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Not vulnerable, not marginalised: reclaiming power through social work research

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ABSTRACT

The terms *vulnerable* and *marginalised* will be critically analysed in this reflexive article, arguing that their uncritical use constrains the potential for transformative research and social change. Drawing on Wilson's participatory research with low-income coastal communities and Charfe's work on co-production and social pedagogy, the paper challenges neoliberal narratives that depict marginalised individuals as passive or responsible for their own exclusion. Instead, it foregrounds the structural and institutional factors that inhibit inclusion and erode relational capacity within communities and social work. The article introduces the concepts of *relational capital*—the resources individuals draw upon to form and sustain relationships. Drawing on three participatory case studies and the reflexive interpretation of experience, data, or practice, the paper illustrates how reframing deficit-based discourses enables communities to reclaim agency and co-create change. The findings reveal that relationships grounded in trust, honesty, and mutual respect are essential for meaningful inclusion, participation, and civic engagement. Ultimately, the paper argues that reframing vulnerability and marginalisation through relational practice moves social work research from transactional to relational modes of engagement, fostering inclusive, community-driven research and social transformation.

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Introduction

This paper is presented as a reflexive examination of three participatory action research projects conducted over a ten-year period to explore how relationships shape experiences of inclusion, exclusion and participation within social work.

The paper revisits these interconnected studies through qualitative secondary analysis to examine how relationships shaped experiences of inclusion, exclusion and participation.

The conceptual framework underpinning this paper argues that experiences commonly described as vulnerability or marginalisation are not inherent characteristics of individuals but are produced through relational processes operating across institutional, organisational and interpersonal contexts. Drawing together critiques of New Public Management, Freirean pedagogy, social pedagogy and theories of social inclusion, we propose *relational capital* as the central analytical concept through which inclusion, exclusion and self-exclusion can be understood. Within this

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framework, relationships, rather than individual deficits, become the primary unit of analysis, while co-production is understood as a relational process through which power is redistributed through dialogue, reciprocity and shared participation.

The paper adopts an interpretive and reflexive epistemological stance. Rather than using the empirical material to confirm an established argument, we revisit the original qualitative data to explore how relational processes were expressed across three distinct but interconnected research projects. The analysis therefore seeks to generate conceptual insights by engaging iteratively with the empirical material, identifying recurring patterns across cases, and considering how these findings contribute to wider theoretical debates concerning relational practice, participation and social justice. Relational capital did not function as a predetermined coding framework; rather, it emerged through an ongoing dialogue between the empirical material, the researchers' interpretations and the relevant theoretical literature.

The three projects employed participatory action research methodologies and generated rich qualitative datasets through interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, community walks, co-production activities and photovoice. Revisiting these datasets through a qualitative secondary analysis enabled patterns that were not fully visible within the individual studies to be examined comparatively. Through reflexive thematic analysis, the paper identifies shared relational processes that transcend the specific contexts of each project and considers their implications for social work research, policy and practice.

In keeping with the aims of this Special Issue, the purpose of this paper develops a theoretically situated interpretation of how participatory research can deepen understanding of relational processes and by proposing relational capital as a concept that may enrich contemporary debates concerning inclusion, co-production and socially just social work practice.

'Vulnerable' and 'marginalised': the evolving position of language and framing in social work

There has been growing awareness of the limited impact of New Public Management (NPM) in delivering real service reform and improved outcomes for people receiving services within the public service sector (Worsley & Wylie, 2020). Underpinned by the neo-liberal ideology of individualism (Fallov & Blad, 2018), NPM has focused on cost-effectiveness and key performance indicators (Worsley & Wylie, 2020) and is transactional in its approach to supporting people seen as vulnerable and marginalised (Wilson, Ridley, et al., 2024). Within the social work discipline, this has led to what Harbo and Kemp (2020) term the manualisation of social work practice; standardised assessments and procedures, and a focus on outcomes. Being able to complete assessments/plans on IT systems, meet timescales, and achieve the desired outcomes has led to the professionalisation of social work practice (Charfe, 2023, p. 5; Harbo & Kemp, 2020; Smith, 2020) and is seen as a sign of good professional practice. In terms of social work research, the impact of NPM can be seen in the obsession with evidence-based practice based where research can be seen as 'hard' knowledge which is abstracted and applied to practice (Smith, 2020). The use of social work research in developing evidence-based practice is underpinned by the discourse around efficiency and certainty to meet desired outcomes and 'denies the realities, complexity and challenging nature of modern social work practice' (Charfe, 2023, p. 5; Harbo & Kemp, 2020; Smith, 2020). As argued by Lowe et al. (2021, p. 17), it has led to social workers and other public sector professionals being made to operate in a 'magical fantasy world'.

As a result of NPM's negative impact, there is a growing case for moving from the *transactional* nature of social work to the *relational*. Within current research, the discussions and developments around relational public service reform focus on the issue of shared power and decision making (Cottam, 2021; Glover, 2023; Lent & Studdert, 2021; Lowe et al., 2021). As Evans (2016) has highlighted, poorly designed systems and processes have impacted and overshadowed any well-meaning and ethically based practice within social work. Evidence suggests increased interest in

redesigning organisational systems and culture, as well as the day-to-day practice, within social work, so that it is ethically rooted in supporting humans to flourish and helping people live a good life (Cottam, 2021; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2019).

The lived experience movement

Part of this growing discontent with managerial approaches to public services has been reflected in government policy, which has increasingly emphasised local engagement, participatory democracy and collaboration as responses to the limitations of traditional social service reform (Needham & Carr, 2009; Osborne et al., 2016). This shift was further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which mutual aid networks and community-led initiatives demonstrated the capacity of local relationships and collective action to respond rapidly to social need, particularly for those categorised as 'vulnerable' (Kruger, 2020). These developments have reinforced calls for more participatory approaches to social work research and practice that recognise communities as active contributors to knowledge and service development rather than passive recipients of support.

Central to this agenda has been the growing emphasis on co-production, which seeks to involve people with lived experience – often referred to as experts by experience – as equal partners in the design, delivery and evaluation of services and research (Needham & Carr, 2009; Durose et al., 2012; Beresford, 2019). Although co-production has become a dominant discourse within social work and wider public service reform, evidence suggests that its implementation frequently falls short of its emancipatory ambitions. Participation is often constrained by organisational power imbalances, resulting in forms of consultation that are tokenistic rather than genuinely collaborative (Arnstein, 1969; Durose et al., 2012; Beresford, 2019). In these circumstances, lived experience risks becoming a resource to be extracted rather than a source of shared authority capable of influencing decision-making.

The discourse surrounding vulnerability and marginalisation further complicates co-production. On the one hand, professionals may become so concerned with safeguarding, trauma and risk management that paternalistic practices emerge, limiting opportunities for people with lived experience to exercise agency or influence change (McKercher, 2020). Individuals are positioned primarily through deficit-oriented narratives that emphasise need, dependency and protection rather than capability, expertise and contribution. On the other hand, participatory initiatives can inadvertently expose people to harm when organisations seek repeated disclosure of traumatic experiences as evidence of authenticity or legitimacy. Research has highlighted that poorly facilitated participation may lead to emotional burden, exploitation and re-traumatisation, particularly where adequate support, reciprocity and shared control are absent (Beresford, 2019; Carr, 2012; Sweeney et al., 2016).

McGarvey (2025), writing from lived experience, provides an illustrative critique of how invitations to recount trauma may be experienced, and how, in some contexts, fostered the mistaken assumption that repeatedly recounting traumatic experiences is inherently therapeutic and necessary for improving services. While trauma-informed approaches have made an important contribution to recognising the impact of adversity (Sweeney et al., 2016), an uncritical focus on personal trauma risks obscuring the structural inequalities, power relations and social injustices that shape people's lives. Rather than challenging these conditions, such approaches can inadvertently reinforce deficit-based understandings of individuals while overlooking their knowledge, strengths and capacity to contribute to social change.

These tensions illustrate that meaningful participation cannot be achieved simply by inviting people with lived experience into existing systems. This suggests the importance of approaches that recognise relationships as a foundation of ethical practice, redistribute power and value lived experience as a form of knowledge in its own right. It is within this context that this paper argues for *relational capital* as an analytical framework capable of explaining how relationships enable – or constrain – participation, recognition and collective agency within participatory social work research.

Through this reflexive paper, we seek to explicitly foreground the fact that our central concern is not only with the existence of concepts such as ‘tokenism’, ‘vulnerability’, and ‘lived experience involvement’, but also with how these constructs function in practice and influence social work relationships, decision-making, and reflective practice. This, in itself, brings a contradiction, creating an apparent tension between the critique of tokenistic and performative involvement and the subsequent emphasis on integrating lived-experience expertise. For this reason, we chose to present a reflective interpretation that highlights the limitations of superficial or symbolic involvement while also engaging with three case studies that position lived experience as a substantive and integral component of co-produced social work practice.

Social pedagogy and relationships

This Special Issue of the *European Journal of Social Work* poses an important challenge: how should social work research rethink experiences of vulnerability and marginalisation, and what are the implications for more socially just practice? Responding to this challenge invites consideration of perspectives that move beyond deficit-based understandings of individuals towards perspectives that recognise the relational, structural and contextual conditions through which vulnerability and marginalisation are produced (Levitas, 2005a; Popay et al., 2008). Such a shift foregrounds approaches that value people’s strengths, lived experience and capacity for participation rather than positioning them solely as recipients of professional intervention.

Social pedagogy provides a valuable philosophical orientation for supporting this rethinking. Rather than offering a prescriptive method or intervention, social pedagogy represents an ethical, theoretical and practical orientation that emphasises human relationships, participation, dialogue and social justice (Charfe & Gardner, 2019; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011; Petrie et al., 2009). As Charfe and Gardner (2019) argue, social pedagogy is inherently complex and contextual, with practitioners frequently responding to questions of practice by recognising that ‘it depends’. This reflects an understanding that practice cannot be reduced to technical procedures but instead requires continual ethical judgement, reflexivity and responsiveness to the uniqueness of each person’s circumstances. Consequently, social pedagogy places relationships at the centre of practice, recognising them not simply as a means of intervention but as the foundation through which learning, participation and social change occur (Petrie et al., 2009).

Central to this perspective is the expectation that practitioners critically examine their own assumptions, values and use of power. Reflexivity requires practitioners to question how professional knowledge, organisational cultures and societal discourses influence how people are labelled as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘marginalised’ and how these labels shape opportunities for participation. It also invites practitioners to consider whether the professional values of social work – including respect for dignity, social justice and human rights – and the core principles of co-production are genuinely enacted in practice (Banks, 2012; Charfe & Gardner, 2019).

This ethical stance aligns closely with contemporary understandings of co-production, which emphasise sharing power, valuing experiential knowledge and recognising people with lived experience as equal partners in knowledge creation and service development (Beresford, 2019; Needham & Carr, 2009). As McKercher argues, ‘When we fail to see people with lived experience as partners, we overlook their ability to be an integral part of a solution’ (McKercher, 2020, p. 47). Genuine partnership, therefore, depends not only on creating opportunities for participation but also on practitioners’ willingness to challenge traditional professional hierarchies and to embrace uncertainty, dialogue and mutual learning.

The importance of this position is increasingly recognised both within social work scholarship (O’Leary & Tsui, 2022) and through contemporary social commentators drawing upon their own lived experience to critique welfare systems and dominant narratives surrounding vulnerability (McGarvey, 2025). Together, these perspectives suggest that rethinking vulnerability and marginalisation requires more than changing terminology; it requires a fundamental reorientation towards

relationships as the primary means through which recognition, participation and social justice are realised. It is this philosophical and ethical foundation that informs the concept of *relational capital* developed in this paper, providing a framework for understanding how relationships generate the conditions through which people exercise agency, contribute knowledge and participate meaningfully in social work research and practice.

As Paulo Freire said:

If I do not love the world – if I do not love life – if I do not love people – I cannot enter into dialogue Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know (Freire, 1970, p. 71)

A Freirean standpoint informs our interpretation of dialogue, participation, power and knowledge production across the three projects.

A relational conceptualisation for understanding social exclusion and self-Exclusion

When discussing the terms ‘vulnerable’ and ‘marginalised’, contemporary scholarly approaches to social inclusion and self-exclusion help provide a deeper understanding of their negative impacts. Social exclusion and self-exclusion often go hand in hand with the terms ‘vulnerable’ and ‘marginalised’. Understanding these concepts and their impact helps us rethink our own subjectivity and how we engage with individuals, groups, and communities labelled as such. The process of inclusion and exclusion is presented as fluid and dynamic. Individuals or groups are neither included nor excluded in a binary classification (Popay et al., 2008). Nor are they completely included or excluded from all forms of society; it depends on a number of factors, such as context, relationships, and assets (Levitas et al., 2007).

Drawing principally on the participatory dimension of social exclusion – ‘participation in economic, social, cultural and political life – or its absence’ (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 89) – we adopted a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of social inclusion and exclusion. This approach focuses on how communities socially construct their interactions with opportunities to participate in civic society and how they respond to these interpretations. This perspective recognises the interplay of differing power structures (for example, political and social) in this construction. A key requirement in the Freirean approach of equity, inclusion and co-production (McKercher, 2020).

This paper introduces *relational capital* as the central analytical concept through which relationships are understood to shape experiences of inclusion, exclusion and participation within social work. Rather than conceptualising vulnerability or marginalisation as inherent characteristics of individuals, relational capital directs attention towards the relational processes operating across interpersonal, organisational and institutional contexts that enable or constrain participation, recognition and agency. In doing so, the paper positions relationships not simply as a mechanism for delivering services, but as the primary analytical unit through which social justice can be examined (Freire, 1970; Crossley, 2011).

The development of relational capital draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital, which conceptualises capital as socially produced resources that are accumulated, exchanged and mobilised within fields of power (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu identified economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital as interconnected forms through which social inequalities are reproduced. Of particular relevance is his conceptualisation of social capital as the actual or potential resources available through durable networks of relationships (Bourdieu, 1992). These relationships are embedded within wider structures of power and cannot be understood independently of the social fields in which they are constituted. Bourdieu’s relational ontology therefore provides an important foundation for understanding that capital is socially produced rather than individually possessed (Bourdieu, 1992). Relational capital builds upon rather than corrects Bourdieu’s relational ontology. Its specific contribution

is to provide an analytical lens for examining how relationships between institutional, gatekeeping and participatory actors mediate the activation, recognition and conversion of resources within unequal fields of power. Bourdieu helps explain how resources operate within fields of unequal power; relational capital provides a social-work-specific analytical lens for examining what happens within relationships between institutional, gatekeeping and participatory actors as those resources and power relations are negotiated.

Relational capital therefore extends, rather than replaces, Bourdieu's theory. It shifts analytical attention from relationships as resources that individuals possess or mobilise towards relationships as dynamic social processes through which trust, recognition, reciprocity, belonging and collective agency are co-produced. In this sense, relational capital is understood as emerging through ongoing interactions between individuals, communities, professionals and institutions, where power is continually negotiated rather than statically distributed. This perspective aligns with relational sociology, which rejects individualistic explanations of social life in favour of understanding persons, identities and institutions as constituted through social relationships (Emirbayer, 1997; Crossley, 2011). Relationships are therefore viewed not merely as conduits for other forms of capital but as productive social spaces in which opportunities for participation, empowerment and social justice are either enabled or constrained.

This conceptualisation is further informed by Freire's (1970) pedagogy of dialogue, which positions authentic relationships as the foundation of critical consciousness and collective action. Likewise, social pedagogy emphasises that learning, participation and human development occur through reciprocal, respectful relationships characterised by trust and shared responsibility (Eichstetter & Holthoff, 2011; Petrie et al., 2009). These perspectives challenge managerial approaches to welfare by recognising relationships as intrinsically valuable rather than merely instrumental. Similar arguments have emerged within relational public administration, where scholars argue that addressing complex social problems depends upon collaborative relationships, mutual learning and co-production between professionals, citizens and communities (Bartels, 2014; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Osborne et al., 2016).

Within social work, relationship-based practice has long been recognised as central to ethical and effective intervention (Trevithick, 2014). However, organisational reforms associated with New Public Management have frequently privileged procedural accountability, performance measurement and standardisation over the development of trusting professional relationships (Carey, 2008; Ferguson, 2009). This paper argues that relational capital provides a conceptual framework for understanding the consequences of these structural shifts by examining how institutional arrangements either facilitate or constrain the relational conditions necessary for participation, recognition and shared decision-making.

Within this framework, relational capital functions as the overarching analytical construct and is distinguished from the related concepts of relational practice and relational capacity. Relational practice refers to what actors do relationally: the practices through which relationships are initiated, negotiated and sustained, including dialogue, recognition, reciprocity, collaboration and shared decision-making. Relational capacity, by contrast, concerns the possibility for such relationships to develop and endure. It refers to the interpersonal, organisational and institutional conditions that enable or constrain meaningful relational engagement, including time, continuity, accessibility, psychological safety, institutional openness and opportunities for participation. Relational capital concerns what becomes possible through these relationships and relational positions. It refers to the resources and forms of power produced, accessed and mobilised through relationships, which may enable or constrain actors' capacity to participate, negotiate, influence, resist or withdraw. The three concepts therefore perform distinct but interconnected analytical functions: relational practice concerns action; relational capacity concerns the conditions of possibility for relational engagement; and relational capital concerns the power and resources generated and mobilised through relationships. Importantly, relational capital is not necessarily positive or equally distributed. Its operation is shaped by actors' differing relational and institutional positions, meaning that

relationships can facilitate recognition, access and agency while simultaneously reproducing gatekeeping, dependency and inequalities of power. From this position, we develop the concept of relational capital to examine how participation and agency are enabled or constrained through relationships structured by unequal distributions of power. Relational capital refers to the relationally produced conditions and resources through which actors are enabled or constrained in exercising recognition, participation and agency. It is therefore not understood as a resource located within an individual, but as emerging through interactions between differently positioned actors and the interpersonal, organisational and institutional contexts in which those relationships take place. Within the context of social inclusion, we identify three analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions of relational capital: institutional, gatekeeping and participatory. Institutional relational capital refers to the authority, legitimacy and resources associated with institutional positions, and the ways in which these can be mobilised to recognise, enable, constrain or act upon the participation and knowledge of others.

Gatekeeping relational capital refers to the relational positioning of actors who can facilitate, mediate or restrict access between individuals or communities and institutional spaces, resources and decision-making processes. Participatory relational capital refers to the relational resources through which individuals and communities can exercise agency within these encounters, including through participation, negotiation, collective action, resistance or withdrawal. These dimensions are neither fixed nor equally distributed: they interact within particular relationships and may change across institutional, temporal and spatial contexts. Although, for analytical clarity, this paper generally examines institutional relational capital in relation to institutional actors, gatekeeping relational capital in relation to intermediary actors and organisations, and participatory relational capital in relation to communities and people conventionally framed as vulnerable or marginalised, these positions should not be understood as inherent characteristics of particular actors. Rather, they describe relational positions within particular contexts of interaction and power.

Viewed in this way, relational capital is not proposed as an additional form of capital alongside economic, cultural, social or symbolic capital. Rather, it is offered as an analytical lens for understanding how different forms of capital are activated, negotiated and transformed through relationships. It enables analysis of how institutional practices either strengthen or erode trust, recognition, reciprocity and participation, thereby shaping people's opportunities to exercise agency and influence the conditions affecting their lives. By foregrounding relational processes rather than individual deficits, relational capital offers a framework for understanding how co-production can move beyond consultation towards the redistribution of power and the creation of more socially just forms of social work practice (Needham & Carr, 2009; Durose et al., 2012). Its analytical value therefore lies not in identifying a new stock of capital, but in examining how existing resources and forms of power become consequential through relationships.

This paper therefore proposes relational capital as a developing theoretical construct grounded in established traditions of capital theory while extending them through insights from relational sociology, Freirean pedagogy, social pedagogy, relational public administration and participatory social work. Rather than replacing existing theories of capital, it contributes a relational perspective that explains how relationships themselves function as the medium through which inclusion and exclusion are produced.

Our relational conceptualisation of social exclusion and self-exclusion offers a nuanced framework for understanding how inclusion operates as a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by intersecting power relations and social structures. By introducing the notion of relational capital, we move beyond static definitions of vulnerability and marginalisation towards an understanding that emphasises agency, reciprocity, and the potential for transformation within relationships. This approach foregrounds the ways in which power circulates across policy, gatekeeping, and participatory domains, influencing how individuals and communities navigate opportunities for inclusion or choose self-exclusion as a form of resistance. A relational perspective invites a more reflexive engagement with the processes of inclusion and exclusion, challenging us to reconsider

how equity and participation are enacted within social, cultural, and institutional spaces. Relational capital is not synonymous with positive or trusting relationships. Relational processes may enable participation and recognition, but may also reproduce exclusion, reinforce institutional authority, erode trust or contribute to withdrawal and resistance. Its analytical value therefore lies in examining how relational conditions distribute possibilities for action unevenly across institutional, gatekeeping and participatory actors.

Reflexive and epistemological positioning

This study adopts a reflexive interpretive orientation within a qualitative secondary analysis of three participatory research projects. Rather than seeking to test or validate a predetermined theoretical proposition, the paper emerged through sustained critical reflection on three interconnected participatory research projects undertaken over a ten-year period. As researchers and practitioners directly involved in the design, delivery and interpretation of these projects, we recognised recurring patterns concerning relationships, participation, trust and power that extended beyond the original aims of the individual studies. The purpose of this paper is therefore to reflect on these cross-cutting insights and consider their implications for social work research and practice.

Our interpretation is inevitably shaped by our dual positioning as researchers and practitioners working within participatory and community-based social work. This position provided prolonged engagement with the communities, practitioners and institutional stakeholders involved in the research, while also requiring ongoing reflexivity regarding our own assumptions, values and professional commitments. Our work is informed by a social pedagogical orientation and Freirean principles of dialogue, participation and social justice, which sensitised us to the relational dimensions of the research while remaining attentive to the ways in which power, exclusion and institutional practices influence participation.

The process involved returning to the qualitative material generated across the three projects, including interview transcripts, field notes, observations and records of co-production activities and engaging in an iterative process of reading, comparison and discussion. Rather than treating the projects as independent case studies, we examined them comparatively to identify recurring patterns, tensions and differences that had not been fully explored within the original analyses. Through this process, concepts that had initially been understood as project-specific were reconsidered across the wider body of work, prompting us to reflect critically on the role of relationships in shaping participation, inclusion and social change.

Our interpretations developed through an ongoing dialogue between the empirical material, our professional experiences and relevant theoretical literature. The concept of relational capital was not applied to confirm an existing theoretical position; instead, it evolved as an analytical lens that helped us make sense of recurring observations across the three studies. Throughout this process, we sought to remain reflexive about how our own experiences, disciplinary perspectives and commitment to participatory practice influenced the questions we asked of the data and the meanings we derived from it. The findings should therefore be understood as theoretically situated interpretations developed through iterative engagement with the empirical material.

Methodology: a multiple case study descriptive design methodology: reflexive qualitative secondary analysis across three participatory research projects

We undertook a reflexive qualitative secondary analysis across three related participatory action research (PAR) projects to examine recurring and divergent relational processes across different contexts of participation. This design enabled examination of a shared phenomenon across three related but distinct research contexts while preserving the contextual integrity of each case. These methods have been applied widely within the field of social work to understand phenomena such as school social work (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020), international social work training (Hvalič-Toužery et al., 2017)

and practitioner education (Greenwood & Lowenthal, 2005). The themes generated were then used to inform analysis and theory development (Gilgun, 2015; Thyer et al., 2010), applying a social pedagogical conceptual lens.

Materials: summary of research projects

All research projects centred on working in partnership with individuals and communities labelled as vulnerable and marginalised. A brief summary of each project is provided below, along with key references for further reading. In this paper, we present a framing of vulnerability and marginalisation based on narratives and discourses around 'left behind' communities (Local Trust, 2019). These discourses, which are socially and politically constructed, are principally based on economic composition, and have been conceptualised as combining a range of characteristics, notably 'economic disadvantage, lower living standards, population loss/contraction/low-growth, a lack of infrastructure and political neglect and disengagement' (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 42). It is suggested that these conditions are a consequence of 'geographically uneven development' (p. 41) and the concentration of skilled knowledge-economy jobs in cities (Feldman, et al., 2021; Florida, 2021). Table 1 provides a methodological overview of the three projects to ensure transparency regarding the source data and to lay the foundation for the secondary analysis.

Project one: 'In This Together' (2014–2017)

'In This Together' aimed to understand the barriers that parents and carers perceived to supporting their children's secondary school education. The research conducted focus groups and interviews with 77 parents and carers living in low-income coastal communities. Many participating parents and carers revealed that they felt the skills they used in supporting their children in their everyday lives couldn't be applied to support their children with their secondary school work (Wilson, 2020; Wilson & McGuire, 2021; Wilson & Worsley, 2021). The research findings led to the design and delivery of a solution-focused brief mentoring programme (de Shazer, 1975), where 25 parents each participated in six one-to-one sessions to explore strategies to overcome their perceived challenges in supporting their children's secondary education (Wilson, 2021a, 2021b).

Project two: 'Connected Communities Cumbria' (2017–2022)

'Connected Communities Cumbria' trained 120 children and young people as community researchers to conduct 646 doorstep interviews with residents from four low-income coastal communities. The research used a survey tool to understand residents' social networks, resources, health and well-being, and perceptions of the local community. The young researchers shared their results at public events and collaborated with community stakeholders to co-create interventions that met the community's needs identified through the research (Wilson & Morris, 2020; Wilson & Morris, 2023a, 2023b; Wilson et al., 2020). The research findings shaped a co-produced 'Children's Charter' adopted by Copeland Borough Council and informed the creation of three new organisations, collectively raising over £10,000 for community projects (Wilson, 2019a). Moreover, opportunities for children and young people to build relationships with the local authorities and other significant stakeholders promoted social inclusion (Wilson, 2019b; Wilson et al., 2024).

Project three: 'Community Power' (2022–2024)

'Connected Communities Cumbria' found that of the 646 residents interviewed, only nine people reported they would approach the Council or a Councillor if they wanted to make a positive change in their community. 'Community Power' was developed in response to these findings and is designed as relationally based, community-level participatory action research, aiming to foster collaboration between the Council and communities in policy development across the policy cycle. Working closely with 40 residents in four low-income coastal communities considered 'left-behind', participatory workshops explored enablers and barriers to civic and democratic

Table 1. Summary of research projects.

Project	Design	Sample & Recruitment	Data Collection	Original Analysis	Data Included in Secondary Analysis	Contribution to Secondary Analysis
Project One: <i>In This Together</i> (2014–2017)	Participatory Action Research (PAR) exploring barriers to parental engagement in secondary education, followed by a solution-focused mentoring intervention.	77 parents and carers from low-income coastal communities recruited through local schools and community organisations. Twenty-five participants subsequently participated in a six-session mentoring programme.	Focus groups, semi-structured interviews, mentoring session records and researcher field notes.	Inductive thematic analysis exploring perceived barriers and strengths in supporting children's education to inform the development of the mentoring intervention.	Interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, mentoring records, researcher field notes and project documentation.	Provided insights into how relationships with professionals influenced confidence, participation and self-efficacy, contributing to the theme of Appreciating Existing Strengths and Valuing Relationships.
Project Two: <i>Connected Communities Cumbria</i> (2017–2022)	Community-based Participatory Action Research training children and young people as community researchers to investigate community strengths, social networks and well-being.	120 children and young people recruited through schools and youth organisations as community researchers, who conducted doorstep interviews with 646 residents across four low-income coastal communities.	Community survey, community conversations, public dissemination events, co-production workshops, observations and researcher field notes.	Quantitative descriptive analysis of survey findings combined with qualitative thematic analysis of community discussions to identify community priorities and inform local action.	Qualitative community discussions, workshop records, researcher field notes, observational records and participatory outputs. (Quantitative survey data were used only to contextualise the qualitative findings.)	Demonstrated how collaborative relationships, co-production and community participation strengthened social inclusion and civic engagement across communities.
Project Three: <i>Community Power</i> (2022–2024)	Relational Participatory Action Research exploring barriers and enablers to civic and democratic participation through collaborative policy development.	40 residents from four low-income coastal communities recruited through community organisations, local networks and existing project partnerships.	Participatory workshops, facilitated co-creation forums, group discussions, observations and researcher field notes.	Reflexive thematic analysis examining experiences of participation, governance, power and relationships between communities and local government.	Workshop transcripts, co-creation forum records, researcher field notes, observational records and project documentation.	Illuminated how institutional relationships shape inclusion, participation and trust, contributing to both overarching themes and informing the development of relational capital as a cross-case analytical framework.

Note: Summary of the three participatory action research projects included in the qualitative secondary analysis

participation (Wilson, 2024a, 2024b). Acknowledging prior learning on the centrality of relationships in social inclusion and exclusion, particular attention was given to perceived and aspirational relationships between communities and the Council before facilitating co-creative forums. These forums provided the communities and the Council with opportunities to collaborate in co-creating innovative approaches to promote engagement in the local democratic system (Wilson, 2024c).

Analysis

This study employed a qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) of data generated across three participatory research projects undertaken between 2014 and 2024. Qualitative secondary analysis is not simply the re-use of existing data; rather, it involves returning to qualitative datasets to address new research questions through processes of recontextualisation and reinterpretation (Heaton, 2008; Davidson et al., 2019). The datasets were not treated as methodologically equivalent or aggregated into a single dataset. Analysis was first undertaken within each project, preserving its methodological, temporal and participatory context. Cross-case comparison subsequently examined patterns of similarity, difference and tension at the level of relational processes rather than comparing frequencies or aggregating participant accounts. The original datasets were revisited to explore a question that extended beyond the aims of the individual projects: how do the three projects collectively illuminate the role of relationships in shaping inclusion, participation and social change within social work research and practice?

The secondary analysis returned to the original qualitative materials, including interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, field notes, observational records, meeting documentation and materials generated through participatory activities. Rather than relying solely on the published project reports, these primary qualitative data formed the principal basis for analysis. The reports and publications were used to re-establish the context of each project, verify interpretations and maintain sensitivity to the organisational, social and temporal circumstances in which the original data were generated. This process of contextual reconstruction is recognised as an important component of qualitative secondary analysis, enabling researchers to preserve the integrity of the original studies while generating new conceptual insights.

As members of the original research team, we possessed detailed knowledge of the research settings, participant relationships and decision-making processes that informed the original studies. While this familiarity strengthened contextual understanding, it also required continual reflexivity regarding how our prior interpretations, practitioner experiences and theoretical commitments might influence the secondary analysis. Consequently, the datasets were approached as a new body of qualitative material, with the intention of asking different analytical questions from those that had guided the original projects. Rather than seeking to confirm previous findings, the analysis explored what relational processes became visible when the three studies were examined collectively and what these revealed about inclusion, exclusion, participation and the development of relational capital. Analysis was first conducted within each project, preserving its methodological, temporal and participatory context, before cross-case comparison was undertaken at the level of relational processes rather than frequencies or pooled accounts.

The analysis followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) within a hybrid inductive-deductive design. Initially, repeated reading and familiarisation with each dataset enabled immersion in the original data before open coding was undertaken within NVivo. During this initial, data-led but theoretically situated phase, coding was guided by broad exploratory questions, including: How are relationships described and experienced by participants? What relational processes appear to facilitate or constrain participation? How do participants describe experiences of inclusion, exclusion and self-exclusion? What common relational patterns emerge across different projects and contexts? These questions were intentionally open-ended to allow themes to emerge from the data rather than being structured around the developing conceptual framework.

These questions functioned as sensitising prompts rather than predetermined codes; the analysis did not begin from predefined categories of relational capital.

Coding was first undertaken within each project to preserve the integrity and context of the individual studies before progressing to cross-case comparison. Constant comparison across the three datasets enabled similarities, differences and recurring relational processes to be identified that had not been fully explored within the original project analyses. Although some concepts relating to relationships, participation and strengths had been identified within the individual studies, the two overarching themes presented in this paper did not appear in the original reports. Instead, they emerged through comparing patterns across all three datasets while addressing the new research question posed in this secondary analysis. Cross-case comparison therefore sought patterns of similarity, difference and tension, rather than aggregation across heterogeneous datasets.

The emerging codes were progressively refined into conceptual categories through iterative cycles of comparison, discussion and thematic reflection. Themes were continually checked against the original datasets to ensure they remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than abstracted from them, while analytic memos documented coding decisions, conceptual development and alternative interpretations. This iterative movement between familiarisation, coding, comparison and interpretation provided an audit trail of the analytical process. Following initial coding and cross-case comparison, the developing themes were brought into dialogue with relevant literature on social exclusion, social pedagogy, relational sociology, co-production and capital theory. Theory was therefore used to deepen interpretation rather than to organise coding or pre-determine findings. Through this iterative movement between empirical material and conceptual literature, relational capital gradually emerged as an analytical lens capable of explaining patterns observed across the three studies rather than being imposed upon the data from the outset. This process resulted in two overarching themes: The Subjective Experience of Social Exclusion and Self-Exclusion and Appreciating Existing Strengths and Valuing Relationships. These themes represent new analytical interpretations arising from the comparative secondary analysis rather than a synthesis or reproduction of findings reported in the original project publications.

The trustworthiness of the analysis was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the original datasets, preservation of contextual understanding through revisiting project documentation, iterative coding and cross-case comparison, collaborative discussion of theme development within the research team, and continual movement between data, interpretation and theory. Direct participant quotations are presented throughout the findings to demonstrate the relationship between the empirical material and the analytical claims, while pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities. By combining qualitative secondary analysis with reflexive thematic analysis, this study moved beyond synthesising previous findings to generate new conceptual understandings from existing empirical material. The analysis combined data-led coding, cross-case comparison and theoretically informed interpretation enabling the study to develop a conceptually informed account of how relationships function across diverse participatory contexts and how these insights contribute to contemporary debates concerning relational social work practice.

Findings

Two key themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Relational positioning, judgement and withdrawal, and (2) Trust, recognition and the renegotiation of participation.

Relational positioning, judgement and withdrawal

Families found secondary education to be a space in which they were unable to engage. This sentiment was summarised by one mother, 'I'm not well educated myself ... I thought, "how can I teach him"?' (Sandra). Many families reported fearing negative judgment from teachers, which further eroded their confidence in supporting their children's education at home and engaging with the

school system (Wilson & McGuire, 2021). Sandra's account illustrates how anticipated judgement shaped parents' perceived legitimacy within the school relationship and contributed to withdrawal from engagement. This self-exclusion, we argue, is influenced by mainstream individualised policy perspectives and interventions that pathologise parents who deviate from the socially constructed middle-class, concerted, cultivated parenting model (Lareau, 2018; Wilson & Worsley, 2021) and obscure the role of structural factors in shaping inequality (Hartas, 2014). For example, the 'Helping Parents to Parent' programme seeks to influence 'direct parenting behaviours' (Social Mobility Commission, 2017, p. 4). By continuing to provide a model of parenting and socially acceptable parental engagement in education, the perspective that 'educational inequality and social immobility can be tackled through effective parenting' is perpetuated (Hartas, 2015, p. 32).

The conscious awareness of being negatively judged, based on an ascribed social identity (also known as stigma salience, Quinn & Chaudoir, 2015), was also present in research which sought to develop relationships between the local Council and families. One participant reflected, 'I tend not to like the word deprived, and it's what gets used a lot for [community], isn't it? "It's a deprived area". I think that just makes everybody overlook all the positives that are going on' (Jane). Here, Jane consciously reflects not only on how others may view her community but also on the strengths within. Melanie reflects on how this image is projected by the local council, stating, 'we're not deprived like [the Council] put out in public'. Through this statement, Melanie describes her perception of an external force ('they') that exerts power (to 'put out') to define her community as distinct from others. The local council's framing of communities was found to have a negative impact on trust between the two groups. Accounts from participants further illustrated a feeling of distance and alienation from local politics and how it leads to self-exclusion:

I think sometimes that's a barrier because you can have all the feelings and wanting change in your community, but if you've got, let's say an arrogant man in front of you that's reading all these policies and spouting all this, you're just going to think, well what's the point. I'm not going to get my point across, I can't compete with that.

As with education, here we can see how communities socially construct their relationship with the local democratic institutions, influenced by their objective structural conditions. This social construction is influenced by the framing of vulnerability and marginalisation of communities as imposed on them, and is rejected by those who live in these communities. These accounts show relational capital operating negatively as well as positively: institutional framing eroded trust and narrowed participants' perceived capacity to engage.

Trust, recognition and the renegotiation of participation

Across the three projects, changes in participation were associated with changes in how participants were recognised, how trust developed, and how institutional power was exercised.

In this together

Within the work on parental engagement in education, deficit constructions of parents' capacity to support their children's learning were explicitly challenged through a strengths-based approach that identified and valued skills already present within families (Wilson, 2021a). Many parents possessed knowledge and competencies that could be applied to their children's education but did not initially recognise these as legitimate educational resources. This distinction is important: the apparent absence of parental capacity did not necessarily reflect an absence of skills, but the ways in which particular forms of knowledge and competence were socially recognised and valued. A strengths-based approach therefore challenges dominant deficit discourses surrounding families experiencing social exclusion (Goodall, 2019), while drawing attention to forms of knowledge that may remain unrecognised when legitimacy is attached primarily to institutionally valued resources such as formal educational qualifications (Fargion, 2023). This contrasts with the 'political economy of

parenting', through which normative constructions of 'good' and 'bad' parenting are produced and reinforced (Jensen, 2018, p. xiii).

The intervention was associated with improved educational outcomes across the participating families (Wilson, 2021a), but attributing this change to relationship-building alone would obscure the relational processes through which change became possible. Participants and practitioners both emphasised the importance of trust and rapport: 'I felt I could trust her' (Stacey), while one practitioner reflected that 'the rapport you can build with people makes a massive difference' (Deborah). These relationships mattered not simply because they were positive, but because they interacted with a change in how parents' existing knowledge and competence were recognised. Parents were approached as knowledgeable actors with resources to contribute rather than as deficient recipients whose parenting capacity required correction.

This provides an important distinction between capacity and relational capital. The parents did not acquire relational capital simply by developing trusting relationships with practitioners, nor did practitioners provide them with capacities that they previously lacked. Rather, existing skills and knowledge became differently recognised and therefore more available for mobilisation within the educational context. Trust, recognition and psychological safety altered the relational conditions under which parents could exercise agency. Relational capital can therefore be understood here not as an individual resource possessed by the parent, but as emerging through the interaction between existing parental knowledge, its recognition by others, and relationships that enabled that knowledge to be exercised in a context in which parents had previously felt less legitimate or competent.

This interpretation also complicates the framing of parental 'non-engagement'. Earlier withdrawal from relationships with schools can be understood not simply as an absence of motivation, confidence or parental capacity, but as a relational response to anticipated judgement and to institutional contexts in which parents did not necessarily perceive their own knowledge as legitimate. From this perspective, withdrawal may itself constitute a form of relational agency: a decision not to enter, or to limit engagement with, relationships in which an individual anticipates being judged or positioned through deficit assumptions. The intervention did not simply make parents more willing to engage; it altered some of the relational conditions under which engagement was judged by parents to be possible and worthwhile.

The learning from this work was therefore twofold. First, strengths-based reframing enabled forms of parental knowledge and competence that had previously been obscured by deficit constructions to become visible and valued. Second, sustained relational practice created conditions in which parents could choose to mobilise those resources within new educational contexts. The significance of the relationships consequently lay not in their capacity to 'empower' otherwise deficient parents, but in their role in negotiating recognition, legitimacy and participation. In this example, relational capital operated through the processes by which existing resources became recognised and actionable within relationships structured by differing forms of professional and institutional authority. This moves the analysis beyond the proposition that trusting relationships produce positive outcomes, towards an examination of how relationships shape whose knowledge counts, whose competence is recognised and under what conditions individuals choose to participate.

Ormsgill strong together

Relationships were significant in challenging deficit framing and creating opportunities for community action, but the development of Ormsgill Stronger Together (OST) demonstrates that such relationships cannot be understood simply as the presence or absence of trust. The original community research identified relatively strong relationships within Ormsgill but weaker bridging and linking connections between residents and institutions, including local government. Indeed, one of its recommendations was to create opportunities for residents to connect with actors in positions of power through institutions that already held some degree of community trust.

The development of OST provides an example of how these different relational positions subsequently interacted. A number of mothers initially became involved through supporting their children in the participatory research and subsequent community activities. Several of the women who later formed OST already knew one another, some having attended school together and sharing experiences of growing up in Ormsgill. These existing relationships provided an important foundation of trust, familiarity and shared commitment. Their local knowledge was also differentiated rather than treated as a single collective resource, with members recognising that individuals brought different strengths and connections to the group. As one founding member explained: 'We all get to express what we want and what ideas we want to do, like what events we want to do. And there's never like, "you're not doing that" – we all come to an agreement' (Jo).

The participatory process also created relationships beyond these existing community networks. The mothers encountered Council staff and other institutional actors through the research and subsequent community development activity, and a Community Development Officer played a particularly significant role in supporting the establishment of OST. Importantly, however, the trust that subsequently developed should not be interpreted as evidence that the women had simply become more trusting of the Council as an institution. The data suggest something more relationally specific. The partnership was characterised by shared commitment to Ormsgill, respect, open-mindedness, a developing history of working together, and interactions characterised by humour and warmth. The strength of the interpersonal relationship with one Community Development Officer was particularly evident in one OST member's description of her: 'She's like a mum to us' (Tracy).

This distinction between interpersonal and institutional trust is important. The officer occupied a gatekeeping position between a community with relatively weak connections to institutions and a Council possessing resources, authority and access that the women themselves did not hold. Her relational practice appears to have made that institutional relationship more accessible: rather than requiring the mothers first to develop abstract trust in the Council, a trusted interpersonal relationship provided a route through which institutional engagement became possible. This represents gatekeeping relational capital: access to institutional resources and decision-making was mediated through a relationship with an actor able to move between community and institutional spaces. The report supports this interpretation more broadly, noting that OST's developing connections meant members increasingly knew who they could approach 'to try and get something done'.

At the same time, this exposes a potential fragility within relational capital. Where institutional access is strongly mediated through particular trusted individuals, the relationship between community and institution may remain contingent upon the continued presence and relational practice of those gatekeepers. The warmth of the relationship with the Community Development Officer was therefore a strength, but its very significance raises a critical question: whether trust had become embedded institutionally or remained disproportionately attached to particular people. The evidence cannot establish what would have happened had that officer withdrawn, and this should not be assumed. However, the later development of a broader professional network, including relationships with elected members, schools, housing, police, fire services and other community organisations, suggests some movement from dependence upon individual gatekeepers towards a wider relational infrastructure.

The case therefore complicates a straightforward account in which trusting relationships simply enabled OST to succeed. Relational capital operated at different and unequal levels. Existing friendships and shared local knowledge provided participatory relational capital, enabling the women to organise collectively and act on their own priorities. Relationships with trusted intermediaries provided gatekeeping relational capital, creating routes into networks and institutions that had previously been comparatively difficult to access. Institutional relational capital remained located partly within organisations and actors possessing the authority, resources and connections through which community ambitions could be supported or constrained. What changed was not the disappearance of these inequalities, but the relationships through which differently positioned actors were able to negotiate them.

Seen in this way, the significance of OST lies not simply in demonstrating the value of strengths-based practice. The mothers were not transformed from 'vulnerable' individuals into capable community actors by professional intervention; their existing friendships, local knowledge, skills and commitment were already present. The participatory research and subsequent relationships created conditions in which those existing resources could be recognised, connected to wider networks and mobilised collectively. This challenges deficit constructions of marginalised communities while also demonstrating why relational capital cannot be reduced to either individual capacity or the quality of a single relationship: its effects depend upon how community knowledge, interpersonal trust, gatekeeping positions and institutional power interact.

Copeland Borough Council Children's Charter

Strength-based, relational approaches have also been applied with children, for example, in the co-production of Copeland Borough Council's Children's Charter (Copeland Borough Council, 2019). Informal conversations with children involved in Connected Communities Cumbria revealed a specific concern regarding the use of quad bikes on a local cycle path, which many children reported made them feel unsafe. In response, a participatory research activity was developed in which children, accompanied by teachers, police and Council representatives, undertook a community walk. During the walk, the children used photovoice to document the places in which they felt unsafe (Wang & Burris, 1997), while also discussing their experiences directly with the accompanying stakeholders.

The evidence generated by the children was subsequently accepted as legitimate by the Council's legal team. A Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) was introduced for the central area of concern identified through the children's research, and the significance of safety was subsequently reflected in the Children's Charter through the inclusion of 'Staying Safe' as one of its central pillars. The Council also committed to ensuring that children would be educated about Public Space Protection Orders and how they could be used within their communities. In this respect, the Children's Charter illustrates how children can enact citizenship (Parsfield et al., 2015; Wilson & Morris, 2020) and contribute to processes of policy co-creation (Van Vooren & Lembrechts, 2021; Westerback et al., 2020).

However, interpreting this simply as an example of the Council listening to children risks obscuring the unequal relations of power through which their participation became consequential. The children generated knowledge about their community and articulated what needed to change, but they did not hold equivalent authority over whether that knowledge would be recognised as legitimate evidence or translated into policy action. That authority remained with institutional actors, including the Council and its legal team. The example therefore illustrates the simultaneous operation of different forms of relational capital. The children exercised participatory relational capital through producing situated knowledge, articulating their experiences and participating in collective action. Gatekeeping relational capital operated through the adults and professionals who created routes through which children's knowledge could enter institutional spaces and be heard by those with decision-making authority. Institutional relational capital, meanwhile, remained significant because institutional actors possessed the authority to recognise the children's knowledge as legitimate, translate it into formal processes and ultimately enact a policy response.

Relational capital was therefore neither equally distributed nor synonymous with the existence of positive relationships. Rather, it was asymmetrically distributed but relationally activated. The children's knowledge acquired institutional influence through relationships that connected their lived experience with actors holding different forms of authority and access. Importantly, this did not remove the underlying power asymmetry: institutional actors retained the capacity to legitimise, reject or act upon the knowledge children produced. The example consequently demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of reframing children traditionally positioned through discourses of vulnerability as knowledgeable and competent social actors. Their participation created opportunities to exercise agency and influence policy, but the extent to which that agency

became consequential remained partly contingent upon relationships with those holding gatekeeping and institutional power.

Discussion

The collective learning surrounding the significance of perceived relationships in social inclusion interventions demonstrates that across the projects, trust, recognition and the valuation of existing strengths were recurrently associated with participants' willingness and perceived ability to engage. An original contribution is made to the literature by applying the BSEM to conceptualise participatory social inclusion and exclusion within a contemporary context (Levitas, 2005b; Levitas, 2006; Levitas et al., 2007). Furthermore, this chapter responds to the literature calling for a stronger recognition of the intersections between subjective and objective dimensions of social inclusion and exclusion (Mathieson et al., 2008; Silver, 1994). It does this by evidencing, through three research projects, the ways in which structural conditions can influence agency, mainly in the form of participation or self-exclusion in civil society. Moreover, these projects extend knowledge concerning the value of a strength-based approach in fostering social inclusion in the context of participation in civil society (Denning, 2023; Haskins, 2015; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Rubin et al., 2012; Van Vooren & Lembrechts, 2021; Westerback et al., 2020) and policy co-creation (Bartels, 2018; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Dobson, 2015; Medina-Guce, 2020; Sharpe, 2015).

The analysis suggests that reframing vulnerability and marginalisation relationally changes what becomes analytically visible and can lead to more inclusive and community-driven approaches to research. Across the three case studies, participants who were conventionally categorised as 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised' exercised agency through their existing relational capacities, thereby challenging deficit-based assumptions that underpin neoliberal models of social welfare and research. This reconceptualisation aligns with contemporary calls to move beyond transactional service delivery towards relational approaches that foreground trust, reciprocity and shared power (Cottam, 2021; Wilson & Slavin, 2019).

The cases identify conditions under which engagement may move from extractive towards more participatory forms of knowledge production. Relational practice does not remove institutional asymmetries; rather, it can create spaces in which those asymmetries are recognised, negotiated or, at times, reproduced. This orientation moves social work from extractivism to activism, consistent with Freire's (1970) pedagogy of dialogue grounded in love, humility and mutual learning. Such praxis affirms the political and ethical nature of research and practice, positioning co-production as a process through which communities reclaim power and agency.

The cases illustrate different configurations of relational power. In *In This Together*, parents identified and mobilised their own skills to support their children's education, subverting deficit narratives of 'poor parenting'. *Ormsgill Stronger Together* illustrated how trust and shared purpose among local women enabled the creation of a self-sustaining community organisation, while *Connected Communities Cumbria* and the resulting *Children's Charter* exemplified how children, when treated as competent social actors, can shape local policy. The analysis suggests that inclusion involves more than participation within existing institutional frameworks and draws attention to the need for institutions to examine how they recognise and distribute power and knowledge.

By integrating social pedagogical theory and Freirean ethics with empirical examples drawn from participatory social work research, the analysis positions relational practice as one potential pathway through which more socially just forms of participation may be developed. Recognising lived experience as legitimate knowledge challenges deficit-based assumptions about people and communities conventionally positioned as vulnerable or marginalised, while foregrounding the moral and ethical dimensions of social work. A move from transactional towards relational practice can therefore represent not only a methodological shift, but a moral and political reorientation that gives greater attention to human connection, collective flourishing and shared responsibility for social change. Relational capital should not be understood as synonymous with good or successful relationships.

Its analytical value lies in directing attention to how power, recognition, trust, access and agency become possible – or impossible – through relationships between differently positioned actors. Relational capital can therefore be generated and mobilised, but it can also be constrained, eroded, withheld or resisted. Distrust, withdrawal, institutional exclusion and gatekeeping are consequently as relevant to its analysis as trust, participation and successful co-production. This also means that withdrawal or self-exclusion should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of individual deficit or an absence of relational capacity; under some circumstances, disengagement may represent an agentic response to relationships in which judgement, misrecognition or unequal power is anticipated or experienced.

The analysis across the three studies illustrates this variation. Participants brought knowledge, skills, relationships and capacities into research encounters, but whether these could be recognised and mobilised was shaped by their relational positioning and by the actions of those holding different forms of institutional and gatekeeping power. Relational practice did not remove these asymmetries. Rather, it sometimes created conditions in which they could be negotiated differently. In the parental engagement work, parents' existing knowledge and competence became more readily recognised and mobilised within relationships characterised by trust and reduced anticipation of judgement. In Ormsgill, existing community relationships and local knowledge were connected to wider institutional resources through trusted gatekeepers, while also exposing the potential fragility of institutional relationships dependent upon particular individuals. In the Children's Charter, children exercised participatory agency by producing knowledge about their community, but institutional actors retained the authority to determine whether that knowledge would be recognised as legitimate and translated into policy action. Across these examples, relational capital was therefore asymmetrically distributed but relationally activated. This understanding extends the contribution of relational capital beyond identifying the benefits of relationship-based practice. The concept provides a means of examining how participatory, gatekeeping and institutional relational capital operate simultaneously and interact within particular encounters, and how their configuration can enable or constrain participation, negotiation, resistance and collective action. These positions are neither fixed nor inherently attached to particular actors; they are relational positions that may shift across contexts and over time. Relational capital therefore offers an analytical lens through which social work research can examine not only whether relationships exist or are experienced positively, but whose knowledge is recognised, who gains access to institutional spaces, who is able to influence decisions, who retains the authority to legitimise the contributions of others, and under what conditions people choose to participate, resist or withdraw.

Through reflexive qualitative secondary analysis, the paper also illustrates how returning to existing empirical material with new theoretical questions can generate conceptual insights that were not the primary focus of the original studies. Relational capital developed through iterative engagement between participants' accounts, researcher interpretation and established theoretical perspectives rather than being applied as a predetermined framework through which successful examples were selected. Bringing this concept into dialogue with relational governance further foregrounds the interconnected operation of power, governance and participation (Bartels, 2014, 2018, 2020; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Medina-Guce, 2020; Selg & Ventsel, 2024). The contribution of relational capital is therefore not a claim that relationships are inherently transformative, nor that relational practice can overcome structural inequalities through interpersonal connection alone. Rather, it provides a way of examining how structural and institutional inequalities are encountered, reproduced, negotiated and, at times, disrupted through relationships. This is particularly significant for social work research concerned with vulnerability and marginalisation because it shifts analytical attention away from presumed deficits within individuals and communities towards the relational and institutional conditions under which their knowledge, capacities and agency are recognised, constrained or made consequential. In doing so, the paper contributes to relationship-based social work while

offering a theoretically informed framework for understanding how participatory inquiry might support more ethical, inclusive and socially just research and practice.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Suzanne Wilson:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Lewis Charfe:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Lewis Charfe is an associate learning facilitator with ThemPra and ran their Making Co-Production Meaningful course for the last five years. Previous to that she was a Senior Lecturer at the University of Lancashire, where she gained her PhD by Published Works. She has run various training and educational courses on social pedagogy and has written several articles and book chapters as well as the book *Social Pedagogy and Social Work*. The first book in English to explore how social pedagogy can support positive social work practice. As part of being interested in co-production through the social pedagogy lens, Lewis became focused on addressing the issue of power which is often overlooked or misunderstood and tackled. Lewis is a member of the Social Pedagogy Professional Association.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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