jobcentre and welfare-to-work services (see also, Lindsay et al. 2022). For those who had transitioned to work or learning, there were often benefits in terms of self-esteem and mental wellbeing.

I feel like my health is a lot better because like you are a wee bit distracted ... over-thinking things and stuff ... I feel like before I never felt like worthy. I felt like, I don't know, people would look down on me because I was on

jobseekers [i.e. Jobseeker's Allowance] that I never wanted to be on and it was never my intention to be on that. But after getting a job and stuff I feel like I am moving up a wee bit that is good. (Briony, Area 4, Year 3)

Some MIW stakeholders complained that gaps in community mental health provision sometimes meant that some participants faced long waits to access support, and we heard how under pressure public and third-sector health providers struggled to resource a sustained engagement with the MIW programme. Nevertheless, our research clearly identified a commitment to the wellbeing of lone parents and their families above all else, in a way that again differentiated MIW's relational approach from UK Government activation. It is also important to reiterate that, as well as signposting people with significant problems to health professionals, MIW's own core provision was fully rooted in a commitment to lone parents' wellbeing and flourishing. The intensive support provided by keyworkers and, crucially, peer support activities were often highlighted by lone parents as helping to build self-confidence and self-belief that they could progress into work (i.e. what the literature would term job search self-efficacy) as well as combating social isolation.

I suffered with post-natal depression after having [interviewee's child] and it completely knocked my confidence. And through coming to groups and [keyworker] sort of pushing me out of my comfort zone a little bit ... I've stood up in front of a room of 200 people and spoken, and I would never do that. I would have done it before, but I would never have thought that I'd be able to do it again. So socially and me, for my mental health, so much better. (Liz, Area 2, Year 4)

Cottam's (2018, 204) call for relational approaches that support a sense of community, 'working alongside others in an effort to bring about change', was also reflected in MIW. First, MIW sought to re-connect often isolated lone parents with a much broader network of peers, supporters, service providers and employers rooted in their local communities. Cottam (2018, 129) argues that relational projects targeting labour market inclusion must bring together a diverse range of stakeholders and community actors rather than just being 'a hang-out for the unemployed'. In a number of partnership areas, local stakeholders pursued just such an approach – services and keyworkers were based not in Jobcentres or established activation providers' offices, but rather in community centres, creches and childcare facilities, where they sought to establish MIW as part of the fabric of a wide range of activities that take place in these settings. MIW participants spoke of engaging with community childcare, wellbeing and mutual support groups of which they had previously been unaware; managers in community centres spoke of significant additional footfall and engagement with their facilities. More broadly, MIW's understanding of employability (and the programme's role) was focused on achieving outcomes and growing relationships valued by lone parents, rather than seeking to evaluate service users based on top-down management systems (Cottam 2018).

I think it's just that when you're on your own with the kids, sometimes it's a bit lonely ... And I was basically clueless to what I was entitled to, being a single parent, and just to make friends who were sort of in the same situation as I was in ... it ticked all the boxes for me. (Liz, Area 2, Year 4)

What we found was, that model worked really well, because then people started to build relationships with one another. It allowed the peer groups to grow, because parents then wanted to support other parents within their own area, but actually in other areas ... taking away that isolation. (Stakeholder representative, Area 4, Year 3)

Keyworkers spoke of how lone parents who still faced substantial barriers to employability had nonetheless involved themselves in community activities such as co-organising food banks and clothing banks in their neighbourhoods. We heard of many cases of lone parents supporting each other with informal childcare and setting up semi-formal 'playgroups' for young children. In one area, lone parents and keyworkers established a campaign to demand improved pay and conditions and an end to under-employment in the local retail sector. In short, far from being 'just an employability programme', MIW provided a focal point for lone parents to build their own community and solidarity.

Accordingly, an emphasis on nurturing relationships, which places relational approaches – and programmes like MIW – in sharp opposition to work-first activation, was a recurring theme in our

research. Cottam's (2012, 50) work in the employability field has argued for activities 'encouraging peer-to-peer support' connecting people 'to a network of other individuals in and out of work who can offer support', an approach that was clearly reflected in MIW. So, as noted above, MIW strongly emphasised providing a platform for social network-building by lone parents. The diverse networks developed through MIW, among fellow lone parents who were seeking to progress towards employability as well as, crucially, those who had transitioned into paid employment, were seen by lone parents as a key source of practical support, but also offered mutual emotional support and combatted social isolation and stigma – lone parents spoke of benefiting from the realisation that the challenges that they faced were shared by many others from a range of backgrounds.

Supporting family relationships provided a central focus for MIW. Employability journeys co-produced by lone parents were designed to ensure that work and family life were balanced. Keyworkers offered signposting to, and transitional funding for, childcare. All engagements with MIW services took place in child-friendly environments, with free creche or childminding facilities provided. MIW participants contrasted this experience with Jobcentre Plus and activation services that they had experienced, and which appeared to refuse to acknowledge family relationships. Keyworkers reported similar negative perceptions of the willingness of Jobcentre Plus staff to acknowledge the genuine needs of lone parents to attend to family commitments.

I think the Jobcentre, they just, like I say, give you leaflets and stuff like that. There's no support ... I took [interviewee's child] a couple of times but it's quite hard for him because they're quite strict and didn't like any children to run about... (Susan, Area 2, Year 4)

They still have some [Jobcentre] lone parent advisers ... who actually said "They bring their children in with them to the Jobcentre and that is a deliberate attempt to distract us from taking the steps into work". I am like: "What?" (Keyworker, Area 2, Year 2)

MIW's focus on relationships that people valued, including family relations but also mutually respectful relationships with keyworkers, community stakeholders and peers, placed the programme in sharp contrast with work-first activation that too often imposes 'painful and demeaning' experiences (Cottam 2018, 136).

'Doing' relational employability: collaborative working and street-level practice

The emerging literature on relational approaches retains a strong emphasis on 'How To' guidance, with much of the discussion again drawing upon prior lessons from CA-informed strategies. Two recurring themes are: the need to establish collaborative governance arrangements facilitating partnerships of inter-disciplinary agencies/stakeholders, communities and people; and the distinctive relational skills, roles and ways of working adopted by street-level managers and workers (such as MIW keyworkers) in supporting and co-producing with lone parents.

The CA-informed literature on employability and activation advocates a capability-friendly governance, based on partnership-working between government/public funders and local stakeholders; characterised by less hierarchical management and more flexible programme content agreed by consensus; and including a participative approach to defining aims and outcomes, with considerable autonomy and room for manoeuvre for local actors and service users (Bonvin and Orton 2009). A CA-informed or indeed relational governance would therefore seem to require a shift from the new public management tenets that have dominated activation in the UK and some other welfare states, which privilege standardisation, contracting-out based on cost competition, and payment-by-results performance regimes that encourage providers to register 'job entries' in order to maintain their financial survival (Bonvin and Perrig 2020).

Drawing on such relational principles, the 'open and porous' approach to governance and partnership-working advocated by Cottam (2018, 253) was reflected in the *modus operandi* of MIW. As noted above, as a non-departmental public body, the funder was able to promote a more collaborative model than would normally be found under UK Government activation, encouraging

local public sector and third-sector stakeholders to co-lead the programme. Rather than payment-by-results contracting-out, the funder provided up-front grant funding, which was instrumental in facilitating the participation of local grassroots organisations (including charities run by and for lone parents) that would not have been able to compete with large private sector providers for Work Programme-type contracts. This along with clear guidance from the funder – based on preliminary consultation with local stakeholders and lone parents – that MIW should offer a diverse range of services saw partnerships bring together delivery agencies with specific expertise in: employability-building and personal development; vocational training and adult learning; debt, welfare and financial advice; and mental health services. As we have reported elsewhere, most lone parents took up a number of different support services, co-producing a more personalised employability journey (Lindsay et al. 2019). Up-front funding also meant that there was time for local partners to develop relationships, engage with local communities and lone parents' groups, and arrive at a consensus around resource-sharing and the initial co-design of services. 'Growing relationships takes time' (Cottam 2020, 27) and in this case governance and funding models created the time and space for crucial relationship-building.

Grant funding rules were not overly prescriptive, with the content of provision and resource allocation governed by reasonably flexible partnership memoranda and service level agreements. Local partnership representatives described a flexible funding model that allowed room for manoeuvre for delivery partners (including grassroots lone parents' organisations), keyworkers and MIW participants to co-design services, adapt them in accordance with lone parents' feedback and needs, and eliminate elements that were not effective. The capacity to 'stop doing things' that do not work well has been largely denied to contracted providers of UK Government activation (Lindsay et al. 2019), whereas dropping service components that received negative user feedback was common under MIW, as was resourcing to co-produce new services based on users' changing priorities as MIW developed. Keyworkers argued that, where possible, within resource limits, managers were supportive of such bottom-up innovations.

If you identify a gap, we'll go to the manager and we'll say "I think we need this, X, Y and Z". And it will be put in place. (Keyworker, Area 4, Year 2)

There were limits to the flexibility and responsiveness of MIW's collaborative and relational approach. MIW was well-resourced compared to work-first activation programmes, and keyworkers and local managers were able to draw on discretionary funds to support access to tailored training, wellbeing and (crucially) childcare services on behalf of lone parents. But these funds were limited, so that, for example, funding longer-term further education for MIW participants was challenging. Specific gaps in local childcare and (as noted above) adult learning and mental health services also meant that some referral routes were closed to lone parents. Nevertheless, the collaborative and flexible governance sought by advocates of relational approaches was clearly reflected in the principles of MIW.

We also found that MIW partners, local managers and keyworkers exhibited many of the collaborative skills and ways of working required by relational approaches: 'an ability to see things from the point of view of others, strong skills in both communication and listening, and skills of mobilisation, including particular skills in how to organise coalitions for change' (Mulgan 2012, 29). The process of partnership formation in many ways encouraged such skills and behaviours – it is again important to note that the funder required evidence of genuine multi-agency collaboration and third-sector co-leadership. This led to the inclusion of third-sector stakeholders with a strong track record of relationship-building, partly due to their collaborative ethos, partly as a well-established response to resource shortages.

As a charity we know you have to bring people together if you have limited budget, limited spend. So, you connect with local groups. You do lots of networking. You make sure you know what's going on. And they [networks] bridge the gaps. (Project Manager, Area 5, Year 4)

All partnerships prioritised a range of relationship-building practices and investments including: extensive, early collaboration activities that built a shared understanding among delivery partners of each other's services and expertise; further network-building with other public and third-sector stakeholders who could be used as referral options to broaden the range of services that MIW was able to access on behalf of lone parents; information-sharing with local community organisations that were able to refer lone parents to MIW; and co-location, joint-learning and other collaborative activities undertaken by street-level keyworkers and other MIW partners to develop over time a joined-up and integrated service. The importance of these relationships based on respect, mutual inter-dependency and shared values was a recurring theme across interviews. Challenges included: concerns raised by some stakeholders regarding the gradual pace of programme development (a product of collaborative and consensus-based governance); and relatively minor disputes about the extent to which all funded providers provided equal value to the delivery of the programme's objectives. Nevertheless, over four years of fieldwork, we identified a genuine commitment to, and multiple practices supporting, relational approaches rooted in: consensus- and coalition-building; information and practice-sharing; and joined-up collaboration and co-production.

The practice of MIW keyworkers also reflected the focus on empowering and assisting people to take control that has been advocated by relational approaches (Cottam 2011). Keyworkers interviewed for the research emphasised the need to work with lone parents to support them to make choices about what they valued – a way of working very different from the 'cajoling and persuading' behaviours often exhibited by frontline workers in work-first activation (Cottam 2018, 111).

I am never going to tell you, you have to do something. My role here is to tell you everything that's around, everything that's available, everything that's possible, everything you can take advantage of, but you make the decisions. I can tell you the pluses and minuses, but you make the decisions. (Keyworker, Area 4, Year 3)

Many keyworkers had a professional background in local economic development, women's rights advocacy or other community work settings, and so possessed the collaboration and engagement skills and commitment required for relational approaches. Some were themselves lone parents and/or resided in the communities that they served, and so demonstrated considerable dedication to supporting and empowering local people.

Relational approaches require street-level professionals to 'bring their whole selves to work' (Cottam 2018, 78); and many keyworkers and MIW participants described intense and respectful relationships, but ones that required the former to offer support with complex personal and family issues, engage in emotionally-demanding interactions, and make themselves available outside of normal working hours. Relatively low caseloads (compared to mainstream activation) helped keyworkers to cope with these demands.

For Cottam (2020, 27), 'thinking relationally inspires a different institutional design – inherently questioning what spaces are required, what is the order in which we might approach each other and what forms of listening, talking and making together build the trust that all relationships embody'. Our research suggests that the benefits reported by MIW participants were facilitated by capability-friendly governance and relational ways of working. Governance and funding arrangements privileged (and invested in) consensus and collaboration-building; there was an emphasis on the inclusion of community-level partners; and local stakeholders and lone parents felt empowered to co-produce services that helped the latter to pursue work and relationships that they had reason to value.

Discussion and conclusions

There is clear consensus on the need for a fundamental re-booting of activation policies in the UK and other liberal welfare states post-Covid-19. While high unemployment has not yet materialised as a lasting legacy of the COVID-19 crisis (partly due to the protection provided by the UK Government 'furlough' scheme and other demand-side support), there is some evidence that lone parents and

other already vulnerable groups have experienced increasing precarity (One Parent Families Scotland 2022). High inflation contributing to the ‘cost of living crisis’ has also led to increasing risks of in-work and out-of-work poverty among such vulnerable groups. Imposing welfare conditionality and work-first activation without reference to the income or family needs of lone parents, let alone the relationships and activities that they have reason to value, seems counter-productive. Nor are such approaches likely to assist lone parents to benefit from new opportunities that *might* emerge in post-Covid-19 labour markets. As we have suggested above, the normalisation of remote/hybrid working might expand opportunities for parents to balance work and family life, although it has also been noted that such new forms of flexibility can create additional pressures on working parents (especially mothers) who absorb most family care responsibilities while sometimes trying to navigate an ‘always online’ virtual workplace culture (Felstead 2022). Nor can we assume that hybrid working will be open to vulnerable lone parents – we have seen that many of MIW’s participants entered relatively low-paid, face-to-face service work in retail or social care. Nevertheless, the point is that there are both new risks and potential opportunities faced by lone parents post-Covid-19. A tailored, co-produced approach is required to assist lone parents navigate these complex challenges, and we again suggest that work-first is not equal to this task.

There is an emerging evidence base that investing in relational and capability-enhancing approaches may offer a way forward. This article has drawn upon the relational principles advocated by Cottam (2011, 2018), which are rooted in the CA, to frame an analysis of findings from an innovative, co-produced employability programme. We found that local MIW partnerships, their street-level keyworkers and co-producing lone parents were able to arrive at a consensus on services that rooted employability in a broader context of support for the relationships and capabilities that people had reason to value. We found that the principles of relational welfare advocated by Cottam (2018) also provide a basis for a relational approach to employability that supports people to access learning and/or paid employment that is meaningful; balances progression towards employability with personal and family wellbeing and caring; and privileges the importance of mutually supportive relationships with kin, peers, community and street-level professionals.

We also identified ‘How To’ lessons for stakeholders interested in pursuing relational employability. In line with extant research on both relational welfare and CA-informed approaches to employability, we found that there is benefit in involving communities in choices concerning them through collaborative governance. In this case, collaborative governance and funding mechanisms created the time and space for the emergence of open, multi-stakeholder partnerships and strong community engagement. At street-level, a gradual and collaborative approach to programme development meant that frontline providers and service users had the time and space to listen to each other, build relationships of trust and arrive at co-produced solutions as to ‘what might work’; while flexible funding meant that MIW was able to stop doing things that didn’t work. This resulted in local initiatives that were effective in delivering on their own objectives of supporting progress towards employability and wellbeing, as well as empowering lone parents to pursue other relational benefits that they had reason to value, in the form of engagement in peer and community support networks (while also supporting family and caring roles).

In terms of such lessons for future street-level employability practice, we need to ensure that there are clear co-production mechanisms so that the promise of user voice and empowerment are made real – Egdell and McQuaid (2016), reflecting on CA-informed approaches to employability, have warned that claims of a commitment to empowerment can sometimes mask a paternalism from above that results in vulnerable people being persuaded to seek positive feelings by pursuing inappropriate work opportunities. In this case, we found no evidence of such pressures, but it is important that user and community voice are realised fully in the design and content of employability so that work, family, personal wellbeing and community participation are valued and supported.

We accept that there were important limitations to MIW. Gaps in local learning, wellbeing and childcare provision limited the choices open to lone parents. And a relational approach to

employability also needs complementary demand-side strategies to promote decent jobs and a benefits system that provides secure incomes (Fernandez-Urbano and Orton 2021). Neither are policy priorities for the UK Government at the time of writing. It is important that demands for person-centred, locally rooted relational employability are not used as cover for a further withdrawal of the state or a refusal to rebuild diminished social protection. We also acknowledge the limitations of our own research – a relatively limited qualitative study, focusing on a specific vulnerable group. We acknowledge that we have previously published reflections on the experiences of service users and key stakeholders involved in MIW (Lindsay et al. 2019), but we believe that re-framing some of our extensive qualitative dataset using the lens of relational principles provides new insights on what might work in the delivery of relational employability.

As the UK and other welfare states face the prospect of a period of labour market volatility and an on-going cost-of-living crisis (both of which may further disadvantage vulnerable groups) it is hoped that they will seek out new approaches to promoting employability and wellbeing. Counter-arguments to those elucidated above might direct policymakers towards work-first activation strategies, based on the idea that liberal economies like the UK seem to have rebounded from Covid-19 to continue to offer plentiful opportunities in entry-level work. But in the coming months and years we may see increasing risks of precarity and in-work poverty and/or a permanent shift in employment patterns that may throw up new challenges but also opportunities for excluded groups, including lone parents (Smith and Reis 2022). The relational principles described by Cottam and others, and partnerships for relational employability of the sort that we have detailed above, may provide a useful starting point for policymakers interested in progressive approaches that can go some way to helping vulnerable jobseekers to achieve outcomes that they have reason to value in family and community, learning and the labour market.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was funded by Big Lottery Fund.

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