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Programme form and service user well-being: linking theory and evidence

Whitworth, A¹ and Carter, E²

Abstract

Since the early 1990s the 'activation turn' has become a standard welfare orthodoxy at the heart of international welfare systems. Whilst policy makers talk confidently about the well-being gains of activation interventions and their employment outcomes a growing body of research has focused instead on questions around 'activation process well-being' – the potential well-being effects of participation in activation programmes themselves. The present article makes three main contributions to the theory, knowledge and policy practice of this activation well-being literature. Firstly, the paper develops an original conceptual framework that newly connects well-being theory, qualitative variation in programmatic form and empirically testable well-being expectations for participating service users. Secondly, the paper uses multivariate statistical analyses to examine six conceptually-derived hypotheses around variation in programme forms and implications for participating service users' well-being, drawing on the case study of UK activation policy. Noteworthy is the paper's unique distributional insights into well-being effects across different types of service users. Thirdly, the paper offers new policy contributions around the relevance of policy form to service user well-being as well as important pointers to key programme features in this regard.

Keywords

Well-being; activation; employment support; programme design; quasi-marketization; Work Programme

Setting the scene: Activation participation and well-being effects

Since the early 1990s the 'activation turn' has become the standard welfare orthodoxy at the heart of international welfare systems. Although varying in emphasis, all nations have sought new strategies to propel unemployed welfare recipients back into the labour market as quickly as possible through a combination of heightened benefit conditionality, improved financial returns to work and a range of supply-side employability interventions (Bonoli, 2010).

Governments' shared commitments to this activation turn rest on straightforward fiscal desires to reduce benefit spend and boost tax receipts as well as a growing desire to responsabilise individuals for their own welfare provision. These governmental desires have fused with mounting evidence that good work is beneficial for health and well-being (Clark and Oswald, 1994; Layard, 2005; Waddell and Burton, 2006; Dolan et al., 2008). Indeed, this evidence has been employed by various policy makers to justify mandatory activation policies in a logical mantra whereby work is good for you, activation supports work transitions, *ergo* mandatory activation is ethically justified.

Each step in this logical chain is open to critique (Whitworth and Griggs, 2013). Regardless, although important this dominance in activation policy and research on well-being derived from employment *outcomes* neglects the ways in which *participation* in activation schemes in and of itself might affect service users' well-being. Noting this distinction, Carter and Whitworth (2017) introduced a distinction to the literature between what they term 'process well-being' and 'outcomes well-being'.

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By outcomes well-being they refer to the dominant policy focus of participant well-being that is derived through an activation programme's employment outcomes – or, more precisely, that *might* be delivered via its employment outcomes depending on their nature given evidence that only 'good work' associates with well-being gains (Waddell and Burton, 2006; Dolan et al., 2008). In contrast, by process well-being they discuss the less widely acknowledged extent to which activation programmes can themselves differently affect the well-being of service users during participation depending upon the design and operation of those interventions.

There are important reasons to bring concerns around process well-being from the margins of activation scholarship and practice. Ethically it is important to understand the implications of participation in differently configured public policies if one holds the view that citizen well-being matters. These ethical needs become acute where participation in activation interventions contain mandatory elements that may push negative rather than positive well-being effects onto service users. In terms of employment outcomes process well-being might also be of relevance if one accepts the reasonable expectation of positive associations between higher process well-being, enhanced participation (e.g. attendance, engagement, motivation) and improved employment outcomes.

The ideas of Jahoda (1982) and Fryer (1986) have provided important theoretical grounding for the mechanisms through which activation participation might affect process well-being. For Jahoda, unemployment is harmful to well-being not only due to reduced financial resources but also because of key psychosocial functions that paid work is argued to provide but that open unemployment (i.e. unemployment without any activation support) denies: time structure, social contacts, participation in collective purposes, status and identity, and regular activity. Alternatively, Fryer (1986) highlights ways in which unemployment reduces individual's control and agency over their current life situation and future life direction. Though differing in their emphases, both theories emphasise the existence of important non-pecuniary benefits from paid work and emphasise the negative consequences of non-financial 'loss' from unemployment (Sage, 2018). As such, these theories argue that whilst participation in activation programmes does not increase financial incomes compared to open unemployment it does have the opportunity to improve the process well-being of activation participants relative to open unemployment *if* those activation policies are structured and experienced in ways that provide these valuable non-financial characteristics and contributions of paid work.

Due to a combination of these ideas, greater policy and scholarly interest, and increased availability of suitable survey data there has been burgeoning empirical examination of these ideas (Strandh, 2001; Vuori and Silvonen, 2005; Coutts, 2009; Wulfgramm, 2011; Sage, 2013; Tisch and Wolff, 2014; Wulfgramm, 2014; Sage, 2015; Crost, 2016; Carter and Whitworth, 2017; Knabe et al., 2017; Vossemmer et al., 2018; Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019). This emerging evidence base lends credence to the relevance of participation in activation programmes as a mediating factor between unemployment and well-being. Overall, the evidence is somewhat mixed but generally suggests positive well-being effects of participation in activation programmes compared to open unemployment. As theorised, those well-being effects importantly dependent upon the precise form of that activation intervention.

The present article makes three significant contributions to remaining key gaps in activation well-being scholarship and practice in this context. Firstly, the paper proposes an original conceptual framework to newly connect well-being theory, variation in programme form and service users' process well-being. In the process it advances significantly a major conceptual gap in the current literature (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019), examining variation in programme form according to its

subtle qualitative type rather than according to quantitative metrics of activation expenditure as in the rare occasions when it has been explored (Wulfgramm, 2014; Vossemmer et al., 2018). Secondly, the paper connects this innovative conceptual framework to robust multivariate statistical analyses of processes well-being that push beyond the existing empirical knowledge on aggregate headline effects. Instead, for the first time in the literature this paper uses rigorous multivariate statistical analyses to dig empirically into key but currently neglected *inequalities* in process well-being across different types of service users with greater and lesser levels of support needs, a major empirical gap in the literature (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019). Thirdly, these conceptual and empirical contributions combined provide important new insights for policy makers around the relevance of, and links between, qualitative programme form and service user well-being as they design and implement public policies.

The next section responds to the initial need for a new conceptual frame for the field and prepares the ground for the later empirical analyses.

Shining a light inside the black box of activation well-being scholarship

Activation scholarship distinguishes typically between the two stylized ideal types of human capital development and work first models (Theodore and Peck, 2000) or what Levy (2004), with similar meaning, describes as 'thick' and 'thin'. Thicker human capital development approaches can be caricatured by their commitment to more intensive, sustained and personalised employment support with an emphasis on *pulling* service users into higher quality sustained employment. In contrast, thinner work first activation approaches can be caricatured by their basic, generic offer and reliance on self-help and hassle to *push* service users rapidly into any available job.

Whilst useful heuristically as high-level summaries these typologies inevitably struggle to recognise the diversity of programmes within each broad group or to offer a set of criteria against which programmes can be differentiated or their typology-spanning hybridity recognised. These limitations restrict the ability of these existing dominant typologies to provide the necessary bridge between theory and practice that is required to progress process well-being scholarship.

Bonoli (2010) goes further by separating activation programmes into four main types dependent upon their orientations: 'incentive reinforcement' which uses carrots (e.g. tax credits, return to work subsidies) and sticks (e.g. sanctions) to encourage work transitions; 'employment assistance' that focuses on barrier removal, job search and application support; 'occupation' approaches that seek to keep the unemployed busy with requirements and activities; and 'upskilling' approaches focused on training and skills development. This four-fold categorisation offers greater promise for more subtle analyses of programme variation and process well-being. However, this still forces interventions into strict single boxes despite their multi-faceted nature that frequently spans boundaries and varies in shades of grey along graduated dimensions.

In response, we fill this priority gap in the literature (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019) by proposing a new conceptual framework that provides activation well-being scholarship with a much-needed ability to differentiate subtly between distinct programme forms. Summarised in Table 1, our framework is based on two key programmatic dimensions: firstly, whether programme levers are financial or non-financial in nature and, secondly, whether they push or pull service users in their effects. Building on Weishaupt (2011), our approach draws on Berlin's ideas of positive and negative freedoms (1969) and Sen's ideas of capabilities (Sen, 1983, 1985) to present two distinct axes along which programme forms can be differentiated qualitatively and gradually as required conceptually. Positions along these axes reflect variations in the extent to which differently configured activation

programmes mimic the key non-pecuniary features and benefits of paid work theorised in Jahoda and Fryer and, as such, how they are expected to differently affect service users’ process well-being during activation participation. Importantly, by ‘programme form’ we refer here not merely to the formal nature of the policy on paper but more broadly also to how the incentives, pressures, priorities and safeguards of the programme shape how it is delivered and felt during implementation. As such, through the framework we enable an analytical understanding of programmes in their totality as interventions that are both live and lived.

Negative ‘push’ levers can be understood as curtailing service users’ *space to act*, an idea drawing on Berlin’s idea of negative freedom to relate to the freedoms and incentives available to an individual once the external environment (e.g. legal, policy, financial) has been put in place. In Sen’s mindset of capabilities this *space to act* is akin to an outer capability set – each service users’ set of *potentially attainable choices* during their participation in the activation programme given the nature of the policy and wider external environment. In contrast, positive ‘pull’ levers describe the extent to which service users’ *capacity to act* is then supported by policy within that bounded space. This builds on Berlin’s notion of positive freedom in recognising that individuals may well require resources or supports in order to realise many of the choices potentially available to them. The potential to vote, for instance, cannot be taken up if the individual lacks the time, money or transport to travel to the polling station. Voting may well be within their space to act (they are technically able to do it given the external environment) but it is not within their capacity to act (they cannot actually do it). For Sen, this *capacity to act* would therefore define a smaller capability set inside their *space to act* that relates to their *actually attainable choices*.

The framework can in principle be used to differentiate qualitative policy forms across domains but is operationalised here with the case study of activation policy. The left two columns of Table 1 set out push factors associated with thinner work first approaches. These can be described as negative incentives that are either financial (NIF) or non-financial (NIN) in nature. In the right two columns are pull factors associated with thicker human capital development approaches. These can be described as positive incentives that are either financial (PIF) or non-financial (PIN) in nature.

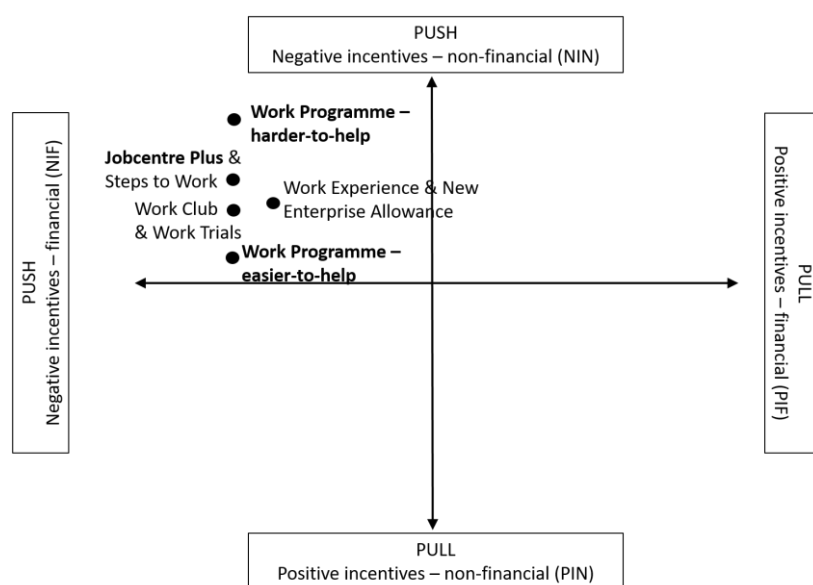
Table 1: Four dimensions of programme variation

Push factors: Defining the service users’ space to act		Pull factors: Supporting the service users’ capacity to act	
Negative Incentives – Financial NIF	Negative Incentives – Non-financial NIN	Positive Incentives – Financial PIF	Positive Incentives – Non-financial PIN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short duration and/or time limit of unemployment benefits • Low value of unemployment benefits • Unavailability of early exit options e.g. retirement/state supported care role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strict eligibility criteria • Strict job search requirements • Strict conditionality and sanctions regime • Discomfort and/or stigma to benefit receipt and/or activation • Broad definition of a suitable job offer (‘any job’) • Strong pressure by and on providers to quickly deliver employment outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefit roll-ons in work • Benefit top-ups for work-related activities • In-work wage subsidies • Attractive minimum wages • Transport subsidies • Self-employment start-up subsidies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalised, frequent, high quality job counselling • Proactive employment engagement • Voluntary work experience opportunities • Person-centred job matching and carving • Skills courses (soft and occupational skills) • Childcare support • Co-ordinated wider supports (e.g. health, debt, housing)

Figure 1 extends these ideas further through their visual representation and programme mapping. This figure plots the respective positions of the main activation programmes in the UK since 2010. This is an important date in the UK context since it reflects a decisive shift to a stridently centre-right government administration that introduced a large and aggressively quasi-marketised activation programme (‘Work Programme’) alongside the UK’s long-standing public activation offer via Jobcentre Plus.

The two axes on Figure 1 represent the financial (horizontal axis) and non-financial (vertical axis) axes of the conceptual framework with push and pull approaches shown on opposing ends. Based on the insights of previous theoretical and empirical research outlined above it is expected that service users’ process well-being will be higher in activation programmes closer to the pull extremes on these two axes. This is because these positions denote the expansion of service users’ space to act and their capacity to act. As such, any activation programme located in the bottom-right quadrant is expected to be associated with the highest levels of service user process well-being, and vice versa. It is unclear empirically where the key comparator situations of employment and open unemployment without activation fall on the chart and this is expected to vary by welfare regime, labour market and job context.

Figure 1: A conceptual framework to unpack variation in policy form



The UK’s main activation programmes since 2010 are positioned on Figure 1 according to their key characteristics. The public sector Jobcentre Plus offer and the contracted-out Work Programme dominated the UK activation landscape over the post-2010 period and are shown in bold to highlight their importance. A number of smaller public sector schemes are also identified.

Jobcentre Plus is the UK’s default public sector activation offer and operates from a national network of local offices. For unemployed benefit claimants deemed fit to work Jobcentre Plus participation consists of mandatory fortnightly appointments of approximately 10 minutes duration (WPSC, 2016). In these appointments Work Coaches with caseloads of around 100 claimants ensure that necessary job search requirements to maintain eligibility for benefits have been performed (WPSC, 2016). Despite Work Coaches’ best efforts, delivering meaningful employment support to overcome barriers is challenging given that the system is – partly by design, partly due to lack of

resource – heavily rationed and strongly endorses a 'self-help' approach amongst people accessing this provision.

Jobcentre Plus is located towards the negative push extreme along the financial dimension. This is based on the combination of strong negative push factors (low benefits value) and weak positive pull factors on this financial dimension in the UK benefits regime (though a modest minimum wage, in-work tax credits and childcare subsidies do exist). Jobcentre Plus is located similarly towards the negative push extreme of the non-financial dimension. This is based on its strong negative push features (extensive and rapid job search demands towards any job, strong conditionality and sanctions regime, stigma) and weak positive pull factors (weak substantive employment supports) on this non-financial axis.

The location of several other minor public sector employment programmes are also mapped on Figure 1. Work Experience offers short voluntary work tasters with transport and childcare subsidies whilst Work Trials offer opportunities for new job roles to be tested on an unpaid basis without risk of benefit loss. New Enterprise Allowance offers voluntary business mentoring, a potential financial allowance (up to £1,274 over 26 weeks) and a business loan for starting self-employment. Work Clubs are voluntary self-help meetings where service users can gain basic additional employability support. The Northern Irish Steps to Work scheme is similar in practice to the Jobcentre Plus offer. Work Clubs and Work Trials are therefore slightly more generous than standard Jobcentre Plus on the non-financial dimension and identical on the financial dimension. Work Experience and New Enterprise Allowance represents modest time-limited improvements from the standard Jobcentre Plus position in terms of both financial and non-financial support.

The expected implications of these public sector activation programmes for service users' process well-being provides an initial hypothesis for the later empirical analyses:

Hypothesis 1: Given their relatively 'thin' nature, participation in these public sector activation programmes is expected to associate with comparable or slightly lower well-being levels than open unemployment, controlling for other factors.

Work Programme is a large-scale contacted-out activation scheme that started in 2011 and ceased referrals in 2017. Over its lifetime Work Programme supported around 2 million diverse service users with a programme budget in excess of £3 billion. Work Programme was contracted by central government to a small number of large providers (which often sub-contracted delivery to smaller firms) with large contracts in both financial value and geographical reach. The programme was significant not only due to its large size and significant role in the UK activation landscape but also from a comparative perspective as a vanguard experiment in aggressively quasi-marketised public policy. In terms of its key features Work Programme had small and then zero up-front secure service fees to providers, heavy and then complete reliance on payment-by-results on employment outcomes achieved, and significant provider discretion due to minimal specification from government over (even minimum) services to be delivered within its so-called 'black box' model. Of relevance to the present interest in process well-being, Work Programme became important politically in the UK as it suffered consistent evidence of poor quality, generic and often inappropriate support. More specifically, evidence was found repeatedly to suggest that providers were engaging in widespread 'parking' (the deliberate deprioritization of support) of service users with more complex support needs deemed by providers to be too costly to support and/or unlikely to trigger outcomes payments (Newton et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2013; Meager et al., 2013)

Recognising that evidence, Figure 1 plots two separate Work Programme positions. A first position relates to Work Programme participants with fewer support needs who are relatively close to work. This is located similarly to Jobcentre Plus participation in terms of the financial dimension but closer to the central axis in terms of the non-financial dimension. This adjustment on the second dimension stems from the more regular, intensive and personalised support offered to this group in Work Programme compared to in Jobcentre Plus as well as service users' stated preference for the brighter, more positive and more flexible style of Work Programme delivery compared to Jobcentre Plus support (Newton, 2012; Meagher et al., 2014). On the other hand, these service users continue to report that their actual Work Programme support offer is limited (Newton, 2012; Meagher et al., 2014) and that employment outcomes achieved tend to be based more on self-help than contributions from their Work Programme provider (Meagher et al., 2014), thus offering limited positive non-financial pull factors.

Two further testable hypotheses emerge for the later empirical work relating to service users with relatively few support needs within the Work Programme:

Hypotheses 2 & 3: For service users with fewer support needs participation in Work Programme is expected to associate with higher well-being levels compared to both open unemployment (**Hypothesis 2**) and public sector activation (**Hypothesis 3**), other things equal.

In contrast, a second Work Programme position relates to service users with more severe and/or complex support needs who are located at the negative push extreme of the non-financial dimension. This is based on severely limited non-financial pull features for these service users in Work Programme including a lack of more intensive and personalised support as well as its extreme manifestation in the form of 'parking'. This is combined with the still strong negative financial push factors of the mainstream benefits regime that continued to underpin Work Programme participation. Two final hypotheses can therefore be identified for service users with more complex support needs participating in Work Programme:

Hypotheses 4 & 5: For service users with more complex support needs participation in Work Programme is expected to associate with lower well-being compared to public sector activation (**Hypothesis 4**) and lower well-being compared to Work Programme participation for service users with fewer support needs (**Hypothesis 5**), other things equal.

Getting inside in the black box of activation well-being: Data and Methods

To examine these hypotheses empirically the analyses below make innovative use of seven years (2011/12-2016/17) of the UK's large-scale and nationally representative Annual Population Survey (APS). These annual survey waves are combined to form one pooled dataset of roughly 1.1 million survey respondents and analysed via a series of robust multivariate linear regression models. In a research field constrained by a frequent lack of suitable data the APS is ideally suited to explore these hypotheses. Critically, it offers sufficiently large sample sizes across key sub-groups of conceptual interest (e.g. economic status, activation programme type) and contains the full range of necessary well-being outcome variables as well as wider explanatory variables in order to control for other factors. Unless indicated otherwise all analyses are survey weighted using the appropriate APS well-being weights.

The majority of individuals in these data are either employed (53.6%) or inactive, not wishing to work and not involved in activation programmes (e.g. retired, 37.6%). A group of 37,602 survey individuals (3.3%) are openly unemployed and not on any activation scheme whilst 2,751 individuals (0.24%) are unemployed and participating in an activation scheme. A final group of 48,138 individuals (4.28%) are inactive and would like to work but are not participating in any activation programme to support that employment ambition.

Table 2 describes the 2,751 individuals identified as participating in activation schemes across the key schemes mapped onto Figure 1. Almost half are participating in the Work Programme whilst almost one-third are described as participating in 'Other' activation programmes. Given the dominance and frequent mandatory nature of public sector Jobcentre Plus participation as the default activation programme in the UK, combined with the lack of a specific coding for this in the APS survey questionnaire, it is assumed that this 'Other' category is dominated by Jobcentre Plus participants. A diverse range of smaller activation schemes are also included in the survey as described in Figure 1 above.

Table 2: Activation participation across the survey respondents

UK activation scheme	Freq	%
Work Club	204	7.42
New Enterprise Allowance	92	3.34
Work Experience (2-8 weeks)	168	6.11
Work Trial	28	1.02
Work Programme	1,234	44.86
Training for Success (NI only)	4	0.15
Steps to Work (NI only)	43	1.56
Training for work	56	2.04
Ready for work	43	1.56
Other (assumed largely Jobcentre Plus)	879	31.95
Total	2,751	100

Programme form and service user process well-being in UK activation: empirical findings

To begin, Table 3 summarises the average well-being levels across the six economic statuses coded in the survey data. Given the paper's interest in the implications of policy form on service user well-being results are shown separately for the Work programme and public sector activation schemes. All well-being indicators are scored on a scale 0-10 where 10 relates to its highest possible level: higher scores for satisfaction, happiness and worth therefore denote higher well-being whilst higher scores for anxiety denote lower well-being.

Table 3 shows that well-being scores tend to lie in the range two to four for anxiety and the range six to eight for satisfaction, happiness and worth. Those in employment on average report higher levels of well-being than the unemployed, whether openly unemployed without activation or participating in activation schemes. Across the different activation programmes the well-being levels of Work Programme participants is consistently lower than for those receiving public sector activation. Those in public sector activation schemes show comparable well-being levels to the openly unemployed. In line with Fryer's theoretical work on the value of agency, notably higher well-being levels are seen amongst those economically inactive individuals who do not wish to work and are not participating in activation schemes compared to those who would like to work but are not receiving activation support towards that ambition.

Table 3: Average well-being levels across the economic status

Economic Status	Well-being Dimension			
	Anxiety	Satisfaction	Happiness	Worth
Open unemployment without activation	3.36	6.73	6.93	7.08
Work Programme	3.71	6.29	6.77	6.74
Public sector activation	3.52	6.70	7.01	7.18
Employed	2.87	7.68	7.46	7.89
Inactive would like work - no activation	3.78	6.71	6.72	7.13
Inactive would not like work - no activation	2.90	7.63	7.52	7.80

Although initially instructive these simple descriptive analyses naturally lack any controls for compositional differences (e.g. age, sex, health, qualifications, etc) across groups that might well be relevant. These are known covariates to well-being (Dolan and Peasgood, 2008; Oguz et al., 2013) and would be expected to play a role therefore. The analyses below therefore employ multiple linear regression models with a range of controls in order to take account of these wider factors of potential relevance. Results of the models are presented in Table 4. Given that these are linear models and all factors are inserted as dummy variables each coefficient describes the expected effect of that factor on well-being compared to its reference group (as detailed in the far left column). Asterisks denote statistical significance: three if significant at the 1% level; two if significant at the 5% level; and one if significant at the 10% level.

Table 4: Accounting for service user process well-being

		Anxiety	Satisfaction	Happiness	Worth
Economic Status Ref= Openly unemployed with no activation	Work Programme activation	0.272**	-0.212**	0.0254	-0.153*
	Public sector activation	0.114	0.0846	0.171**	0.180**
	Employed	-0.430***	0.791***	0.373***	0.612***
	Inactive & want work	0.172***	0.148***	-0.0488**	0.133***
	Inactive & don't want work	-0.512***	0.882***	0.523***	0.621***
Time Period Ref=11/12-12/13	2013/14-14/15	-0.180***	0.118***	0.129***	0.101***
	2015/16-17/18	-0.364***	0.375***	0.351***	0.286***
Health condition Ref=Good health	Bad health	1.376***	-1.247***	-1.226***	-1.010***
Region Ref=NI	London & South East	0.248***	-0.244***	-0.269***	-0.253***
	Other regions	0.139***	-0.226***	-0.274***	-0.221***
Sex Ref=Male	Female	0.266***	0.104***	0.0714***	0.278***
Highest Qualifications Ref=No qualifications	Other	0.113***	-0.138***	-0.0680***	-0.0535***
	GCSE	0.0543***	-0.119***	-0.0816***	-0.0210***
	A-level	0.0961***	-0.0403***	-0.0241**	0.0444***
	Degree or Above	0.209***	-0.0412***	-0.0188**	0.0696***
Marital Status Ref=Not married	Married	-0.244***	0.608***	0.507***	0.474***
Ethnicity Ref=White British	Asian	0.135***	-0.100***	0.0407***	-0.0889***
	Chinese	0.0629	-0.166***	-0.0341	-0.237***
	Black	-0.0415*	-0.386***	-0.0716***	-0.0802***
	Other	0.187***	-0.175***	-0.0818***	-0.0829***
Age Ref=16-29	Aged 30-49	0.314***	-0.505***	-0.322***	-0.191***
	Aged 50+	0.170***	-0.395***	-0.127***	-0.0583***
	Constant	2.906***	7.096***	7.194***	7.139***
Observations		1,065,834	1,067,307	1,066,912	1,064,005
R-squared		0.036	0.111	0.059	0.079

The key focus here is on the relationships between economic status – in particular the different activation programmes – and service users' process well-being, controlling for other factors. These results are shown in the top block of results in Table 4. Their shared reference group is set as openly unemployed people who are outside any activation support (as noted in the left column).

Starting with the activation programmes, on average individuals participating in public sector activation show statistically significant and substantively higher levels of well-being in terms of the happiness and worth indicators as well as a small positive but non-significant effect for satisfaction, controlling for other factors. There is a possible suggestion of higher levels of anxiety for these unemployed participants of public sector activation programmes compared to the openly unemployed once other factors have been controlled for, though this is not statistically significant. For the Work Programme the picture is more troubling. Unemployed service users participating in the Work Programme on average show higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of satisfaction and worth compared to the openly unemployed reference group, controlling for other factors. These associations are all statistically significant at the 5% level except for worth which is significant at the 10% level.

Amongst the other economic statuses, individuals who are employed on average show a significant and sizeably higher level of well-being across all four well-being indicators compared to the openly unemployed, other things equal. The same is true of individuals who are economically inactive without a desire to work and outside of any activation scheme. Well-being levels for individuals who are inactive and wishing to work but without activation support are broadly comparable to those seen for individuals participating in public sector activation, other things equal. Of the wider variables modelled associations run as expected in terms of their estimated relationships with individual's well-being (Dolan et al., 2008; Oguz et al., 2013).

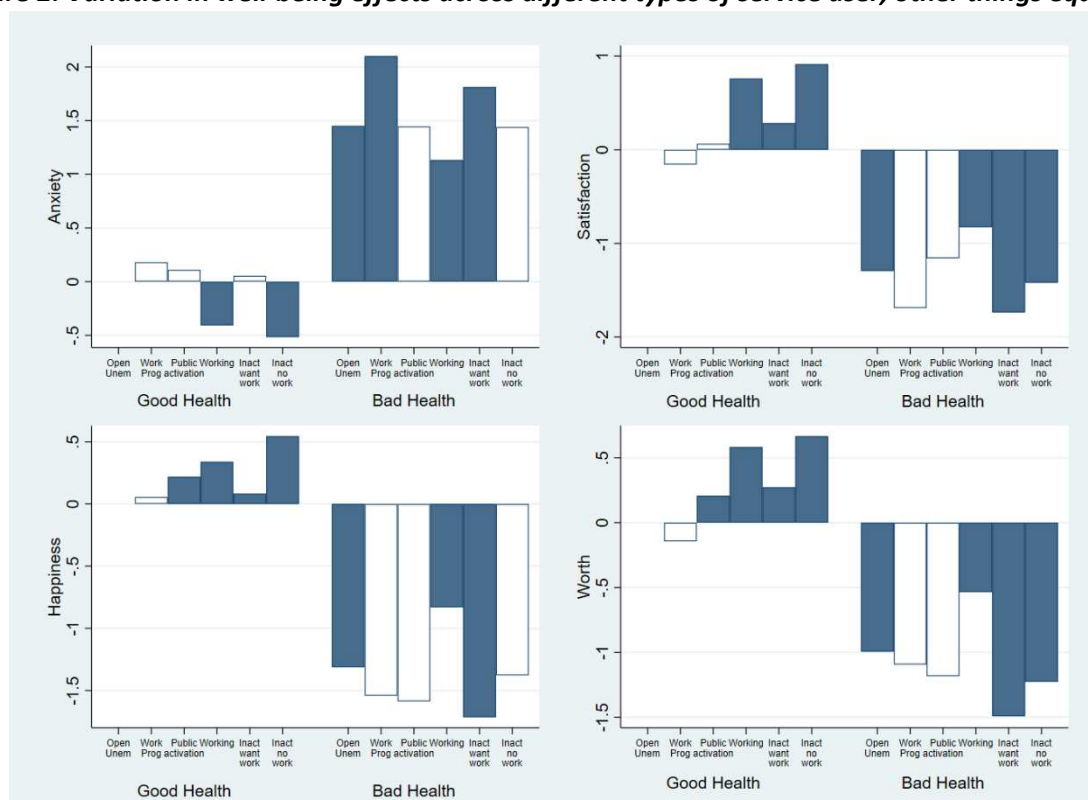
Given that the form of activation programme appears to matter for service users' process well-being a further interest exists around whether it matters equally for different types of service users. This has been identified in a recent systematic review of the activation well-being literature as a key empirical gap (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019) and is particularly relevant to the present analyses given the evidence outlined above around the systematic 'parking' of service users with more complex support needs within Work Programme (Newton, 2012; WPSC, 2013; Meagher et al., 2013). To explore this issue the linear regression models above are reproduced with the addition of interaction effects between economic status and poor health. This binary health status indicator is chosen because it is the single strongest negative well-being predictor in Table 4, was the key focus of concern around 'parking' in Work Programme (WPSC, 2013) and represents a sensible proxy for the broader cohort of service users with more complex and/or severe support needs more generally.

Figure 2 shows the results of these interaction effects. Wider controls are again included for ethnicity, qualifications, sex, marital status and region but their effects (which remain relatively similar) are not reported since the focus is on the interaction effects specifically. As labelled on the vertical axis, from top-left and running clockwise the four charts relate respectively to results of these interaction effects for anxiety, satisfaction, worth and happiness. Along the vertical axis the estimated relationships of these key economic status groups with well-being are shown, controlling for other factors. As labelled along the horizontal axis these economic statuses are shown in the following order from left to right: open unemployment; Work Programme; public sector activation; working; inactive and want to work; and inactivate and do not want to work. In order to explore potential variation in process well-being across service users in good and bad health respectively the

results are shown in two separate blocks, as labelled along the horizontal axis: results for individuals in good health are shown in a left-hand block and results for individuals in poor health are shown in a right hand block.

Solid bars in Figure 2 denote estimates that are statistically significant at the 5% level whilst hollow bars denote effects that are not significant statistically at this standard threshold. It is worth noting that detecting the statistical significance of these interactions sets a high bar evidentially given that they are based on relatively small sample sizes: only 16% of Work Programme and 17% of public sector activation survey respondents are identified as in bad health. As Ziliak and McCloskey (2008) argue, the ‘sizeless stare’ at p-values alone should always be avoided in statistical analysis and thought should be given to effect sizes and their substantive meaning as well as to statistical significance. This is particularly true in scenarios such as this where statistical significance might a priori not be expected due to restricted sub-group sample sizes.

Figure 2: Variation in well-being effects across different types of service user, other things equal



The interpretation begins by focusing only on those service users in good health – the left block of results in each chart. The reference category against which these results are compared is those service users who are openly unemployed and in good health. This reference category is included on the far left of this block and its result is set to zero. Looking across these results shows that service users in good health in the Work Programme show comparable if not slightly lower (though not statistically significant) levels of well-being compared to the openly unemployed in good health, other things equal. In contrast, for service users in good health participating in public sector activation programmes there is some suggestion of slightly higher well-being compared to the openly unemployed in good health, with statistically significant positive effects seen for happiness and worth. Compared to the openly unemployed in good health, individuals tend to show higher

well-being levels in employment, when inactive and not wanting employment and, to a lesser extent, when inactive and desiring employment, other things equal.

The interpretation moves next to those service users in bad health – the right block of results in each chart. Immediately striking is the marked and consistent detrimental impact of bad health on well-being levels irrespective of economic status, controlling for other factors. For these individuals who are openly unemployed, for example, for each well-being outcome the average well-being levels for those in bad health are at least one point worse off than those in good health on these ten-point well-being scales, and these large differences are always significant statistically. Similar trends are visible across all economic statuses. Looking across the results relating to individuals in bad health, the reference category against which these interaction effects are compared is those service users who are openly unemployed and in bad health – the left most bar within these right-hand blocks of results for individuals in bad health. For individuals in bad health participation in activation – whether Work Programme or public sector activation – shows little statistically robust evidence of well-being levels different to those of the openly unemployed, other things equal. There is some non-significant suggestion of lower well-being levels in activation compared to open unemployment for service users in bad health however, other things equal. The exception is the significant evidence of increased levels of anxiety for these service users in the Work Programme, other things equal. For individuals in bad health paid employment is associated with higher well-being compared to open unemployment, other things equal, but not enough to compensate for the negative effects of poor health. Interestingly, for individuals in bad health the lowest levels of well-being, other things equal, tend to be seen amongst those individuals who are inactive and outside of any activation programme but who want to be in employment.

Discussion

Employment activation has moved to the centre of welfare systems internationally. As it has done so the well-being impacts of employment outcomes from activation programmes has risen up the policy agenda as policy makers seek to justify their increasingly interventionist activation approaches and has climbed up the up the research agenda as scholars seek to unpack the empirical evidence. Alongside that (albeit important) interest in how employment outcomes affect well-being levels, it is also critical for research and policy to understand more fully the ways in which differently configured welfare programmes affect the well-being levels of differently positioned service users during participation in public policies. The growing theoretical and empirical attention on these links between activation participation and process well-being is welcome but remains under-developed in key ways. The present article has made three significant contributions to the growing literature around activation well-being scholarship and practice.

Firstly, in its conceptual contributions the paper bridges a major key on-going need in the literature to subtly connect well-being theory, qualitative programme form and well-being outcomes (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019). For the first time in the literature the original conceptual framework developed in the paper enables the rich qualitative variation in alternative programme forms to be subtly mapped and for their links to service users' process well-being to be conceptually hypothesised and empirically examined. In doing so this conceptual contribution advances significantly a key gap in the current literature (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019), pushing the literature beyond those few existing attempts that have utilised quantitative metrics of activation expenditure to seek to differentiate programme form (Wulfgramm, 2014; Vossemer et al., 2018).

Secondly, in its empirical contributions the paper pulls through six conceptually-derived hypotheses into sophisticated multivariate statistical analyses that test empirically the utility of the conceptual framework in the UK context post-2010. Furthermore, for the first time in the literature the paper's empirical analyses push beyond the current evidence base on *aggregate* well-being effects to instead dig empirically into key but currently neglected *inequalities* in process well-being across different types of service users with greater and lesser levels of support needs. In doing so the article's empirical work responds to a major empirical gap in the literature (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2019). The key results are as follows. Across all individuals participating in public sector activation the results point to somewhat higher levels of well-being compared to open unemployment, controlling for other factors. These results suggest that hypothesis one is unduly pessimistic in expecting these 'thin' public sector activation schemes to associate with zero or slightly negative well-being compared to open unemployment, other things equal. In contrast, across all service users participating in the Work Programme these findings suggest lower levels of well-being compared to open unemployment and, to a greater extent, public sector activation, other things equal. These findings are of concern given the popularity of quasi-marketized approaches in the UK and internationally. For service users in good health participation in Work Programme associates with similar, if not slightly lower, well-being compared either to open unemployment or public sector activation, other things equal. This is in contrast to hypotheses two and three which appear unduly optimistic about the well-being expectations for these service users in Work Programme. Finally, controlling for other factors, bad health has a significant negative association with well-being irrespective of economic status. For these service users in bad health the findings offer little evidence to suggest that any form of activation – whether Work Programme or public sector – positively affects the well-being of service users compared to open unemployment. Instead, there is some limited (albeit non-significant) evidence that well-being levels are slightly lower in activation programmes than in open unemployment for service users in bad health, other things equal. Indeed, there is statistically significant evidence of elevated anxiety levels in Work Programme compared to open unemployment for service users in poor health, other things equal. As such, the expectations in hypotheses four and five that service users in bad health would, other things equal, fare better in well-being terms in public sector activation (hypothesis four) or open unemployment (hypothesis five) compared to Work Programme is not (or only very partially) supported. In contrast, the expectation in hypothesis six that in Work Programme service users in bad health will fare less well than service users with fewer support needs is supported, but the same is true for the public sector activation programmes.

Thirdly, although focused here on the case study context of UK activation policy the paper's combined conceptual and empirical contributions inform policy thinking and practice more widely across policy fields and contexts. Taken together the results offer partial support to the utility of the conceptual framework developed. They suggest too that the practical difference on the ground for service users may not be so different between Work Programme and public sector activation, despite their considerable programme design differences. Though noting the slightly more positive results for the public sector schemes compared to Work Programme, in broader view none of these activation programmes as configured were able to make meaningful contributions to service users' well-being in the face of the more significant challenges that they faced and that were damaging their well-being to far greater extents. This raises important questions to the case of UK activation design specifically as well as to policy making processes more generally.

For this specific case these analyses point to a UK activation system – both private and public – that fails to provide the types of valuable functions, agency and hope that the theoretical accounts of

Jahoda and Fryer emphasise as necessary to enhance service users' process well-being during participation on programme. Moving closer to these ideas can be expected to require greater quantitative resourcing, intensity and longevity of personalised support to all service users. In addition, however, it can also be expected to require a qualitative reconfiguration of the approach and ethos of UK activation such that service user agency, preferences and co-production are placed more squarely into its values and delivery model.

More generally, the paper highlights the relevance of programme form to service users' process well-being during participation and identifies the types of programme characterises that might be expected theoretically and empirically to either help or hinder that well-being. What practically might be done to support better policy making around programme design and service users' process well-being? In the UK context policy makers are required to complete equality impact assessments for all new programmes. Looking forwards, it would be helpful if policy makers were required to consider programme configuration and its service user well-being within any such future equality impact assessments. It is only through embedding rigorous conceptual and empirical good practice of this sort within routine policy processes that policy makers will be supported to fully recognise and consider the well-being implications of their policy decisions for service users.

Conflicts of interest: None

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