Digital Social Security: Towards Disciplinary or Relational Futures?

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Abstract

The welfare state is increasingly digitised, and the new Labour government intends to use technology as a key component of public service improvement. Active exploration of potential digital welfare futures is therefore essential to inform choices in policy and practice.

This paper takes Universal Credit as an exemplar of existing approaches to the digitisation and automation of social security. Universal Credit is data-driven and employs automated decision making to determine eligibility and calculate payments. Staff primarily communicate with claimants through digital channels, including discussions about job-seeking requirements. Digitisation is not simply a tool for improving administrative efficiency, it is also a disciplinary instrument, shaped by underlying policy drivers and assumptions of uncooperative claimants.

In contrast, some public and voluntary sector organisations are turning to relational models, which centre trusted human relationships, and appear more effective at helping people into work than coercive approaches. Unlike Universal Credit, the potential to integrate digital technologies in relational models is so far little explored.

This paper examines the future direction of travel for digitised social security. It reviews the literature on the risks and benefits of existing systems, and relational employment support, and identifies areas of potential development and further research. It finds that Universal Credit in its current form is incompatible with relational principles, and that more research is needed to understand the potential of technology to support relational working.

More than one potential digital future for social security is possible; what emerges will depend on the policy context in which it develops, and the attention given to exploring new models.

***Keywords*:** co-creation; surveillance; privacy; relational services; welfare state; automation; datafication; transparency; digital governance; trust; social capital

Introduction

Digitisation is no longer an add-on to the welfare state and public services, it is thoroughly integrated: "[t]he welfare state … is now increasingly dependent on digitalised and data-driven forms of public administration … The genie is firmly out of the bottle".[1]

Universal Credit (UC) is considered by many to be the UK's flagship digital public service. It combines digital administration and management, including eligibility checks and payment calculations, with requirements for most claimants to enter employment or increase earnings. It is premised on a 'digital first' approach, where the majority of interactions between claimants and the service are digitally mediated; online claims, communication via text and email. It also incorporates a range of automated elements which use claimant and other data to make decisions and calculations, often with no or limited human involvement.[2]

It exemplifies many of the opportunities and challenges inherent in digitising and automating public-facing services; for many it provides a convenient means to access financial and other support, but for others it is a locus of anxiety, mistakes and punitive policies.

In parallel to UC, a relational approach to employment support is increasingly used by organisations such as local authorities and charities. It focuses on relationships between participants and staff, and the relationships participants have with family, friends and communities. Relational services prioritise actions and outcomes tailored to the individual, shaped around their needs and capabilities, and crucially are driven by cooperation and co-production, not coercion.

UC in its current form is incompatible with a relational approach, being based on compliance and imbalances of information and decision-making power. This paper explores the direction of travel for digitised and automated social security, whether there are potential futures in which it could coexist with the principles of relational services, and indicates areas for further research and testing.

Universal credit, digitisation and automation

Introduced in 2013, UC was designed to merge and simplify a number of different social security benefits. It aimed to smooth the administration and receipt of benefits under changing claimant circumstances, reduce bureaucracy, fraud and error, and ensure that being in work was always more financially beneficial than being out of work.[3]

1 Tomlinson, J.,Halliday, S., Meers, J. (2024), *Procedural Legitimacy Logics Within the Digital Welfare State*, Administrative Fairness Lab, University of York. p. 4.

2 Digitisation incorporates a range of different technologies, which may or may not include automation, the use of algorithms, predictive analytics and other data-driven approaches. For examples in the public sector see Transforming public services, using technology and digital tools and approaches - case studies

3 Griffiths, R. (2021), *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog?*, Social Policy and Society, FirstView

Through increasing standardisation, made possible by digitisation and automation, cutting costs was another primary aim. When initially introduced, estimates of administrative savings of nearly £100 million per year were anticipated, as well as a reduction of over £1 billion in fraud and error.[4]

Processes that were previously partly or wholly manual are now mediated through automated decision-making systems and digitised processes, and the vast majority of claims are made and managed online.[5,6] The benefits of digitisation were highlighted during the pandemic when there was a huge upsurge in new claims; online applications, rather than paper-based or in-person, contributed to the system adapting well to the increased pressure.[7]

The relationship between claimant and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff is mediated through an online 'UC journal'. Claimants must inform DWP of any changes in circumstances via the online journal, and use it to record job-seeking activities as set out in their 'claimant commitment', which states the actions they will take in return for receiving their benefit. Penalties for non-compliance include suspension of benefit payments. Claimants can be contacted via text messages and emails, directing them to check their messages in their online journal.[8]

The system emphasises claimants' responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the information they supply to DWP via their online application and journal. This information, as well as other data, can be used to automatically flag potential fraud,[9] using AI-powered fraud detection. Data from historic cases is analysed to identify potentially fraudulent claims, which are then referred to staff for investigation.[10] The DWP is developing further AI capabilities, applying machine learning analysis to a broader range of information and other parts of the system.[11]

There is also automatic sharing of earnings and income data between HMRC and DWP, so-called 'real time' information, to check eligibility for UC payments, and how much people are entitled to.[12] Amendments to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill would have given DWP the power to require third party organisations, initially banks and building societies, to share data they hold on claimants, in order to tackle fraud and error.[13]

Underlying policy drivers

The wider policy and political context of the digitisation and automation of UC has shaped how it has been designed and implemented; it is not a neutral undertaking. As Raso notes in her critique of digital governance of benefits and borders, "... interfaces cannot be understood separately and apart from the institutions they constitute".[14]

UC digitisation and automation is inextricable from the wider policy objectives of UC; it is a tool for their implementation. It is one strand of wider welfare reforms including efforts to shrink budgets, reduce numbers qualifying for benefits, and implement tools to influence the behaviour of claimants, including conditionality and sanctions.[15] The use of digitised and automated systems in UC has gone hand in hand with policy attention on combating fraud and distinguishing between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and an underlying assumption that claimants wish to avoid complying with the system. Digitised and automated systems are employed to combat these tendencies.[16]

Risks and harms arising from digitisation and automation

For many claimants UC does an adequate job, providing access to benefits and employment support in a convenient way. However, there are documented instances in which its digitised and automated nature not only fails to deliver its stated purpose, but actively contributes to harm.

It is common in digital systems for a gap to open up between the majority for whom it works acceptably, and the minority for whom it does not. In the effort to build in standardisation and efficiency, the act of categorising and sorting people digitally can itself contribute to harm: "... the social sorting inherent in these processes [can] also function as a mechanism of exclusion, targeting, and oppression...".[17] The most vulnerable individuals and groups are normally those most affected.[18]

This process of datafication, turning claimants' identities into data that the system can read and process, can not only exclude people who are entitled, it can also replicate bias.[19] Even though equalities legislation bars directly excluding or discriminating against claimants on the basis

4 Raso, J. (2023), Smooth Operators, Predictable Glitches: *The Interface Governance of Benefits and Borders*, Canadian Journal of Law and Society, Vol 38, number 2.1

5 Alston, P. (2019), *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*, United Nations General Assembly

6 Griffiths, *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog*

7 House of Commons Library (2021), *Coronavirus: Universal Credit during the crisis*

8 Griffiths, *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog*

9 Tomlinson et al, *Procedural Legitimacy Logics Within the Digital Welfare State*

10 BBC (2024), *Universal Credit claims no longer paused while AI fraud checks carried out*, Accessed online Universal Credit claims no longer paused while AI fraud checks carried out

11 Tech Monitor (2023), *DWP's fraud and error checking AI still displaying signs of bias*, Accessed online DWP's fraud and error checking AI still displaying signs of bias

12 Tomlinson et al, *Procedural Legitimacy Logics Within the Digital Welfare State*

13 HM Government (2024), *Data Protection and Digital Information Bill Amendment Paper*, Accessed online Data Protection and Digital Information Bill - (Amendment Paper)

14 Raso, *Smooth Operators, Predictable Glitches: The Interface Governance of Benefits and Borders*, p. 8

15 Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*

16 Zajko, M. (2023), *Automated Government Benefits and Welfare Surveillance*, Surveillance and Society 21 (3)

17 Zajko, *Automated Government Benefits and Welfare Surveillance*, p. 249

18 Tomlinson et al, *Procedural Legitimacy Logics Within the Digital Welfare State*

19 Masiero, S. (2023), *Digital identity as platform-mediated surveillance*

of protected characteristics such as ethnicity, gender or age, these characteristics can be encoded in other data such as nationality, which then acts as a proxy. If this data is used in an automated system it bakes in existing biases and inequalities.[20,21] Training AI systems using historical data can also build in bias; some disabled benefit claimants believe they are being unfairly targeted by fraud algorithms, due to bias against disabled people in previous fraud investigations.[22]

When the system gets things wrong, the inherent tension between assumptions of infallible technology and people's actual experiences is highlighted. Some UC claimants describe long and difficult processes to rectify problems, with the onus on them rather than system administrators.[23,24] The automated nature of UC directly contributes to the difficulties rectifying mistakes: the reasons behind decisions are opaque, and requirements are often unclear.[25,26]

The digital by default nature of UC leads to a lack of transparency for claimants, making it unclear for them what is happening 'behind the scenes': who or what is answering their questions, or what specific changes in circumstances they are required to report.[27] Transparency is also limited by commercial and bureaucratic confidentiality. It is difficult to get much information about how systems like UC work, either because they are provided by private companies that insist on commercial confidentiality, or because governments claim that releasing information will help fraudsters to beat the system.[28]

Parts of the system intended to smooth the application process for claimants do not always work as intended. If the dates on which UC automatically calculates entitlements using real time HMRC data do not match up with the dates in-work claimants are paid, UC can overestimate someone's income and reduce their benefit entitlement to nothing.[29,30] In addition, thousands of claimants every month dispute the accuracy of real time earnings information.[31]

Because of the focus on combating fraud and ensuring compliance with eligibility conditions, ongoing surveillance is essential to the functioning of UC, both through the requirements on claimants to keep sharing information, and through DWP's use of other data.[32] Data is shared with third parties to check things like claimant identity and whether they are in work, and checks on dependent children and housing costs are also done automatically.[33] Whether this reliance on 'data maximisation' is compatible with claimants' privacy is debatable.[34] However it is entirely in line with the wider datafication of society and belief that more data will always lead to better outcomes from public services.[35]

The digitised and automated state, as exemplified by UC, is distant and non-human, and at the same time knows us intimately through our data. There is an imbalance between what it knows about us, and how much we can know about it and how it works. The relationship between claimant and system is often one of compliance, punishment and frustration rather than support and respect.[36]

Emerging automated futures

Governments often look to borrow welfare policy and innovations from other countries. The apparent success of welfare state technologies and the similarity of many countries' welfare policy objectives tend to make digital welfare policy and practice 'travel' quickly and easily.[37,38,39] Multiple countries are adopting 'India Stack', a suite of digitised tools for the welfare state;[40] Japan is looking at UC as inspiration for their own digital transformation;[41] and many countries and development organisations are using digital ID systems to distribute aid and financial support.[42] If UC continues down the path of increasing digitisation and automation, practices from other countries indicate what other technologies might be introduced or expanded. For example:

20 Zajko, *Automated Government Benefits and Welfare Surveillance*
21 Amnesty International (2021), *Xenophobic Machines: Discrimination through unregulated use of algorithms in the Dutch childcare benefits scandal*
22 Dent, A. (2022), *Disabled benefit claimants are being unfairly investigated*, Huck Magazine, Accessed online Disabled benefit claimants are being unfairly investigated
23 Cheetham, M., Moffatt, S., Addison, M., Wiseman, A. (2019), *Impact of Universal Credit in North East England: a qualitative study of claimants and support staff*, BMJ Open
24 Tomlinson et al, *Procedural Legitimacy Logics Within the Digital Welfare State*
25 Raso, *Smooth Operators, Predictable Glitches: The Interface Governance of Benefits and Borders*
26 Tomlinson et al, *Procedural Legitimacy Logics Within the Digital Welfare State*
27 Mears, R., Howes, S. (2023), *You Reap What You Code: Universal Credit, digitalisation and the rule of law*, Child Poverty Action Group
28 Zajko, *Automated Government Benefits and Welfare Surveillance*
29 Griffiths, *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog?*
30 Raso, *Smooth Operators, Predictable Glitches: The Interface Governance of Benefits and Borders*
31 Griffiths, *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog?*
32 Zajko, *Automated Government Benefits and Welfare Surveillance*
33 Griffiths, *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog?*
34 Dencik, L., Hintz, A., Redden, J., Warne, H. (2018), *Data Scores as Governance: Investigating uses of citizen scoring in public services*, Data Justice Lab, Cardiff University
35 Kaun, A., Dencik, L. (2020), *Datafication and the Welfare State: An Introduction*, Global Perspectives 1 (1)
36 Raso, *Smooth Operators, Predictable Glitches: The Interface Governance of Benefits and Borders*
37 Peck, J. (2001), *Workfare States*, New York, The Guilford Press
38 Peck, J.,Theodore, N. (2015), *Fast policy: experimental statecraft at the thresholds of neoliberalism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press
39 Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*
40 Business Today (2023), India Stack goes global; close to a dozen countries set to implement India's digital infrastructure
41 Tokyo Foundation (2022), Creating a Social Safety Net for the Digital Age
42 Wang, B., Lueks, W., Sukaitis, J., Graf Narbel, V., Troncoso, C. (2023), *Not Yet Another Digital ID: Privacy-Preserving Humanitarian Aid Distribution*, Conference paper presented at IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy

Predictive analytics: In the UK and US there are already examples of public services using predictive analytics, where historical data is used to identify people or cases at risk of a particular behaviour or outcome. Trends and patterns in previous behaviours and outcomes are analysed using algorithms to predict future scenarios. Authorities in both countries have used it to identify children who may be at high risk of mistreatment or abuse.[43,44]

While such predictive systems can be an additional source of information, particularly when used as a complement to rather than a wholesale replacement for human decision-making, they are not foolproof. They may use poor quality data, and there is a risk of self-reinforcing scores, in which an action triggered by being flagged as high risk is fed back into the system pushing the risk score higher still.[45] Some public bodies have discontinued their use for these reasons.[46]

Predictive tools can be flawed in deployment as well as design: in the Netherlands, thousands of people were accused of and punished for benefit fraud, when the SyRI fraud risk assessment system wrongly targeted them. It was disproportionately deployed in low-income neighbourhoods with high proportions of households from racialised minorities and/ or migrant backgrounds.[47]

Biometrics: The Indian government runs the world's largest biometric ID scheme, which citizens must use to access benefits and other social support. Biometrics use physical characteristics to identify individuals; the Indian system uses an iris scan, photograph and fingerprints. While being welcomed by many within India and internationally, it has also received criticism for excess data collection, privacy concerns and a lack of effective oversight.[48] Dozens of US states are using facial recognition to verify the identities of people claiming unemployment benefits, despite the known risks of misidentification which particularly affect people of colour.[49]

Electronic payment cards: Some countries use electronic payment cards rather than making social security payments into beneficiaries' bank accounts. They have the advantage of being available to anyone, regardless of whether they have a bank account, but they also enable state surveillance of beneficiaries' spending, and can be limited in functionality.[50] These already exist in the UK for asylum seekers: ASPEN cards can be used like a debit card, but have been used to penalise people by the Home Office.[51]

Job matching data analysis: data scraped from sources such as personal emails and 'click behaviour'[52] is being used in Finland and Belgium respectively to identify the most 'suitable' roles for jobseekers, and gauge how appropriate candidates are for particular jobs.[53] How well these technologies work is debatable: a data-driven job search tool in France, meant to provide personalised guidance, had mixed results at best.[54]

These examples demonstrate the seemingly unstoppable expansion of technology into the welfare state, with governments continuing to adopt technologies despite known problems of accuracy, privacy, bias and surveillance. Unchecked travel in this direction points to increasingly authoritarian and disciplinary digitised social security futures.

Relational employment support

The second part of this paper explores relational public services as an indicator of different possible futures for digitised social security. Mulgan, Cottam and others introduced the idea of a relational state over a decade ago: the state working with the public rather than acting for or on them, and the importance of relationships within households and communities, and between people and services.[55,56]

A relational model of public services is one that is based on relationships, not processes: relationships between professional(s) and service user(s), between a service and the community, and between citizens or service users. In contrast to a transactional model, which is standardised and can be delivered by any representative of the service provider, a relational model is based on a one-to-one relationship between a specific professional and a service user.[57]

A relational model puts service users in control, and builds relationships based on trust and respect. They are designed with, rather than imposed upon, the community they serve,

43 Eubanks, V. (2017), *Automating Inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police and punish the poor*, New York, St Martin's Press
44 Dencik et al, *Data Scores as Governance: Investigating uses of citizen scoring in public services*
45 Dencik et al, *Data Scores as Governance: Investigating uses of citizen scoring in public services*
46 Redden et al, *Automating Public Services: Learning from cancelled systems*
47 Zajko, *Automated Government Benefits and Welfare Surveillance*
48 Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*
49 CNN (2023), Want your unemployment benefits? You may have to submit to facial recognition first
50 Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*
51 Privacy International (2021), What is an Aspen Card and why does it need reform
52 What websites a person visits, which links they click on, how long they spend on particular sites
53 Algorithm Watch (2019), *Automating Society: Taking Stock of Automated Decision-Making in the EU*
54 Picard, B., Pons, V., Paul-Delvaux, L., McIntyre, V., Mbih, E., Crépon, B., Ben Dhia, A. (2022), The sobering story of the website that attempted to bring unemployment down, Centre for Economic Policy Research
55 Mulgan, G. (2012), *Government with the people: the outlines of a relational state, in The Relational State: how recognising the importance of human relationships could revolutionise the role of the state*, IPPR
56 Cottam, H. (2011), *Relational Welfare*, Soundings Number 48
57 Mackenzie, P. (2021), *The Social State: From transactional to relational public services*, Demos

and they aim to support relationships between community members and increase social capital.[58] These relationships and networks are both a tool for and a positive benefit of relational work.[59]

Relational employment support programmes in Scotland[60] and Liverpool,[61] demonstrate the benefits of the approach. In Liverpool a whole-household approach was taken, meaning households members could support each other, and challenges that affected everyone in the household could be more easily addressed.[62] In Scotland, participants reported the positive benefits of services based on choice, the importance of respect and support, and the development of agency and autonomy.[63] Common to both programmes was a holistic approach, addressing participants' lives in the round rather than a series of siloed problems. Both programmes also demonstrate the importance of the relationship between jobseeker and support staff. Relationships based on mutual respect rather than compliance, which aim to produce outcomes meaningful to the individual not just the state or institution, are known to improve employment outcomes.[64,65]

Existing examples of relational services tend to be on a relatively small scale, operating locally or regionally.[66] The extent to which this is driven by the nature of the services themselves, with their high levels of person-to-person, individually responsive work, the organisations that commission and deliver them, the wider political environment, or a combination of all three, needs further exploration.[67] How feasible it is to incorporate a relational approach, or elements of one, in a nationally delivered public service such as UC is as yet unclear. The role of technology in scaling up and enabling relational approaches seems key to furthering our understanding.

Can the digital and relational be integrated?

Is there a future in which digitised and automated social security systems are designed and implemented on relational principles?

First, we must consider whether there is a fundamental mismatch between the standardisation and rules required for digitised systems and something that addresses each person as an individual: does a digitised and/ or automated system necessarily degrade relational principles so much as to render them ineffective? A national service such as UC must take into account the cost of delivery, and take reasonable measures to ensure consistency in the application of rules; in the case of UC, much of this is achieved via digitisation and automation.

Automation as currently implemented requires standardisation, which by design must flatten out complexity. Smith argues that standardisation results in 'one size fits few' provision, which fails to take into account what matters to individuals, and in turn generates less positive outcomes, and higher demand for support. In contrast, relational services focus on the individual and their needs and objectives.

We must also consider whether technology is a barrier to relational work or a tool for its design and implementation. There appear to be two schools of thought. One makes the case for prioritising digitisation and automation of the transactional elements of services only, in order to free up staff time to do more relational work.[69,70] This view can characterise digitised services as dystopian, and therefore implies that digitised services and relational work are incompatible.[71]

Others see potential for a more integrated approach. Cottam[72] identifies technology not only as a means to reduce time spent on bureaucracy and reporting, but also a way to facilitate connections, improve outcomes and share successes. Technology could be employed in services that are primarily transactional as a way to understand more about people, their needs and desires, and introduce more relational work.[73] Hesselgreaves and Smith[74] discuss using 'digital learning and communication platforms' to enhance the capture and use of learning from relational working, evolving the work according to knowledge developed during its delivery. This is technology as enabler rather than gatekeeper, and as a facilitator not an end in and of itself.

The political context and underlying policy drivers of public services are other important factors. Even if the focus of digitisation and automation within UC was solely on the most transactional elements, the intertwining of employment seeking and benefits entitlement which is at the heart of UC may make relational working impossible. Relational services are built on trust and genuine two-way relationships; these

58 Mackenzie, *The Social State: From transactional to relational public services*
59 Pearson, S., Lindsay, C., Batty, E., Cullen, A., Eadson, W. (2023), *Relational approaches to employability*, Journal of Education and Work 36 (4)
60 Pearson et al, *Relational approaches to employability*
61 Tyrrell, B. (2020), *Households into Work: Interim evaluation of pilot programme*, Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool
62 Tyrrell, *Households into Work: Interim evaluation of pilot programme*
63 Pearson et al, *Relational approaches to employability*
64 Phillips, A. (2022), *Working Together: The case for universal employment support*, Demos
65 Hirseland, A., Kerschbaumer, L. (2023), *A Relational Approach to Understanding Welfare Recipients' Transitions from Long-Term Unemployment to Employment and the Role of Case Work*, Social Work and Society 21 (1)
66 Smith, M. (2023), The Liberated Method: Rethinking Public Service, Changing Futures Northumberland; Pearson et al, *Relational approaches to employability*
67 Fox, A., Fox, C. (2023), *How we lost sight of the point of public services: The case for whole system reform moving towards strengths-based and relational services*, New Local
68 Smith, *The Liberated Method: Rethinking Public Service*
69 Mackenzie, *The Social State: From transactional to relational public services*
70 Fox and Fox, *How we lost sight of the point of public services: The case for whole system reform moving towards strengths-based and relational services*
71 Fox and Fox, *How we lost sight of the point of public services: The case for whole system reform moving towards strengths-based and relational services*
72 Cottam, *Relational Welfare*
73 Cooke, G., Muir, R. (2012), *The possibilities and politics of the relational state*, in *The Relational State: how recognising the importance of human relationships could revolutionise the role of the state*, IPPR
74 Hesselgreaves, H., Smith, M. (2023), An Institute for Prevention and Reform, Changing Futures Northumbria

are fundamentally undermined by the conditionality baked into UC which underpins relationships between claimants and staff, and is enforced through automation.[75,76] While UC experiences are not universally negative, claimant choice is severely lacking,[77] and wider wellbeing, barriers and capabilities are not consistently taken into consideration, for example whether conditions are compatible with being a single parent.[78,79]

It might therefore be the case that a relational approach is only possible if job-seeking and employment support are uncoupled from benefits-related compliance. However, the link between benefits entitlement and employment-seeking is firmly embedded in politics, and any disconnection seems unlikely in the near future, at least in the English context.[80] Therefore any introduction of relational approaches may be contingent on the wider political environment, and a shift in political emphasis away from UC as a disciplinary instrument.

If the political context enabled it, there are a number of areas in which technology as an enabler of relational working could be explored, both within the context of UC and more generally.

The first is co-design. Relational services are designed with the people that use them. A technology-based service based on relational principles would have co-design as a key principle, taking into account user preferences, experiences, ideas and goals and considering service users as equal partners in decision-making. The role of technology as an enabler of relational service co-design is a topic for further exploration; co-design is primarily considered an in-person activity, but there is emerging practice in the use of digital tools.[81] Considerations such as access to digital spaces and comfort and confidence using them need to be built in, but there may be benefits to technology-enabled co-design such as enabling asynchronous participation, and balancing out power differentials between professionals and service users.[82]

The relationships which are central to relational working could also be a key area for the use of technology. As it currently operates, UC does not facilitate relationships between claimants as a relational service would do. Rather, it atomises the cohort of claimants into isolated individuals, operating in siloed exchanges with the UC system. This prevents the formation of relationships, which are pivotal in providing effective support to people out of work or on low incomes.[83,84]

Technology is already pivotal to how we communicate and relate to one another, not always positively. What might technology intentionally designed to support relationships and communication in a relational setting do? It would not only connect claimants and services, but also support relationships between claimants and the communities they exist in. It would be informed by what we already know about the pros and cons of digitally mediated relationships. Critically, it would place claimants and professionals on an equal footing, without imbalances of information and transparency.

Technology also has potential to support the joining up of services and support in a holistic way, which addresses claimants as whole people rather than disjointed problems to fix. The onus is usually on individuals to identify and manage multiple services and sources of support to address their needs, requiring time and self-management skills that are not always available. Someone claiming UC who also needs housing advice and support with debt would have to find suitable provision themselves and engage with each provider separately, and the professionals in each service typically would not interact with each other. There could be tech-enabled ways of identifying the most suitable provision, sharing data securely between services, building a coherent package of support and communicating between claimants and services seamlessly. There is emerging practice in this area,[85,86] however there is scope for a great deal more.

What comes next?

In part this paper is a call for more innovation and exploration of the areas outlined above, couched in the broader question of the potential for technology to support ways of working which focus on people rather than processes. The findings would build our understanding of digital social security and whether its future will continue down the path of increasing automation, compliance and surveillance, refocus on relational principles and ways for technology to support them, or something in between.

This is by its nature an emerging area, with limited existing practice and evidence; we have few examples of how the digital and relational interplay manifests in real services. One, from the public employment service in Portugal, used a predictive tool to calculate the relative employability of jobseekers. It was found to be of relatively little use because staff did not trust its 'judgements'; because they did not know

75 Pollard, T. (2023), *From Compliance to engagement: rethinking the use of conditionality in our social security system*, New Economics Foundation
76 Phillips, *Working Together: The case for universal employment support*
77 Tomlinson, D. (2024), *Work first can work better*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
78 The Women's Organisation, Forcing women into work won't work (2023)
79 Talbot, R. (2024), *Universal Credit Conditionality Changes and the Impact on Single Parent Families*, Single Parent Rights
80 Scottish Government (2023), Social security in an independent Scotland
81 Osborne, S., Powell, M., Cucciniello, M., Macfarlane, J. (2022), *It is a relay not a sprint! Evolving co-design in a digital and virtual environment: neighbourhood services for elders*, Global Public Policy and Governance 2, 518–538
82 Osborne et al, *It is a relay not a sprint! Evolving co-design in a digital and virtual environment: neighbourhood services for elders*
83 Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*
84 Griffiths, *Universal Credit and Automated Decision Making: A Case of the Digital Tail Wagging the Policy Dog?*
85 Dingle, K., Lumley, T. (2023), How might we improve signposting for young people
86 Dent, A., *Meeting young people where they are: towards a new model of essential digital support*, Promising Trouble (forthcoming)

the basis on which scores were calculated, staff preferred to focus on their human relationship with clients.[87] This points to the importance of designing digital tools transparently and with *integration* of the digital and the relational prioritised. How technology can enable and enhance co-design, person-centred decision making, holistic support, and building trust, relationships and social capital should be explored further. Theoretical and practical interventions could seek to identify which parts of a relational system could be digitised and automated without losing its fundamental relational nature.

Staff and claimants should be consulted on a range of topics: the role of technology in enabling ongoing learning and improvement within services, and staff to do their jobs effectively; what would a digitised system that staff trust, value and use within a relational employment service look like; how much 'algorithmic brokerage' do staff have to do to make appropriate and effective use of automated decision making?[88] What role do jobseekers and benefit claimants want digitisation and automation to play? Can they envisage and design a digital service based on relational principles which also uses automation to improve their experiences and outcomes?

These explorations could take place through co-produced and user-led research programmes and policy design fora, co-designed pilot projects, public consultations, working with civil society organisations and collaborations between technologists, public services and policymakers. Not only is there scope for a great deal more research and testing of solutions, there are also essential conversations about who will have a stake in shaping the future.

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