

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Activation, Work and Well-Being: Theory, Evidence and Policy Implications

Adam Whitworth 

Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

**Correspondence:** Adam Whitworth ([adam.whitworth@strath.ac.uk](mailto:adam.whitworth@strath.ac.uk))**Received:** 18 January 2024 | **Revised:** 5 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 28 December 2024**Funding:** This work was supported by Regional commissioner of the IPS service and evaluation.**Keywords:** activation | employment support | IPS | paid work | supported employment | well-being

## ABSTRACT

Despite the centrality of activation, paid work and well-being to advanced welfare systems their inter-relationships remain fragmented and underdeveloped in scholarship and policy. The present article makes original contributions to theory, evidence and policy in this context. Theoretically the article presents the two alternative accounts of these relationships and argues for their integration into a single framework. Empirically, path analyses within multivariate structural equation models examine this novel integrated theorisation quantitatively for the first time in the literature using the policy case study of a UK-based voluntary Individual Placement and Support (IPS) activation programme for people with substance misuse issues. The findings support our integrated theoretical framework and highlight the direct importance of activation programmes to client well-being through programme participation alongside their indirect well-being importance through the well-being effects of resulting paid work transitions. The well-being implications for policy and practice are significant and further research is needed to further develop our understanding of how different activation approaches affect well-being both directly and through its shaping of differing employment types and trajectories.

## 1 | Introduction

Since the ‘activation turn’ of the late 1990s employment programmes to support workless individuals into paid work have become ubiquitous across advanced welfare states (Hansen 2019). In tandem, well-being has risen dramatically up the policy agenda (Layard and Ward 2020), despite being a focus of public policy since at least the Enlightenment (Frijters and Krekel 2021). The 2009 Sarkozy Commission on well-being measurement was an important recent catalyst (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009) and today over 70% of OECD countries have national well-being framework in place (Martin 2023). The EU Council of Ministers now urges EU countries ‘to put people and their well-being at the centre of policy design’ (Union CotE 2019). In parallel, scholarship around well-being has flourished. Within the conceptual well-being literature a key distinction is made between

hedonic (relating to concerns around self-evaluated satisfaction) and eudaemonic well-being (relating to concerns around self-realisation, meaning and purpose in life) (Delle Fave 2020). Empirical well-being scholarship has also multiplied with a wide range of well-being measures now exist to capture these alternative conceptualisations (Zhang et al. 2024).

Despite their respective importance, however, understanding of the relationships between activation, work and well-being remains underdeveloped and contested theoretically and empirically, with significant implications for policy. Attention to their relationships has taken place primarily in two distinct research strands. A first view dominates the political and policy landscape and, partly as a consequence, also research activity and evidence. This view theorises a sequential chain whereby activation interventions are framed from a well-being

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Social Policy & Administration* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

perspective in terms of their effects on job transitions. These job transitions are in turn understood to affect individual's well-being via the well-being effects of paid work—frequently asserted by policy narratives to be necessarily positive. In parallel, a minority scholarly view has emerged that theorises (Jahoda 1982; Fryer 1986) and assesses empirically (Puig-Barrachina et al. 2019) how participation in activation programmes can affect well-being directly. At present, however, the relationships embedded across these two strands of research are unconnected in empirical scholarship.

Situated in this context, the present article makes original theoretical, empirical and policy contributions. Theoretically it presents a novel integrated theoretical framework of this fragmented current landscape. Empirically, later analyses use rarely available activation well-being data and path analyses within multivariate structural equation modelling techniques to offer original quantitative insights around these relationships for the first time in the literature. To do so the empirical case study selects a UK-based voluntary, person-centred, intensive model of employment support—Individual Placement and Support (IPS)—to examine these theoretical interests given that IPS programmes are typically evidenced to deliver (and measure) positive employment and well-being impacts for participants. They typically thus offer rarely available data and effects in both the work and well-being outcomes required for such theoretical exploration. The discussion section reflects critically on implications for research, policy and practice.

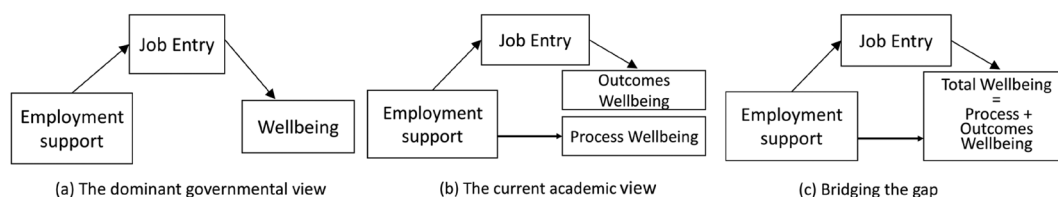
## 2 | Activation, Work and Well-being: Theory, Evidence and Policy Implications

Ever since the activation turn of the late 1990s and early 2000s the dominant governmental narrative of the links between activation, paid work and well-being has been set (Lodemel and Trickey 2001). Figure 1a visualises this theorisation built as it is on the sequential connections from employment activation policies as facilitators of paid work transitions (OECD 2006) and, second, then from participation in that paid work as bringing health and well-being gains for individuals. These health and well-being gains occur both directly through boosts to self-esteem, self-worth and social relationships as well as indirectly through enhanced material resources (Waddell and Burton 2006; Layard and de Neve 2023). Thus, in this dominant governmental theorisation employment support interventions offer no well-being effects in and of themselves. Instead, they are viewed only as an indirect means through which to achieve well-being gains for workless individuals via their facilitation of transitions to paid employment through which all of the well-being effects are held to derive.

This logic has been deployed by governments across advanced economies over recent decades to make the paternalistic well-being case for activation programmes—including mandation into those programmes—as facilitators of well-being enhancing paid work (OECD 2013; Horn, Kevins, and van Kersbergen 2022). As they have done so, policy narratives have frequently neglected the evidence that the well-being gains from paid work are both averages that mask substantial variability and that are conditional upon those jobs being of good quality for people (Waddell and Burton 2006)—adequately paid, secure, chosen and aligned to wider life roles, goals and needs (Williams 2004; What Works Wellbeing 2017; Taylor et al. 2017; Tinson 2020; CIPD 2023). Indeed, recent evidence finds that the well-being effects of job quality are far larger than those for simply being in work, other things equal (Clark et al. 2018).

In parallel to that dominant policy view, a separate strand of scholarship has emerged around the potential direct well-being effects of participation in activation programmes themselves. In this second view, these direct well-being effects from programme participation have been defined in the activation literature as the *process well-being* potential of activation participation in and of itself as compared to the *outcomes well-being* potential from any paid work transitions that may result from that activation participation (Carter and Whitworth 2017). Although these two theorisations do not intersect currently, Figure 1b combines them in a single visual so as to describe the current scholarly understanding of these relationships theoretically and empirically.

The process well-being literature is rooted theoretically in ideas around the valuable non-material psychosocial functions and benefits of paid work. Evidence suggests that this accounts for around half of the total well-being effect from employment (Clark et al. 2018; Layard and de Neve 2023). Dependent upon their design, activation programmes are theorised as having the potential to mimic (or contradict) those employment effects on well-being. Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation concept describes five positive psychosocial functions of employment—time structure, social contacts, participation in collective purposes, status and identity, and regular activity—that unemployment or economic inactivity typically fail to deliver for people and thus that damage well-being. Related, Fryer's (1986) account centres individual agency in highlighting how unemployment or economic inactivity reduce individual's control over current life circumstances and hope around achieving a desired alternative future life trajectory. Beginning with Strandh (Strandh 2001), various empirical studies have provided support for the relevance of these theoretical hypotheses by demonstrating the process well-being effects of activation participation (Coutts 2009; Wulfgramm 2014; Sage 2015; Carter



**FIGURE 1** | (a)–(c) Alternative theorisations of the relationships between activation, work and well-being.

and Whitworth 2017; Puig-Barrachina et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2021). Evidence also highlights how those well-being effects vary as expected theoretically across differing characteristics of activation programmes, with negative as well as positive process well-being effects possible from activation participation for jobseekers where programme features lack or contradict the programme elements theorised above (Carter and Whitworth 2017; Whitworth and Carter 2020).

These findings have clear links to the long-standing literatures around activation typologies and street-level bureaucracy. A common theme in the activation typologies literature has been the distinction between ‘thin’ work-first and ‘thick’ human capital activation approaches (Torfing 1999; Theodore and Peck 2000; Taylor-Gooby 2008; Haapanala 2022). Work-first activation approaches can be caricatured by their relatively basic, generic support offer and their reliance on self-help and conditionality requirements to push jobseekers rapidly into available jobs with relatively little emphasis on the fit or quality of that employment for the individual. In contrast, human capital approaches place greater emphasis on pulling jobseekers into higher quality employment through a greater emphasis on skills development, skills utilisation and job matching within longer periods of activation support. Wider scholarship has helpfully recognised the greater diversity of activation regimes and programmes beyond this dichotomy by introducing further categories and measurement dimensions (Bonoli 2010; Aurich 2011; Dinan 2018; Kowalewska 2017; Weishaupt 2011). However, a series of key binary distinctions within these richer frameworks—coercion/autonomy, push/pull, transition pace/transition quality, benefits reduction/life enhancement—speaks to the continuing durability of the work-first/human capital dichotomy. Recent scholarship highlights the relevance of this distinction to shaping job outcomes, with work-first activation regimes more likely to push unemployed benefit claimants into poorer quality and involuntary part-time work and human capital approaches associated with higher voluntary but lower involuntary part-time employment (Briken and Taylor 2018; Haapanala 2022; Jones, Wright, and Scullion 2024). Within those activation regimes, the literature on street-level bureaucracy highlights the importance of policy implementation and street-level interactions to work and well-being outcomes in activation programmes and the important ways that this is shaped by—though, given continual frontline discretion, never wholly determined by—the nature of the activation regime and programme (Lipsky 1980; Brodtkin 2011; Hupe, Hill, and Buffat 2015).

Connecting together those literatures around activation typologies, street-level bureaucracy and activation well-being, theoretically and empirically once can expect activation interventions and street-level interactions with stronger work-first characteristics to associate with more negative well-being effects. In contrast, those with stronger human capital characteristics are expected to associate with more positive well-being effects—both directly through activation participation and indirectly via the types and trajectories of job transitions that result. The UK activation regime, where this article’s empirical case study is located, is in general dominated by a strongly work-first public sector Jobcentre Plus activation regime. This is built around low-cost provision, significant self-help and an internationally

strict conditionality and sanctions regime requiring extensive job search activities (or, if in work, sufficient earnings) or risk losing some or all benefit payments for up to a potential maximum of 6 months (Eleveld 2017; Fletcher and Wright 2018; Jones, Wright, and Scullion 2024). Empirically, while a substantial minority of UK jobseekers find that Jobcentre Plus support positive and beneficial a substantial minority do not (Wilson et al. 2022, 33) and some jobseekers experience significant poverty and harm to health and well-being (Dwyer et al. 2019; Williams 2020; Pattaro et al. 2022). Related, recent scholarship argues that UK conditionality is so strong and pervasive that it directly drives poorer job quality for jobseekers (Briken and Taylor 2018; Jones, Wright, and Scullion 2024) and thus harms outcomes well-being as well as process well-being. As described further, however, although based in the UK context the empirical case study for the present analyses are almost the antithesis of that dominant Jobcentre Plus system: a voluntary, values-based IPS activation programme for workless individuals with substance misuse issues that aligns with a human capital approach given its emphasis on meaningful personalised support, client agency and co-production, job matching and job quality, and client well-being.

Connecting the discussion back to the current scholarly understanding of the links between employment activation, paid work and well-being on Figure 1b, it can be understood how alternative activation programmes, regimes and street-level interactions act to shape the nature of these process and outcomes well-being effects. However, although Figure 1b brings together these two currently separate views it does so only partially since it continues to leave those two pathways unconnected. Instead, it seems more realistic given the evidence to think instead about effects to an individual’s total well-being that are made up of changes (whether positive, negative or neutral) in each of its constituent process and outcomes well-being components through activation participation and paid work, respectively.

Figure 1c displays this theoretical perspective. Its implications are significant in that, if evidenced, it would to our knowledge provide the first quantitative insights in the literature as to the relationships between, and relative importance of, each pathway to changes in the total well-being of jobseekers who transition into paid employment from activation participation. At a time of greater policy and scholarly interest in well-being, greater understanding of the varying ways that differing activation approaches act to shape both employment and well-being outcomes, and an increasing interest in and ability to appraise the economic value of well-being changes from activation programmes (DWP 2022; Yiu et al. 2023), being able to better integrate, partition and inter-relate the roles of paid work and activation participation to jobseeker’s total well-being changes is an important gap to fill.

### 3 | Data and Methods

To explore these interests empirically the analyses draw on participant-level data from a UK-based IPS activation programme supporting workless individuals with substance misuse issues across eight municipality (local authority) areas in England.

Improving employment support and outcomes for individuals with substance misuse issues is a national policy priority in the UK context. Around 300,000 adults receive treatment from drug or alcohol services each year in England alone and the employment levels and outcomes have been poor historically: around 70% of individuals are unemployed when they enter substance treatment services and remain unemployed throughout the next 5 years (Black 2016). Individuals with substance misuse issues have historically lacked dedicated condition-specific employment support. Instead, they have relied predominantly on the UK's Jobcentre Plus offer alongside eligibility for a range of quasi-marketized contracted provision that have tended to show a strong reliance on payment-by-results and where those with more substantial support needs have tended to fare less well (Carter and Whitworth 2015). In contrast, the data that the present article analyses come from an activation service following a model of employment support known as IPS. IPS has been demonstrated in around 50 randomised controlled trials to be effective in supporting job entry and well-being for individuals with diverse health conditions, disabilities and complex disadvantages (Jahoda et al. 2018; Bond, Drake, and Becker 2020; Whitworth et al. 2024)—including substance misuse specifically (Harrison et al. 2019).

IPS is a voluntary, person-centred, low caseload (maximum of 30 in this intervention) model of employment support for individuals with health conditions, disabilities or complex disadvantages. The national roll-out of IPS across England since 2016 has transformed the country's employment support offer for these groups, including those with substance misuse issues specifically. IPS employment specialists are integrated into clinical teams, support and goals (in this case drug and alcohol teams) so as to seek to join up employment and health (in this case substance recovery) support. IPS is rooted in values of voluntary participation, client preferences and co-production, job matching, proactive employer engagement, flexible on-going in-work support and work as a route to the goal of sustained health and well-being improvements. IPS services operate to a fidelity scale of 25 key characteristics (e.g., caseload size, proactive employer engagement, clinical integration) (CMH 2024) against which services are assessed and scored and that are evidenced to associate with improved employment outcomes for clients (Yamaguchi et al. 2022; Drake and Bond 2023; Whitworth et al. 2024).

In terms of the earlier discussion around activation typologies, IPS is something of a hybrid in that it adopts a place-then-train model that encourages a work-first emphasis on (appropriately) rapid transitions to paid work but in the context of a human capital emphasis on values, client preferences and empowerment, intensive personalised support, job matching and job quality, and supporting client's long-term well-being. Importantly, since supporting participant's well-being through paid work is a key interest and outcome of IPS services they are relatively unusual among activation programmes in measuring client health and well-being at baseline and after IPS employment support, providing our analyses with the necessary well-being as well as work data to explore these theoretical interests.

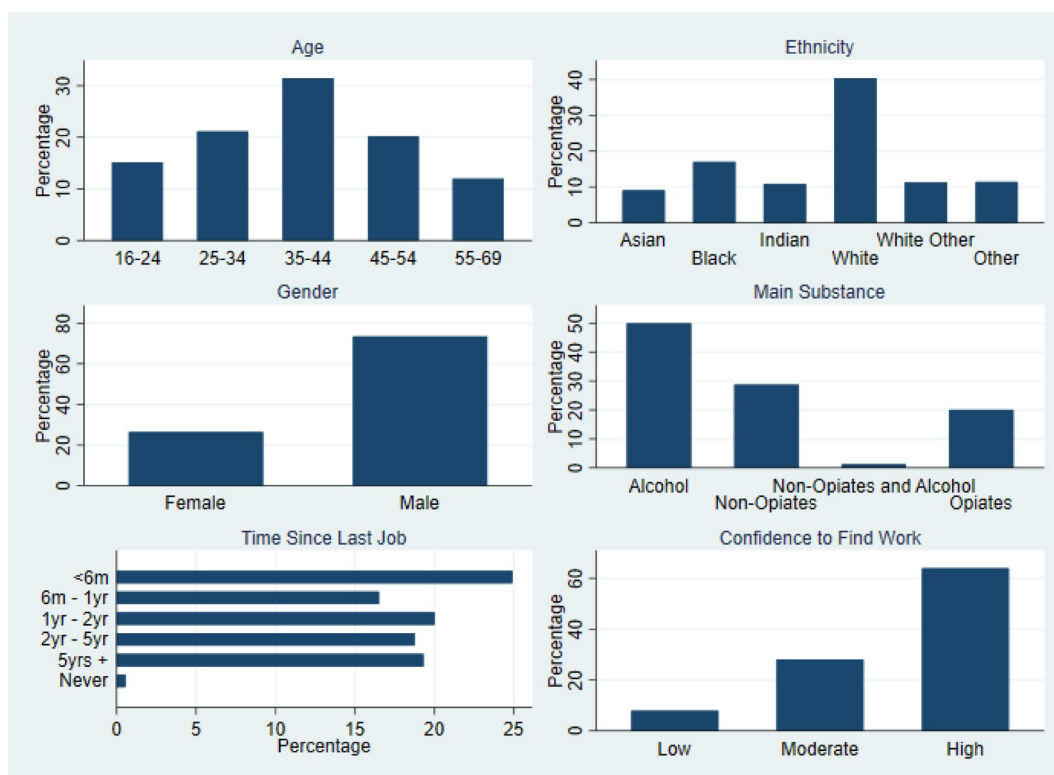
Quantitative data from 718 clients were provided securely by the IPS employment support provider. The data were taken from provider databases in March 2022 and cover all participants

from January 2019 (the start of this new IPS service) to March 2022. We use these data to examine three hypotheses. First, we hypothesise that the pathways between activation, work and well-being are inter-related rather than unconnected as typically presented. Second, regards the direction of effects we hypothesise that both IPS participation and the job starts that the IPS provision affect the direction (negative, positive and neutral) and size of their respective well-being effects for jobseekers. In our empirical case, given the nature of the IPS activation programme involved we hypothesise positive well-being effects from both sources due to the nature of the provision itself as well as its emphasis on job matching, job quality and client well-being in its job transition priorities. Third, regards the size of effects we hypothesise that the well-being effects of paid work are larger than those of activation participation directly but that the latter are substantively meaningful to individuals in their size.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the experiences of almost all public services, including this IPS intervention. National lockdown restrictions came into force in March 2020 in the United Kingdom and remained in force for much of 2020 and 2021 in a variety of forms. Like many other public services, this IPS service was transformed during that period from a face-to-face service for clients and employers to a significantly digital delivery model. The UK economy was of course also transformed during the pandemic. Large sectors of the economy were significantly curtailed or even closed, central government furlough schemes sought to stave off large-scale redundancies, and recruitment to many sectors collapsed.

Figure 2 summarises the key characteristics of the IPS clients. Clients are diverse in terms of their age, ethnicity, employment history and main substance issue. Most IPS clients were male—a pattern shared in the local drug and alcohol services from which IPS referrals mainly came—and most felt confident that they could find paid work.

For each client the provider collected details about the support received and all employment outcomes. Baseline data collected at the start of a client's IPS support captured client characteristics as well as self-rated health and well-being, substance use, self-care, relationships and social participation collected from the substance misuse specific Treatment Outcomes Profile (TOP) (PHE 2018) and the Substance Use Recovery Evaluator (SURE) (Neale et al. 2016) survey instruments. The key physical and psychological well-being outcome variables for our analyses below come from the TOP survey. Each measure asks clients to rate their own psychological health (described in the survey question as anxiety, depression, problem emotions and feelings) and physical health (described in the survey question as extent of physical symptoms an bothered by illness) on a printed 0–20 scale. Follow-up surveys were scheduled for 6–8 months after programme start to capture changes in those items. As with all longitudinal data collection not all participants completed the follow-up survey and as such the analyses below that involve well-being change are based on the sub-sample of 241 IPS clients with full follow-up survey data. This reduced sample size inevitably weakens our ability to detect findings with statistical significance and this is recognised in advance. However, our primary empirical interest is to offer original exploratory quantitative investigation



**FIGURE 2** | Key characteristics of the IPS clients.

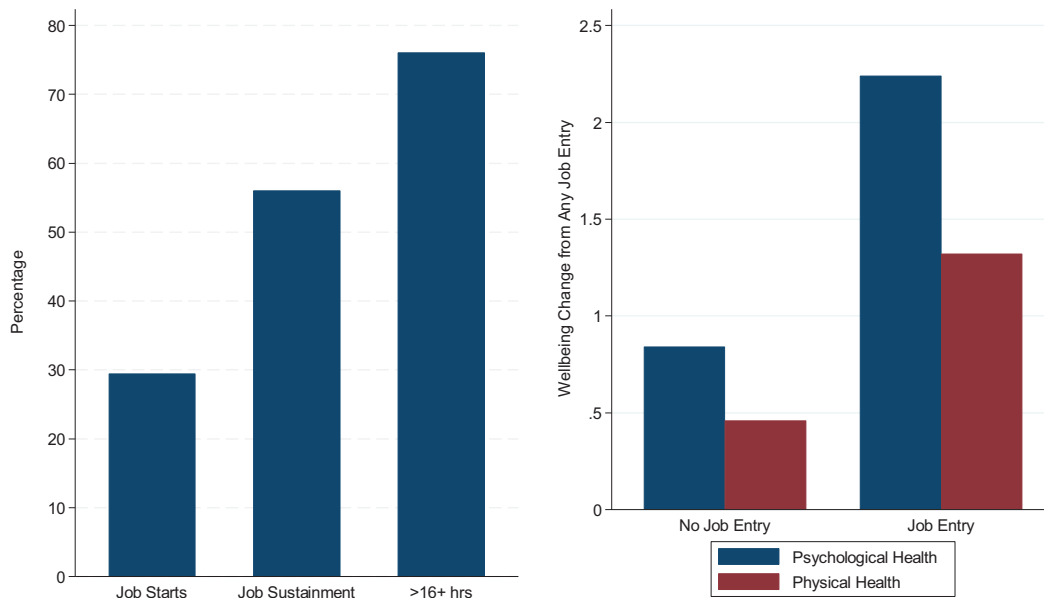
of our theoretical hypotheses to guide and energise further research in this area rather than seeking definitive generalisable empirical conclusions. As such, for both reasons we follow the advice to focus on the interpretation of effect sizes at least as much as  $p$  values while being mindful in interpretation of the implications of any statistically insignificant results (Ziliak and McCloskey 2008; Kenny 2021). The incomplete longitudinal well-being data collection also has implications for potential bias that require investigation. Further analysis shows that the sub-sample of clients with well-being data are very similar to the full sample across a wide range of characteristics including main substance, substance treatment time, time since last job, social security benefit receipt, ethnicity, sex, age, criminal convictions, highest qualifications and confidence to find work. However, the well-being sub-sample are more likely to be referred into the IPS service in year one (2019/2020) (54% off the well-being sample), tend to have more meetings (54% have 12+ IPS meetings compared to 17% of the full sample), have longer support until job starts (156 days vs. 71 days), and have higher job start rates (45% vs. 22%). The suggestion is that the well-being sub-sample may have a greater level of support need, receive more support, and get better employment outcomes than the full sample. These differences mean that our findings below from the well-being sub-sample regards the relationships between activation, work and well-being cannot necessarily be generalised to all participants in this IPS service (or naturally, to other types of activation regime or intervention). However, our interest is in providing original initial quantitative insights into these relationships—acknowledging that they are specific and contingent—rather than in seeking to make absolute or generalisable statements about them.

Methodologically the theoretical questions outlined above require path analysis techniques that enable the simultaneous estimation of multiple equations and the connections between. Although path analyses can be estimated manually (Edwards and Lambert 2007; Fairchild and McDaniel 2017), structural equation models enable their flexible and simultaneous empirical estimation. All estimates are derived using linear structural equation models in Stata 17 using the `sem` command, including for models of the binary job entry outcome variable where linear probability models (LPM) with robust standard errors are advised to aid interpretation in such models (Rijnhart et al. 2021). All structural equation models presented control for a range of other factors of relevance to job entry and well-being selected from prior research (Sage 2015; World Bank 2020; Whitworth and Carter 2020) and model testing.

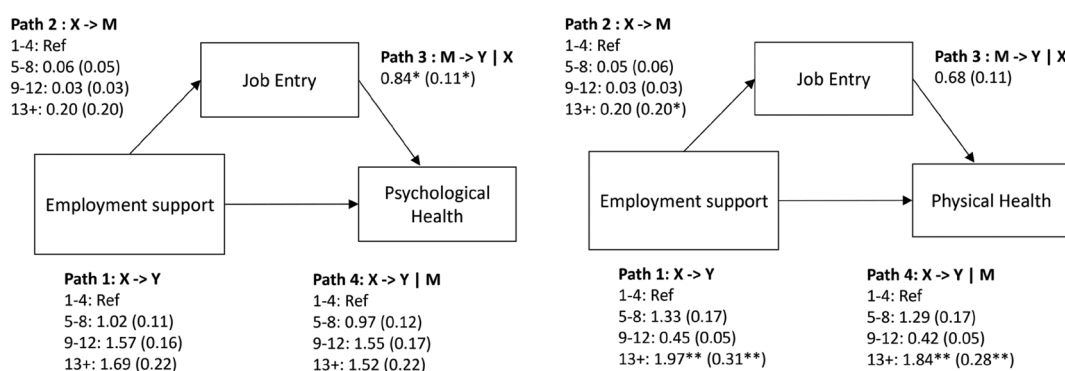
#### 4 | Examining the Connections Between Activation, Work and Well-being

Figure 3 summarises the IPS service's headline employment and well-being results. The left pane shows that 30% of all of the service's IPS clients moved into paid work through the service. Of these job starts 75% moved into employment of at least 16h per week and 56% sustained employment for at least 13 weeks. This represents relatively strong employment outcomes for this population group, especially for a new IPS service and one that was delivering through the COVID pandemic.

As above, the psychological and physical health scores are measured on a scale from 0 to 20. At baseline a bimodal distribution is apparent for both well-being measures with relatively few



**FIGURE 3** | Headline employment and well-being changes in the IPS service.



**FIGURE 4** | Assessing the theoretical relationship described in Figure 1c.

individuals showing scores below five and modes at around 10 and then again at around 15. The right pane of Figure 3 shows the average change in participant's self-rated health and well-being scores within the longitudinal well-being sub-sample disaggregated into clients who did and did not secure a successful job transition. Clients who moved into paid work showed larger well-being improvements than those who did not, but clients tended to still see a boost to well-being even if a transition to paid work was not achieved. Changes are meaningful in their size in the order of 5%–10% of the total well-being scales. Naturally, it may be that some or all of those well-being changes are due to other factors besides the IPS programme—the UK's gradual exit from the COVID pandemic over the period or the potentially differing demographic composition of those who find work and those who do not for instance. The later modelling introduces a range of relevant control variables to seek to account for such possibilities.

Analyses turn next to the empirical exploration of the integrated relationships between activation, paid work and well-being as visualised in Figure 1c. As is standard in mediation analysis

(Edwards and Lambert 2007; Fairchild and McDaniel 2017), each model estimates effects for four paths. Path 1 is a necessary first step. It examines whether the outcome (change in psychological/physical health between baseline and follow-up survey in Figure 4) associates with the explanatory variable whose potential mediation is being assessed (IPS employment support in Figure 4) without controlling for the potential mediator (job entry in Figure 4). If no effect is found then clearly there can be no mediation of that effect either. Path 2 examines whether the first step in the possible mediation path stands up empirically, in other words whether the explanatory factor (IPS employment support) associates with the potential mediator (job entry). Path 3 examines whether the second step in the possible mediation path stands up empirically, in other words whether the potential mediator (job entry) associates with the outcome (psychological/physical health), controlling for the key explanatory variable (IPS employment support). For mediation to be occurring there must be effects along both of these mediation paths. Finally, Path 4 examines the effect of the key explanatory variable (IPS employment support) on the outcome (here psychological/physical health) but—unlike Path 1—now controlling for the potential

mediator (here job entry). Potential mediation is argued to be plausible when all paths show effects and the estimates in Path 4 are either zero (full mediation) or substantially lower than those estimated in Path 1 (partial mediation).

In terms of the key variables, job entry is a binary variable of whether the individual moved into paid work or not during their IPS employment support. The number of IPS meetings between the IPS employment specialist and the individual is a categorical variable with the following four categories: 1–4 meetings (the reference category); 5–8 IPS meetings; 9–12 meetings; and 13+ IPS meetings. Although the analysis and presentation of results remains focused only on the relationships of key theoretical interest<sup>1</sup>, all models also include the following control variables: ethnicity, sex, age, local authority area < time since last employment, main social security benefit received, referral source, and referral year<sup>2</sup>. To aid interpretation effects are reported both as unstandardised and (in brackets) as standardised coefficients. Effects that are statistically significant at the 10% level are marked by one asterisk and at the 5% level by two asterisks.

Turning to Figure 4, the empirical findings are consistent with the theoretical relationships between activation, paid work and well-being as described in Figure 1c. Both models in Figure 4 show good fit according to standard thresholds<sup>3</sup> and have moderately powerful coefficients of determination<sup>4</sup> of 0.47 (psychological well-being) and 0.48 (physical well-being), respectively. The findings suggest that, controlling for other factors, the direct well-being effects of participation in the IPS activation programme shown in Path 4 are positive and meaningful in their effect sizes. Other things equal, the direct effects of job entry on well-being are also positive and meaningful in their effect sizes. The well-being effects of job entry (Path 3) are statistically significant at the 10% level whilst those for IPS participation (Path 4) are not. All of these effect sizes are far from zero, however, strongly suggesting that the lack of statistical significance is more to do with the known limits to the sample sizes—especially when spread across the four IPS sub-groups—as opposed to the lack of substantive effects. In terms of those effect sizes, other things equal the positive direct well-being effects of IPS participation are almost always larger than those for job entry. With well-being outcomes measured on a 20-point scale these estimates suggest a roughly 5%–10% average well-being gain directly from IPS participation and a roughly 3%–4% average well-being gain from job entry, controlling for other factors. Finally, both the effect sizes in Path 2 and the comparison of estimates between Path 1 and Path 4 show little evidence for the mediation of the effects of the IPS employment support on either well-being outcome indirectly through job entry. This implies that the well-being gains from IPS activation participation and job entry are substantially independent from one another.

## 5 | Discussion

Employment activation, paid work and attention to citizen's well-being are all central features of public policy systems across advanced economies. Despite their importance, however, the starting point for the present paper is the recognition that the relationships between, and relative importance of, activation, work and well-being remain underdeveloped, contested and

fragmented theoretically, empirically and in policy. For the first time in the literature, this article presents a comparative theoretical and quantitative empirical exploration of these key relationships and in doing so provides original contributions to theory, empirical understanding and policy.

Theoretically the article makes two main contributions. First, it brings together, synthesises and critically compares the two leading but currently unconnected theoretical understandings of the relationships between activation, paid work and well-being. Having done so, it proposes a novel theoretical account that integrates those currently fragmented perspectives.

Empirically the analyses use path analysis techniques within a multivariate structural equation modelling approach to provide the first quantitative assessment in the literature of these relationships. In doing so they provide several original empirical contributions. First, findings support our first hypothesis around the need to integrate these relationships empirically in order to better reflect and understand their inter-connections and relative importance to the total well-being of activation participants. Second, by integrating these pathways the results are uniquely able in the literature to speak to the relationships between, and relative importance of, each in terms of individual's total well-being. Although constrained in their statistical power by modest sample sizes, the findings suggest that the direct positive well-being effects of IPS participation for these clients relates to a 5%–10% improvement in well-being on average and are almost always larger than the well-being effects from job entry, controlling for other factors. In doing so the findings support our second hypothesis that the nature of an IPS intervention would be expected to associate with positive (rather than neutral or negative) well-being effects both directly via IPS participation and via the types of job transitions that the IPS service supports. However, while our third hypothesis expected larger well-being effects from paid work than from IPS participation directly this was not the case, controlling for other factors and acknowledging that as expected not all results are significant statistically. Instead, the positive well-being effects of IPS participation directly appear at least as large as the positive well-being effects from the paid work transitions of that IPS intervention.

Taken together, the findings lend further weight to the direct relevance of activation programme design and experience to participant well-being, in keeping with previous empirical research regards process well-being in activation interventions. As such they again suggest a need from a well-being perspective to move attention from the dominant governmental narration of activation as only instrumentally relevant for claimant's well-being via their effects on paid work transitions and towards greater recognition of the dual direct (via programme participation) and indirect (via the different types of jobs that different types of activation programmes 'support') well-being roles of activation programmes.

Clearly, these findings relate to a particular sub-group of England's workless population (a motivated and voluntarily participating group of substance misusing individuals) in a particular type of activation intervention (a voluntary, adequately resourced, values-based, evidence-based, person-centred IPS programme) that would be expected a priori to show well-being

benefits. It is not possible to generalise these specific findings to all population groups, intervention types or welfare contexts. Inevitably, the specific empirical findings outlined above are necessarily contextually contingent. Further empirical research in different population groups, activation regimes and intervention types is needed to examine their nature in different scenarios. The role of programme form seems particularly important to consider further given that the direction and size of the direct well-being effects of activation programme participation are shown empirically to map onto the presence, absence, or condition of the key psychosocial mimicking features identified in the theoretical literature (Jahoda 1982; Fryer 1986).

Policy makers and providers clearly have to take several factors beyond well-being into account in a complex Rubik's cube of sometimes conflicting programme objectives and design levers. Our hope is that the present paper supports scholars, policy makers and activation providers to better understand these key inter-relationships between activation, work and well-being and encourages further research in the field to continue to advance well-being understanding within activation scholarship and policy practice. There remains a need for further research to move beyond the current focus on single elements of these triangular activation, work and well-being relationships and to instead seek to bring them together so that we might begin to build a fuller evidence-based typology of their links, forms and variability.

#### Acknowledgements

The research was part of an IPS service evaluation funded by the regional commissioner. No material is re-used from other sources. No generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing process.

#### Ethics Statement

The research received ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde's University Ethics Board.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data used are not owned by the author and are unable to be shared by the author.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Full model results are available on request from the author.

<sup>2</sup> Control variables tested in model development were: local area, referral source, main substance issue, substance treatment time, time since last previous employment, any recent GP or A&E visits, social security benefits received, ethnicity, age, criminal convictions, confidence to secure paid work, highest qualifications, and year of referral to the IPS service.

<sup>3</sup> Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.08, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) ≥ 0.9, Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) ≥ 0.95, standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) < 0.08.

<sup>4</sup> Coefficient of determination (CD) is analogous to  $R^2$  values in linear regression.

#### References

- Aurich, P. 2011. "Activating the Unemployed—Directions and Divisions in Europe." *European Journal of Social Security* 13, no. 3: 294–316.
- Black, C. 2016. *An Independent Review Into the Impact on Employment Outcomes of Drug and Alcohol Addiction, and Obesity*. London: Department for Work and Pensions. Cm 9336.
- Bond, G., R. Drake, and D. Becker. 2020. "An Update on Individual Placement and Support." *World Psychiatry* 19: 3–391.
- Bonoli, G. 2010. "The Political Economy of Active Labor-Market Policy." *Politics and Society* 38, no. 4: 435–457.
- Briken, K., and P. Taylor. 2018. "Fulfilling the 'British Way': Beyond Constrained Choice—Amazon Workers' Lived Experiences of Workfare." *Industrial Relations Journal* 49, no. 5–6: 438–458.
- Brodin, E. 2011. "Policy Work: Street-Level Organizations Under New Managerialism." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21: i253–i277.
- Carter, E., and A. Whitworth. 2015. "Creaming and Parking in Quasi-Marketised Welfare-To-Work Schemes: Designed Out of or Into the UK Work Programme?" *Journal of Social Policy* 44, no. 2: 277–296.
- Carter, E., and A. Whitworth. 2017. "Work Activation Regimes and Well-Being of Unemployed People: Rhetoric, Risk and Reality of Quasi-Marketization in the UK Work Programme." *Social Policy and Administration* 51, no. 5: 796–816.
- Centre for Mental Health (CMH). 2024. "The IPS Fidelity Scale" Accessed August 9, 2024. <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/ips-fidelity-scale>.
- CIPD. 2023. *CIPD Good Work Index*. London: CIPD. Accessed March 25, 2023. <https://www.cipd.org.uk/knowledge/reports/goodwork/#:~:text=the%20report%20archive-,What%20is%20it%3F,drive%20improvement%20in%20working%20lives>.
- Clark, A., S. Flèche, R. Layard, N. Powdthavee, and G. Ward. 2018. *The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Well-Being Over the Lifecourse*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coutts, A. 2009. *Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) and Health: An Evidence-Base, Review Prepared for the Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010 (Marmot Review)*. Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, DPIP. Accessed May 10, 2023. <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/file-manager/economic-active-labour-market-full-report.pdf>.
- Delle Fave, A. 2020. "Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness." In *Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, edited by A. C. Michalos, vol. 2014, 1999–2000. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Dinan, S. 2018. "A Typology of Activation Incentives." *Social Policy and Administration* 53, no. 1: 1–15.
- Drake, R., and G. Bond. 2023. "Individual Placement and Support: History, current status and future directions." *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 2: e122.
- DWP. 2022. *Health-Led Employment Trial Evaluation. 12 Months Outcome Report: Economic Evaluation*. London: DWP. Research Report 1036.
- Dwyer, P., L. Scullion, K. Jones, J. McNeill, and A. Stewart. 2019. "Work, Welfare, and Wellbeing: The Impacts of Welfare Conditionality on People With Mental Health Impairments in the UK." *Social Policy & Administration* 54, no. 2: 311–326.
- Edwards, J., and L. Lambert. 2007. "Methods for Integrating Moderation and Mediation: A General Analytical Framework Using Moderated Path Analysis." *Psychological Methods* 12, no. 1: 1–22.
- Eleveld, A. 2017. "Activation Policies: Policies of Social Inclusion or Social Exclusion?" *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 25, no. 3: 277–285.



- Fairchild, A., and H. McDaniel. 2017. "Best (But Oft-Forgotten) Practices: Mediation Analysis." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 105, no. 6: 1259–1271.
- Fletcher, D., and S. Wright. 2018. "A Hand Up or a Slap Down? Criminalising Benefit Claimants in Britain via Strategies of Surveillance, Sanctions and Deterrence." *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 2: 323–344.
- Frijters, P., and C. Krekel. 2021. *A Handbook for Wellbeing Policy-Making: History, Theory, Measurement, Implementation, and Examples*. Oxford: OUP.
- Fryer, D. 1986. "Employment, Deprivation and Personal Agency During Unemployment: A Critical Discussion of Jahoda's Explanation of the Psychological Effects of Unemployment." *Social Behaviour* 1: 3–23.
- Haapanala, H. 2022. "Carrots or Sticks? A Multilevel Analysis of Active Labour Market Policies and Non-standard Employment in Europe." *Social Policy & Administration* 56: 360–377.
- Hansen, M. 2019. *The Moral Economy of Activation: Ideas, Politics and Policies*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Harrison, J., M. Krieger, and H. Johnson. 2019. "Review of Individual Placement and Support Employment Intervention for Persons With Substance Use Disorder." *Substance Use & Misuse* 55, no. 4: 636–643.
- Horn, A., A. Kevins, and K. van Kersbergen. 2022. "The Paternalist Politics of Punitive and Enabling Workfare: Evidence From a New Dataset on Workfare Reforms in 16 Countries, 1980–2015." *Socio-Economic Review* 21, no. 4: 2137–2166. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwac060>.
- Hupe, P., M. Hill, and A. Buffat, eds. 2015. *Understanding Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Jahoda, A., J. Kemp, S. Riddell, and P. Banks. 2018. "Feelings About Work: A Review of the Socio-Emotional Impact of Supported Employment on People With Intellectual Disabilities." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 21: 1–18.
- Jahoda, M. 1982. *Employment and Unemployment: A Social-Psychological Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, K., S. Wright, and L. Scullion. 2024. "The Impact of Welfare Conditionality on Experiences of Job Quality." *Work, Employment and Society* 38: 1–22.
- Kenny, D. 2021. "Mediation." Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://davidakenny.net/cm/mediate.htm#BK>.
- Kowalewska, H. 2017. "Beyond the Train First/Work-First Dichotomy: How Welfare States Help or Hinder Maternal Employment." *Journal of European Social Policy* 27, no. 1: 3–24.
- Layard, R., and J.-E. de Neve. 2023. "A New Science of Wellbeing With Change Policy and Decision Making." Accessed April 13, 2023. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2023/03/27/a-new-science-of-wellbeing-will-change-policy-and-decision-making/>.
- Layard, R., and G. Ward. 2020. *Can We Be Happier? Evidence and Ethics*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Lipsky, M. 1980. *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lodemel, I., and H. Trickey. 2001. *An Offer You can't Refuse: Workfare in International Perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Martin, S. 2023. "OECD and Well-Being Frameworks: From Inspiration to Facilitation and Collaboration." Accessed January 8, 2024. <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/oecd-and-wellbeing-frameworks-from-inspiration-to-facilitation-and-collaboration/>.
- Neale, J., S. Vitoratou, E. Finch, et al. 2016. "Development and Validation of 'SURE': A Patient Reported Outcome Measure (PROM) for Recovery From Drug and Alcohol Dependence." *Drug Alcohol Dependency* 1, no. 165: 159–167.
- OECD. 2006. *From Inactivity to Work: The Role of Active Labour Market Policies*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD. 2013. "Remarks by Angel Gurría, Secretary-General of the OECD, Meeting of Labour and Employment Ministers: Labour Activation, Equity and Inclusion, Moscow, 18th July 2013." Accessed January 15, 2023. <https://www.oecd.org/g20/topics/employment-and-social-policy/sg-labour-activation-equity-inclusion.htm>.
- Pattaro, S., N. Bailey, E. Williams, et al. 2022. "The Impacts of Benefit Sanctions: A Scoping Review of the Quantitative Research Evidence." *Journal of Social Policy* 51, no. 3: 611–653.
- Public Health England (PHE). 2018. *Treatment Outcomes Profile*. London: PHE. Accessed August 13, 2022. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/784927/TOP\\_form\\_community\\_print\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/784927/TOP_form_community_print_version.pdf).
- Puig-Barrachina, V., P. Giro, L. Artazcoz, et al. 2019. "The Impact of Active Labour Market Policies on Health Outcomes: A Scoping Review." *European Journal of Public Health* 30, no. 1: 36–42.
- Rijnhart, J., M. Valente, H. Smyth, and D. MacKinnon. 2021. "Statistical Mediation Analysis for Models With a Binary Mediator and a Binary Outcome: The Differences Between Causal and Traditional Mediation Analysis." *Prevention Science* 24: 408–418.
- Sage, D. 2015. "Do Active Labour Market Policies Promote the Subjective Well-Being of the Unemployed? Evidence From the UK National Well-Being Programme?" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 16: 1281–1298.
- Stiglitz, J., A. Sen, and J. Fitoussi. 2009. *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*. Brussels: Eurostat. Accessed March 10, 2023. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf>.
- Strandh, M. 2001. "State Intervention and Mental Well-Being Among the Unemployed." *Journal of Social Policy* 30, no. 1: 57–80.
- Taylor, M., G. Marsh, D. Nicol, and P. Broadbent. 2017. *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*. London: BEIS.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. 2008. "The New Welfare State Settlement in Europe." *European Societies* 10, no. 1: 3–24.
- Theodore, N., and J. Peck. 2000. "Searching for Best Practice in Welfare-To-Work: The Means, the Method and the Message." *Policy & Politics* 29, no. 1: 81–98.
- Tinson, A. 2020. *What the Quality of Work Means for Our Health*. London: Health Foundation.
- Torfin, J. 1999. "Workfare With Welfare: Recent Reforms of the Danish Welfare State." *Journal of European Social Policy* 9, no. 1: 5–28.
- Union CoTE. 2019. *The Economy of Wellbeing: Creating Opportunities for people's Wellbeing and Economic Growth*, edited by P. R. Committee. Brussels: Council of the European Union.
- Waddell, G., and K. Burton. 2006. *Is Work Good for Your Health and Well-Being?* London: Stationery Office.
- Wang, S., A. Coutts, B. Burchell, D. Kamerade, and U. Balderson. 2021. "Can Active Labour Market Programmes Emulate the Mental Health Benefits of Regular Paid Employment? Longitudinal Evidence From the United Kingdom." *Work, Employment and Society* 35, no. 3: 545–565.
- Weishaupt, T. 2011. *From the Manpower Revolution to the Activation Paradigm: Explaining Institutional Continuity and Change in an Integrating Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- What Works Wellbeing. 2017. "Job Quality and Wellbeing." Accessed February 10, 2023. <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/job-quality-wellbeing-april-2017-1.pdf>.
- Whitworth, A., S. Baxter, J. Cullingworth, and M. Clowes. 2024. "Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Beyond Severe Mental

Health: An Overview Review and meta-Analysis of Evidence Around Vocational Outcomes.” *Preventive Medicine Reports* 43: 102786.

Whitworth, A., and E. Carter. 2020. “Programme Form and Service User Wellbeing: Linking Theory and Evidence.” *Social Policy and Administration* 54, no. 5: 844–858.

Williams, E. 2020. “Punitive Welfare Reform and Claimant Mental Health: The Impact of Benefit Sanctions on Anxiety and Depression.” *Social Policy & Administration* 55, no. 1: 157–172.

Williams, F. 2004. *Rethinking Families*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Wilson, T., R. Patel, M. Edwards, B. Mason, and D. Muir. 2022. *Working for the Future: Launch Report for the Commission on the Future of Employment Support*. Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies.

World Bank. 2020. *Statistical Profiling: Lessons From OECD Countries*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.

Wulfgramm, M. 2014. “Life Satisfaction Effects of Unemployment in Europe: The Moderating Influence of Labour Market Policy.” *Journal of European Social Policy* 24, no. 3: 258–272.

Yamaguchi, S., S. Sato, T. Shiozawa, A. Matsunaga, Y. Ojio, and C. Fujii. 2022. “Predictive Association of Low and High Fidelity Supported Employment Programs With Multiple Outcomes in a Real-World Setting: A Prospective Longitudinal Multi-Site Study.” *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 49: 255–266.

Yiu, H., J. Buckell, S. Petrou, S. Stewart-Brown, and J. Madan. 2023. “Derivation of a UK Preference-Based Value Set for the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS) to Allow Estimation of Mental Well-Being Adjusted Life Years (MWALYs).” *Social Science & Medicine* 327: 115928.

Zhang, W., K. Balloo, A. Hoseln, and E. Medland. 2024. “A Scoping Review of Well-Being Measures: Conceptualisation and Scales for Overall Well-Being.” *BMC Psychology* 12: 585.

Ziliak, S., and D. McCloskey. 2008. *The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Cost Us Jobs, Justice and Lives*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.