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*Published in:*  
Social Policy and Society

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1017/S1474746419000186](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746419000186)

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*Publication date:*  
2019

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Jensen, T. D., & Danneris, S. (2019). Reconsidering 'what works' in welfare-to-work with the vulnerable unemployed: The potential of relational causality as an alternative approach. *Social Policy and Society*, 18(4), 583-596. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746419000186>

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# Reconsidering 'What Works' in Welfare-to-Work with the Vulnerable Unemployed: The Potential of Relational Causality as an Alternative Approach

Tanja Dall\* and Sophie Danneris\*\*

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**Abstract:** *There is growing interest in research that informs more effective practices in employment services across Europe, Australia and the USA. However, despite the ever-expanding amount of research on the implementation and efficacy of various policy programmes in practice, the knowledge on how to bring unemployed individuals closer to the labour market remains ambiguous and inconclusive. This is especially so in the context of the more vulnerable unemployed, who face physical, mental and social challenges in addition to unemployment. In this article, we examine the existing literature in terms of its potential to inform (the development of) effective employment policies. On this basis, we outline an alternative approach based on the concept of relational causality, and discuss the implications of such an approach for applied policy research.*

**Keywords:** Welfare-to-work, vulnerable unemployed, evidence based policy, relational causality.

## 1. Introduction

The challenge of integrating the long-term unemployed into work have been and continue to be an ongoing issue for social policy development and delivery in most of the Western World; particularly because a substantial part of this group faces physical, mental and social challenges in addition to being unemployed. This does not mean, however, that no effort is being made to bring vulnerable unemployed individuals closer to work. Work and employment are believed to be conducive to individual wellbeing, social cohesion and sound national economies (Borland, 2014; Andersen *et al.*, 2016; van Berkel *et al.*, 2017), and the challenge of unemployment has been the subject of sustained focus in recent decades. This focus has taken many forms across the western world, yet two general and parallel lines of development have been key to how unemployment is being targeted at the policy level. For one, substantial reforms of employment policies have resulted in the development of welfare-to-work<sup>1</sup> (WtW) approaches that bring forward the primacy of work as a goal for welfare services, currently including individualization as a tool for servicing individual's needs (which can have both promising and less promising implications) and limiting the provision of welfare, even for the vulnerable unemployed (Brodkin, 2013; Brodkin and Larsen, 2013; Considine *et al.*, 2015; Caswell *et al.*, 2017). Clients that were formerly exempt from work and activation obligations, either due to physical, mental and/or social challenges, are now treated as part of the wider group of unemployed individuals (Lindsay and Houston, 2013; Nielsen, 2015; Caswell *et al.*, 2017; Danneris and Nielsen, 2018). This may have positive implications as these groups have previously been overlooked when including people in the labour market. However, this also means that the more vulnerable unemployed are subject to increased conditionality of benefits, demands of activation and economic sanctions and incentives that they may not be able to react to (Griggs and Evans, 2010; Card *et al.*, 2015). Second, operational and managerial reforms have rearranged public employment services (and social services more generally), according to the ethos of New Public Management. The basic idea

is that management focused on performance is the most efficient way for public institutions to 'work better and cost less' (Hood and Dixon, 2015). Through the standardisation of services and streamlining of procedures, more effective and efficient services are to be achieved, with better results for both the wider public agencies and the individual receiving the service. Within the employment services, such managerial orientations have occasioned changes in service delivery, particularly in the context of standardisation, manual-basing and performance measurement, which have essentially transformed these services (Brodkin, 2011; Herz and Lalander, 2016; Lauri, 2016).

Alongside these developments in the field, the growing demand for scientific 'evidence' that can inform policy development within this and other areas of social policy has been noted by several authors (Head, 2010; Davies, 2012; Triantafillou, 2015). With inspiration from evidence-based medicine, a focus on evidence-based policy has developed in social services (Marston and Watts, 2003), based on the idea that knowledge within the field of effective interventions will increase the ability of policy makers to design public policies that best meet their objectives (Newman, 2017: 218). However, despite these ongoing efforts to produce knowledge to inform effective employment policies, the problem of unemployment persists for individuals experiencing problems in addition to unemployment (Bredgaard *et al.*, 2015), and there seems to be no clear research on how to approach this challenge for the more vulnerable unemployed individuals (Danneris, 2016).

In this article, we will examine what we know about what works in terms of bringing vulnerable unemployed individuals into or closer to the labour market and how we can move forward towards research more applicable to policy makers. The article consists of two main parts. First, we examine the existing research on policy efficacy and implementation and discuss this in terms of its potential to inform (the development of) effective policies. Second, we build on the insights and limitations of the existing research to outline an alternative research approach, thus building on a relational ontology, which we believe holds a stronger potential for conducting research applicable to policy makers. We conclude the article with a

discussion of the implications of such an approach for both researchers and policy makers.

## **2. Research on ‘what works’ and how interventions work in the delivery of employment policies**

Examining the existing literature on WtW policies in terms of what works when getting vulnerable unemployed into the labour market is a formidable task, since the extent of such research has increased substantially within recent years (Danneris, 2016; Raffass, 2017). Thus, what we set out to do in this article is not to provide a complete mapping of the available research, but instead to give an overview of the various strands of research engaging with the theme in different ways.

Furthermore, we will discuss what each strand contributes to in the search for knowledge on how to improve labour market participation for the vulnerable unemployed.

### **Researching the effectiveness of WtW policies**

One extensive and expanding strand of research, which has engaged most directly with the question of ‘what works’ in terms of bringing vulnerable unemployed individuals into work, is that of quantitative studies of the effects of specific programmes and policy measures on labour market participation (see Danneris (2016) for a mapping review). One of the dominating tendencies is research with a preference for randomised control trials (RCT), or as close to this as one can possibly get (meta evaluations, quasi experiments, quantitative statistical tests) (e.g. Graversen and van Ours, 2009; Maibom *et al.*, 2016; Rehwald *et al.*, 2017), and on the back of those, meta-reviews that seek to synthesise findings across multiple individual studies (e.g. Crisp and Fletcher, 2008; Card *et al.*, 2015). Several of these studies, which are believed to represent the most sound and reliable knowledge in the field (Raffass, 2017), find contradictory or only slightly positive effects of WtW policies in terms of encouraging unemployed individuals into work (e.g. Smedslund *et al.*, 2006; Danneris, 2016; Raffass, 2016). One example is an IZA (Institute of Labor Economics) policy article by Martin (2014), who reviewed 14 studies using cross-country econometric analysis to investigate the impact

of WtW policies on employment and unemployment rates across OECD countries. Martin concludes that spending on WtW policies does to some extent reduce unemployment or long-term unemployment (Martin, 2014: 11). However, Martin also notes that there are examples of both successes and failures in terms of activating benefit recipients, and that these vary as a consequence of the design and implementation of activation regimes, which are again determined by the different starting points, institutions and culture between the countries (Martin, 2014: 26). Martin's study illustrates the challenges of measuring the effects of social interventions. Thus, several authors have criticised the methodological approaches of this strand of studies, which draw on a linear logic of causality when approaching the question of what works (Koivisto, 2007; Andersen *et al.*, 2017). Such methodologies treat both the intervention (WtW policies) and the problem (unemployment) to which it is applied as standardisable, constant and measurable in isolated variables (Shortall, 2012; Newman, 2017). As we will demonstrate throughout this article, this is not reflective of how employment services are delivered to unemployed individuals, nor of how interventions 'work' in complex situations<sup>2</sup>.

A few exceptions to the quantitative evaluations have included a broader range of research in their reviews of 'what works' (e.g. Griggs and Evans, 2010; Brady and Cook, 2015). These studies illustrate how the linear logic of cause and effect is too simplistic when dealing with social matters such as unemployment. For instance, Campbell *et al.* (2016) review 19 qualitative studies in their investigation of lone parents, health, wellbeing and employment policies. They conclude that participation in mandatory WtW interventions have limited success in terms of improving lone parents' health, wellbeing and economic circumstances, but also make visible how several contextually mediating factors such as the unavailability of suitable employment, childcare and social support may counter the potential positive results of employment interventions for this specific group of unemployed individuals (Campbell *et al.*, 2016). In an individual study, Bredgaard and Hansen (2012) use a realistic evaluation framework to analyse what works in three activation sites. They find that a complex interplay

between individual moderators and mechanisms affects the young unemployed. Thus, they conclude that different types of programmes and activities work differently depending on the individual client and his or her competencies and self-efficacy, etc.

Overall, then, the research that has most directly engaged with the question of ‘what works’ offers few clear answers to inform policy makers in their quest to ameliorate unemployment, even more so for people with challenges in addition to being unemployed (Danneris, 2016)<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Researching the front-line of WtW bureaucracies***

A separate strand of research, that of street-level organisations within WtW, helps to fill the gaps between a policy decision to apply a certain measure or intervention and what (and what does not) happen in terms of bringing unemployed individuals closer to the labour market. While growing, the extent of this research is modest compared to its aforementioned quantitative counterpart, and qualitative methods are used more often (see van Berkel (2017) for a mapping review in the European context). Building on the work of Lipsky (2010), this research approaches the implementation of policy not as the application of standardised interventions that can be expected to ‘work’ in certain and uniformed ways, but rather as processes of translation and transformation through which policy is made to work in local practices at street-level (Brodkin, 2011; Brodkin and Marston, 2013). A recurring theme is the role of managerial reforms that have introduced New Public Management (NPM), performance management and similar trends in the design and delivery of employment and social policies (e.g. Diefenbach, 2009; Heinrich and Marschke, 2010; Brodkin, 2011; van Berkel and Knies, 2016). For instance, Soss, Fording & Schram (2011: 209) demonstrate how performance measurements, when combined with other organisational conditions, encourage frontline professionals to sanction clients. Similarly, Møller *et al.* (2016) found that performance management promotes a focus on short-term results, such as quick, temporary jobs, rather than more sustainable solutions to the problem of unemployment. Other authors have

examined the role of frontline workers' attitudes and competencies for how they enact employment policies (Malmberg-Heimonen and Vuori, 2005; Behnke *et al.*, 2010; van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012; Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015), adding yet another dimension to the complexity of making policy 'work'. Such influences on how policy is delivered to the unemployed individual muddies the picture of 'what works', as policy measures and programmes are essentially transformed through their very delivery. Street-level literature, nevertheless, demonstrates that WtW policies have a great (often negative) impact on the lives and experiences of the unemployed, even though the long-term effects in terms of labour market participation, as described previously, may be limited (e.g. Dubois, 2010; Møller and Stone, 2013; Carter and Whitworth, 2015; Nothdurfter, 2016). A small sub-strand of studies has examined how employment policies are experienced from the perspective of the unemployed individuals they aim to reach (e.g. Marston and McDonald, 2008; Danneris, 2016; Danneris and Nielsen, 2018; McIntosh and Wright, 2018). The purpose of giving a voice to vulnerable people is commonly found in this strand, extracting unique knowledge from lived experiences and, to some extent, contributing to qualified practices in the delivery of services by illuminating how the unemployed are affected by such policies in complex ways far beyond their participation in the labour market. The street-level literature does not engage with the question of 'what works', and is often preoccupied by the perverse effects that arise when policies do not work. Nevertheless, it offers important insights into *how* policies work in both intended and unintended ways at the street-level and, as such, holds important potential for policy makers as they consider how to address the problem of unemployment.

### **Researching the communicative practices between front-line professionals and the unemployed**

That the lack of the conclusive effects of WtW policies is not (merely) a matter of failed implementation or of a management regime gone wrong is exemplified by the growing literature, which examines what happens in concrete meetings between professionals and

unemployed individuals; that is, how policies are brought about in personal interactions (e.g. Eskelinen and Olesen, 2010; Caswell *et al.*, 2011; Dall and Sarangi, 2018; Dall, 2018, Matarese and Caswell, 2018). Using discourse and conversation analysis, this literature shows an interest in the variations and nuances of individual cases, and offers important insights into the 'working' of policies at the micro level. For instance, Mäkitalo and Säljö (2002a, 2002b), Mäkitalo (2014) and Müller and Wolf (2015) demonstrate how institutional (and policy-derived) categories are constituted in and constitutive of client work in public employment services. Another important point to come out of this research is the active and strategic role of both professionals (e.g. Drew *et al.*, 2010; Irvine *et al.*, 2010, Toerien *et al.*, 2015, Hansen and Natland, 2017) and the unemployed individuals (e.g. Solberg, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, Danneris and Dall, 2017) as co-producers of how policy measures are implemented. These micro-level studies demonstrate the contingent and negotiated nature of how policy is executed in practice. While such interactions are understood to be happening contingently and continuously between specific people conversing in particular moments in time, general tendencies (in interactions) can often be identified that offer tools for reflection and improved practices for frontline workers (Hall and White, 2005; Kirkwood *et al.*, 2014). These studies demonstrate how interventions, even if they are described and organised in highly structured and standardised ways, are enacted in concrete, contingent and negotiated interactions between professionals, unemployed individuals and the contexts they are part of. However, as the focus is, naturally, on the verbal interactions of the (human) actors, this strand of research offers limited insight into the many ways that practices are shaped outside of such interpersonal interactions (e.g. through policy discourse and management strategies, etc.). Furthermore, discursive studies offer little insight into the more general consequences of certain policies, by focusing on the detailed ways in which they are made to work in and as a result of certain interactions.

In this short journey through the literature, we are presented with a great variety of studies in terms of applied methods, approaches and findings. In each of these strands of

research, both positive and critical approaches can be identified – and it is clear that they contribute to the development of the field in very different ways. Important and valuable knowledge exists in all strands of research, but looking at them individually does not help us to further our attempt to improve WtW policies or to move more people off benefits and into work in sustainable ways. Unfortunately, the field is, to this day, characterised by limited dialogue between the different strands of research, and often the most scathing critique of the knowledge produced in one strand of research comes from researchers in the other strands.

### **3. A relational ontology of ‘what works’**

In this second part of the article, we will outline an ontological starting point for the study of how policy measures and interventions can ameliorate the challenge of unemployment for vulnerable individuals. In doing so, we depart from the aim of the research looking to ‘evidence base’ employment policies by identifying successful interventions, but also build on the contributions from the street-level literature to argue that the assumption of linear chains of causality between applying a certain policy and the labour market participation of a diverse group of people cannot stand in social practices. For one, policy measures may have unintended effects on areas of people’s lives outside of employment, each of which needs to be taken into account. Second, the application of a given measure is not a standardised intervention that can be expected to ‘work’ in a uniform manner. Rather, as the street-level literature has demonstrated, organisational, managerial, professional and local contexts continuously re-shape policies as they are implemented. This is further illustrated by the research on meetings and interactions between professionals and unemployed individuals, which presents how even the individual client and professional shape policy interventions in situated interactions. We will develop these points further in the following sections.

#### ***The aim of understanding ‘what works’ – in nuanced ways***

The study of what works in terms of ameliorating unemployment for the vulnerable unemployed is an important topic and task for researchers engaged in conducting applied

and/or applicable research in this specific field. As such, we are aligned with the aim of the wave of research looking to inform and qualify both employment and social policies targeting the challenges of long-term unemployment. However, we believe that there are significant limitations in how the question of 'what works' has previously been approached, some of which has actually worked against this aim. As we have previously outlined, the strand of research looking to 'evidence base' social and employment policies (and practices) has been oriented towards the identification of causal links between a certain measure and the movement of unemployed individuals into work. However, as has been thoroughly demonstrated by research on street-level organisations, the matter of labour market participation is not the only significant (potential) effect of employment policies. As these additional 'effects' can be highly detrimental to the individual, as well as counterproductive in terms of supporting labour market participation (Caswell *et al.*, 2015), their inclusion is imperative when we seek to understand 'what works'. For instance, Griggs and Evans (2010) find that the use of sanctions works in terms of increasing the rate of job entry for clients on unemployment benefits on a short-term basis, but in the longer term – and for welfare benefit recipients – the effects are inconclusive or negative; further, Caswell *et al.*, Larsen & Sieling-Monas (2015) demonstrate how decreasing benefits and increased sanctions lead to a decline in both job search activity and physical, mental and social wellbeing for the vulnerable unemployed. While it is ultimately a political decision whether the effects of labour market participation outweigh the negative consequences in terms of poverty and loss of individual wellbeing, the role of researchers must be to seek a comprehensive understanding of a given phenomenon and, perhaps most importantly, when political powers seek to further their understanding and agenda through substantial and administrative policies (e.g. Schram *et al.*, 2013). Thus, we argue that there is a potential to strengthen research on 'what works' by including unintended and spill-over effects, as well as the other consequences of policies that do not directly pertain to labour market participation.

### ***Moving towards a relational causality***

Our point that the effects or consequences of policies pertaining to other dimensions than that of labour market participation is not only a normative one, but is also closely linked to the ontological position from which we approach the issue of unemployment.

Research examining whether a given measure ‘works’ often does so based on the assumption of a linear causality; such a causality operates on a mechanistic ontology that supposes that an intervention is a necessary and sufficient element to produce the sought-after effect (Koivisto, 2008: 105). However, such successional processes of causality are the exception, and not the norm, in the social domain (Biesta, 2010: 497). An intervention in the employment services is not the operation whose effect was first examined in a more or less controlled environment in evidence-based medicine. Thus, even a fairly ‘simple’ intervention, such as that of sanctioning clients that do not attend a meeting they are obligated to be at, gains its effect relative to the relations the client is part of; in interactions between the client and the frontline worker (Have the clients understood what they have done wrong, so as to act differently next time?), between the client and their everyday life (Does the client have access to childcare, so as to be able to attend every appointment going forward?) and between the frontline worker and the managerial obligations and incentives s/he is working under. In the words of Porpora (2018: 419), ‘Instead of causality always following some homogenous if-then form [...] causality is thick, taking a multitude of different forms’. Relational causality is why a given policy measure will always work in more than one ‘dimension’ (e.g. that of labour market participation) and why there will always be other effects than those expected (and measured). As described by Biesta (2010: 497); ‘In the social domain interventions do not generate effects in a mechanistic or deterministic way, but through processes that – structurally, not pragmatically – are open so that the connections between intervention and effect are non-linear and, at most, probabilistic’. Rather than a linear causality, then, it is necessary to understand the processes of change in the social domain of unemployment in terms of a relational causality, in which the causal mechanisms are to be found in relational processes

that are continuously performed, produced and reproduced in daily activities and practices (Olesen and Eskelinen, 2011).

We do see some recognition of this in the research focused on finding 'effects'. For instance, Martin (2014) first finds a positive effect within macroeconomic employment policies before going on to nuance his findings according to the significant differences in the activation regimes studied, while Bredgaard and Hansen (2012) find, at the local level, that the effects of the studied interventions depend on local and individual matters. These more nuanced approaches to effect studies, from our perspective, illustrate how a narrow focus on the linear effects of a given policy measure does not provide a sufficient or full picture of the consequences of such policies. Furthermore, they do not offer much input into the directions that policy makers might look towards for more qualified services. In order to improve applicability, the seemingly proven effects (or lack thereof) must be considered in relation to broader understandings of both the effects themselves and of the way in which interventions work in certain contexts.

### ***A relational understanding of how policies 'work'***

The concept of relational causality calls attention to the ways in which policies work in social practices. As demonstrated by the literature on street-level organisations, policy is not simply applied (in linear ways) at the frontline of public employment services, but goes through a series of ongoing translations and transformations, including managerial and organisational, as well as individual and communicational.

Our proposal of the concept of relational causality builds on the ontological ideas of relational sociology<sup>i</sup> (Depéltheau, 2018). Dépeltheau (2018: 10) outlines a 'relational turn' in sociology that refers to 'the attempt to perceive, define, study and so on social phenomena as fluid social processes rather than solid, determining social substances'. This is in opposition to approaches that study effects as linear causal mechanisms between essentially separate entities (e.g. that of a certain policy and its effects on labour market participation). Rather, any social phenomenon is constituted through and within dynamic relations between a matrix of both human and non-human actors; thus, the 'effects' (or other phenomena) emerge and evolve through ongoing relational processes.

Following this ontology, a policy or a specific (policy decided) intervention within the unemployment services may consist of a 'script' outlining which actors are to perform what kind of processes and activities in order to achieve a given goal. Yet the actors perform and produce the method in actual and concrete activities in practice; accordingly, the effects of a given practice 'cannot be explained by the work method [alone], because it is constituted and co-produced in the interactive work activities and processes and it is thus an effect too' (Koivisto, 2008: 109, our addition). This does not mean, however, that we cannot gain any knowledge on 'what works' in social policy efforts, but that we must take into account the ways in which a given intervention is made to work in practice. We are not arguing for or against any certain methodologies here, on the contrary: in order to capture the many ways in which policy measures gain their effects in and through contextual practices, we need a similarly diverse research that engages with the question from different perspectives. Interventions and services

are not universally true and therefore universally applicable (Koivisto, 2007). They are constituted by and function in socio-material networks (Latour, 2005), which means that the a-contextual approach of much of the existing literature on ‘what works’ misses a crucial part of what ‘working’ means in social settings. We have seen this thoroughly demonstrated by both the research in street-level organisations illustrating the role of organisation, management and professional roles, and the micro-discursive research into meetings between frontline workers and unemployed individuals, illustrating the contingent and negotiated character of making policy ‘work’. Unfortunately, such research only engages with the question of what works to a limited extent.

#### **4. Conclusion and perspectives**

At the beginning of this article, we set out to examine and question what we know about what works in terms of bringing vulnerable unemployed individuals into or closer to the labour market. If we are to judge by the research that has most directly engaged with the question, not much seems to be working (e.g. Griggs and Evans, 2010; Raffass, 2017). However, after including the insights of research into the policy work of street-level organisations within the field of WtW (van Berkel, 2017), it becomes clear that, for one, the focus on ‘effects’ in terms of labour market participation is too narrow a lens to evaluate unemployment policies and, second, that policy measures cannot be expected to ‘work’ in linear ways. One of the core messages of the Street-level Bureaucracy research is that policy cannot be simply applied in practice, but rather, policy is *made to work* at the practice level (Brodkin, 2011). Where street-level research mainly focuses on organisational, managerial and professional perspectives, the strand of micro-discursive studies of meetings between frontline workers and unemployed individuals underlines how the ongoing policy work is ‘made’, right down to the micro-level interactions between frontline workers and the unemployed individuals themselves (e.g. Caswell *et al.*, 2011; Dall, 2018). Overall, then, it would seem that we have little conclusive knowledge about ‘what works’ in terms of bringing the vulnerable unemployed into work. What we do have, however, is research that demonstrates the challenges of examining causal

mechanisms in highly contextual, transformational and contingent processes that encompass both policy-level, local organisations and situated meetings between individuals. This does not mean, however, that we cannot gain any knowledge on ‘what works’ in social policy efforts, rather that we must take into account the ways in which a given intervention is *made to work* in practice.

This brings us, then, to the second part of our research question: how can we move forward towards research that offers better knowledge on what works? Building on the insights and challenges of the existing research, we propose a relational approach to the study of causality in social practices. We suggest that the concept of relational causality holds potential to facilitate such research, and define it as the idea that policies (or events/programmes/interventions, etc.) gain their effects in relational processes in which different (human and non-human) actors continuously perform, (re)produce and enact given practices across various contexts. This means that causality takes on a multitude of different forms in fluid and complex processes. It follows that connections between intervention and effect can, at most be probabilistic (cf. Biesta, 2010: 497). Since change is not reducible to any individual actor or mechanism, there are no certain explanations of change and effects (Koivisto 2007: 535), and thus no simple ‘evidence’ to be found on what works. To capture the processes of causality, a relational approach underlines the importance of using a range of different perspectives and methodologies to facilitate the examination of the many ways in which policy is working in practice. This is not to say, that every study should incorporate a range of methodologies, but rather, a call for a more modest recognition of the fact that every study can only provide insights on *some* of the actors, activities and mechanisms that constitute change. Different methodologies have different strengths and will produce different – yet equally important – insights into the workings of policy. It is in the combination and accumulation of research and methodologies, that knowledge about processes of causality can be achieved.

The more immediate implications of such an approach is that research on ‘what works’

will need to include 'effects' or consequences other than the narrow objective of labour market participation when examining 'what works'. This might include examining effects such as poverty and marginalization, but also more open discussions of what constitutes 'evidence' and what this type of research does – and does not – provide insights on. That is, the seemingly proven effects (or lack thereof) must be considered in relation to broader understandings of both the effects themselves and of the way in which interventions work in certain contexts. And, for the time being, that there is a need for a greater humility towards the available EBP constituting our knowledge base in terms of providing us with - at the most – one part of the answer to the question of what works (and not why and how it works).

A relational approach to causality also means that more qualitative researchers will need to directly engage with the question of what works. Much of the aforementioned qualitative work is oriented towards demonstrating how policy does *not* work in its intended ways. While this is a crucially important topic, as it illustrates the possible harmful and counterproductive consequences of policies, there is a lack of research that utilises this ability to capture how policy is made to work in concrete practices to examine more productive ways forward (see Danneris and Caswell this issue for an exception). We believe, therefore, that a relational approach to causality (which could take various theoretical and methodological forms cf. Dépeltheau, 2018) will facilitate increasingly context-sensitive and applicable knowledge about 'what works'.

Finally, one largely absent aspect of the existing research is comprehensive knowledge of the actors that are involved in making policy work: frontline workers and unemployed individuals. If we are to understand policy work as relational processes that are continuously performed, produced and reproduced in daily activities and practices, then the frontline workers and unemployed individuals that are performing these practices (in policy, organisational, managerial and societal, among others, relations) hold unique and important insights we cannot miss out on.

## Notes

1 We use welfare to work (WtW) and activation interchangeably throughout the article.

2 A parallel discussion of the potentials and limitations of quantitative studies of 'what works' have taken place within social work literature, with authors arguing both for and against 'evidence based practice' or 'evidence informed practice' as a way forward towards more effective amelioration of the issues targeted by social policies (unemployment and otherwise) (e.g. McNeese and Thyer, 2004; Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011; Okpych and Yu 2014; Petersén and Olsson, 2015; Diaz and Drewery, 2016).

3 This does not mean, however, that such research has not had an impact. Head (2010), Triantafillou (2011), Bjornholt and Larsen (2015) and Lauri (2018) all argue that a focus on research that can 'evidence base' policy has occasioned changes in service design and delivery.

i. Dépeltheau (2018) describes relational sociology as 'a loose intellectual movement' happening through a constellation of different approaches, theories and thoughts. In the Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology (Dépeltheau, ed., 2018), the relational movement is discussed in relation to a host of other perspectives such as critical realism and ANT, and authors such as Bourdieu and Luhman, in addition to the other chapters, outline various 'versions' or interpretations of the relational ontology. We, therefore, focus on the basic ontological thoughts pertaining to how social phenomena emerge, and are not arguing in favour of any particular theoretical or methodological perspective.

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