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The Benefit Sanction: a Correctional Device or a Weapon of Disgust?

Jamie Redman

Abstract

The benefit sanction is a dominant activation policy in Britain's 'welfare-to-work' regime. Whilst policymakers believe in their necessity to correct behaviour, research shows benefit sanctions cause additional harm to Britain's marginalised groups. Drawing upon a small-scale qualitative study, this article first navigates new territory, mapping the ways stigma emerges from the state—channelled through the benefit sanction—and manifests in the lives of sanctioned claimants. Acknowledging wider evidence, the sanction is then argued to have failed as a correctional device. Rather, taking into account Britain's current politico-economic climate, the sanction appears as a weapon used to incite negative emotion in an attempt to police the boundaries of the labour market, whilst frequently abandoning some of the UK's most vulnerable citizens.

key words: stigma - benefit sanctions - punishment - welfare reform - economic citizenship

Introduction

Since the Thatcher administrations, UK welfare reform has increasingly shifted towards a communitarian ethos of economic 'rights' conditional upon behavioural 'responsibilities'. The departure from Beveridgean 'cradle-to-grave' social security has been justified on paternalistic grounds, claiming that the unemployed require work-related obligations and negative incentives in order to change their behaviour and help them make rewarding choices in the labour market (Mead, 1992). Policymakers have sought to facilitate behavioural change through binding the state and the claimant in a welfare contract, re-designing the benefit sanction to make certain that failure to meet behavioural 'responsibilities' will result in the termination of economic 'rights' (Watts et al., 2014). The current orthodoxy is that benefit sanctions are a compulsory negative incentive for encouraging competence amongst those seeking employment (Gregg, 2008). However, a growing body of research has shown that fiscal sanctions have been ineffective at changing claimant behaviour, instead causing further injury to some of the most marginalised groups in Britain (Batty et al., 2015).

This article first seeks to address an important empirical and theoretical gap. In literature on the welfare state, there has been a regular scholarly tradition examining the presence of stigma within the experiences of those claiming fiscal benefits (Baumberg, 2016). Similarly, there is research highlighting the 'hidden "costs" of social stigma and shame' that accompany alternative social benefits, such as food aid (Garthwaite, 2016:280). Moreover, there is now also a growing body of research

examining the impacts of new behavioural change apparatus, including benefit sanctions, on the experiences of claimants (see <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/>). Hitherto, however, there has not been an in-depth empirical or theoretical exposition considering the presence of stigma within the experience of fiscal benefit loss (via sanction). Exposing this will form the findings section(s) of this article.

Leading on from this, the article then draws upon a wider evidence base to interrogate the intentionality of the benefit sanction. Contrary to the objective stated by policymakers, it is argued here that the benefit sanction has not helped the unemployed make positive, rewarding choices. Rather, when situating sanctioned claimants' experiences within Britain's current politico-economic context, the sanction appears more accurately as a weapon used against the unemployed as a method of ensuring 'business confidence' (Block, 1977:16) and preserving capital accumulation in a period characterised by low-paying, poor quality and insecure forms of wage labour (Shildrick et al., 2012). This is, in part, achieved by imposing various modes of negative emotional coercion in effort to '(re)sacralise labour and elevate it to the rank of absolute civic duty' (Wacquant, 2009:101). Whilst, in some instances, ostracising those possessing circumstances or demonstrating behaviours which were not of immediate value to capital (c.f. Reeve, 2017; Grover, 2018:12-14).

Policy Context

As a proponent of 'underclass' theory and maintaining that a 'culture of poverty' is rife in the US and the UK (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005:6-8), Lawrence Mead (1992) has been highly influential in the justification and implementation of welfare-to-work apparatus. Mead was particularly concerned with the permissive nature of benefit entitlements, and has since remained devoted to the idea that benefit entitlements should be designed so as to target and alter claimant behaviour. He believed the lack of work-related obligations surrounding benefit receipt had nurtured behavioural dysfunction by, in effect, allowing the poor to eschew discipline imposed through wage labour. As such, the poor were seen to have developed antipathy towards the prospect of working, which in turn fuelled an entitlement mentality and the simultaneous cultivation of welfare dependency (Fletcher and Flint, 2018).

The dominance of dependency thesis has been observable within the design of British social security since the eighties, as policymakers sought to develop a new paternalist armature of 'welfare-to-work' apparatus (Adler, 2018). It was in this decade where welfare contractualism, that is, the attachment of behavioural conditions ('responsibilities') to citizenship entitlements ('rights'), had begun to emerge as a new policy direction (Crisp and Powell, 2017). More recently, the Coalition government has made use of 'dependency' rhetoric to legitimise the routine intensification of conditional apparatus enforcing the welfare contract:

"In a tragic loss of human potential, as individuals and families remained trapped in a cruel state of dependency ... we now ensure that when someone falls unemployed they sign a document called the 'claimant commitment.' This is a form of contract with the hard working British taxpayers who fund these benefits ... failure to meet their commitments it says will lead to the loss of benefits ... 'you are now in work to find work'" (Duncan-Smith, 2014)

The foremost policy upholding this contract between claimant, 'hard working British taxpayers' and the state has been the benefit sanction. And with the agenda set out by successive Coalition and Conservative governments, as seen in the excerpt above, both the severity and usage of benefit sanctions have intensified over the last five years or so. In 2012, the Coalition introduced the enhanced sanctioning regime:

Table 1: Enhanced Sanctioning Regime for Jobseekers Since 2012

Sanction Level	Description	1st Offence	2nd Offence	3rd Offence
High	Fail to comply with certain requirements	13 weeks	26 weeks (if committed after two weeks of prior Sanction and within a year)	156 weeks (if committed after two weeks of prior Sanction and within a year)
Intermediate	Fail to actively seek work or be available for job opportunities	Possible 4 week sanction	Possible 13 week sanction (if committed after two weeks of prior Sanction and within a year)	
Low	Failure to attend or actively participate in work advisor interview or employment support service	4 weeks	13 weeks (if committed after two weeks of prior Sanction and within a year)	

Source adapted from: Fletcher and Wright (2018)

The current trajectory of the sanctioning regime has seen a radical departure from its origins in the early 20th century; being increasingly used to target a wider range of actions and behaviours deemed uncompliant and/or incompatible with the prospect of labour market participation (Adler, 2018). When unemployment insurance was initially introduced in 1911, the maximum duration of benefit loss was six weeks (Webster, 2014). This remained until 1986 when it became 13 weeks, before being rapidly escalated to 26 weeks in 1988. By 2012, the Coalition had expanded the timescale of benefit loss to three years (Webster, 2014). Alongside increasing severity, the turn of century also heralded an aggregate surge in their implementation. Over a million

sanctions were administered in 2013, rising approximately 245% above their 2001 level (Dwyer, 2018:148). From 2012-2017, JSA (Jobseekers Allowance) claimants have received the most sanctions; with the vast majority either under four weeks (66%) or between five and 13 weeks (32%) (DWP, 2017:12). Reasons for JSA sanctions correspond with these statistics as lower to intermediate reasons, such as failure to actively seek work or attend appointments, comprise the majority of cases (Adler, 2018:55). Within the demographic of sanctioned claimants, it has been young claimants (18-24), as well as disadvantaged populations, which appear to have borne much of the brunt. In recent years, young people accounted 'for just over a quarter of the claimant count but almost two-fifths of all sanctions' (Crisp and Powell, 2017:1798), while homelessness, drug/alcohol or mental health issues have all been found to significantly increase the likelihood of receiving a sanction (Batty et al., 2015). Though more recent evidence concludes that a 'decision by ministers to ease off' has effectuated significant decreases in overall referral rates (Webster, 2016:10), taken in context, Britain is still enacting the most punitive sanctioning regime in its history (Adler, 2018).

From Relational Stigma to Stigma From Above: Welfare-to-Work Stigmcraft

As Erving Goffman (1963) himself noted, the presence of stigma has long preceded late modern societies and was initially a term used to describe the archaic practice of corporeally branding those deemed inferior or amoral. Despite awareness of stigma as a social phenomenon it wasn't until the 20th century that it became of interest to sociology, in the form of Goffman's own cogitations on spoiled identity. Goffman's (1963) theoretical exposition understood stigma as both the possession of an undesirable attribute and the relational process through which others perceive and condemn this attribute. In particular, Goffman (1963:14) demonstrates how 'blemishes of individual character' can serve to cast the 'discredited' apart from the 'normals'. This not only disqualifies the discredited from full social acceptance but, in some instances, encourages such individuals to respond by manipulating and regulating information passed during social interaction in effort to manage perceived undesirability (Goffman, 1959). This aspect of Goffman's analysis remains pertinent for understanding the current political climate in Britain, where out-of-work status is equated to behavioural iniquity and stands contrariwise to the moral rectitude located in the performance of exploitative wage labour (see Weeks, 2011:37-77).

In spite of Goffman's enduring relevance, contemporary academics have expressed dissatisfaction with his original theorisation and have since approached stigma from alternative directions. The more recent orthodoxy amongst theorists has been to view stigma as 'a form of governmentality', that is, a phenomenon customarily emerging from above and deployed in effort to establish social control (Tyler and Slater, 2018:729). In particular, Tyler (2013) has argued stigma to be an important tool for the preservation and advancement of neoliberal political agenda. More precisely, stigma has been used to

acquire public support for an array of punitive policies directed at the unemployed. Tyler (2013) describes this process as a form of 'social abjection'. Taken on its own, 'abjection' is defined as either an act of abasement or the condition of being degraded. Social abjection, however, is both a socially binding and socially excluding force which fosters cohesion between the electorate and state agenda through the reconfiguration of particular societal groups as something to be regarded with disgust. Social abjection has been argued as an underlying causation behind the ascendancy of anti-welfare commonsense amongst the British citizenry (Jensen and Tyler, 2015); wherein a sustained offensive portraying claiming as an abject lifestyle choice courtesy of the taxpayer has been perpetuated in effort deprecate unemployed life as a failure of the welfare state. The broader purpose of this has been to elicit legitimate feelings of outrage amongst the working populace, so as to rally support for elite policymakers and their agenda to correct perverse welfare behaviour(s) via the intensification of neo-liberal self-responsibilisation strategies (c.f. Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013:297).

Synergetic with theory of social abjection, Scambler's (2018) recent exposition shows how stigma is not simply a marker of shame, but a weapon used to impute blame and harnessed to meet the interests of the capitalist class. Scambler traces the weaponisation of stigma back to the Thatcherite fiscal and social policies which presaged both the explosion of financial capitalism and, along with it, the restoration of capital's omnipotence (Harvey, 2007). However, Scambler (2018:768) argues capital's return to supremacy not only entailed dominance over the working class, but also 'over the decisions and activities of the power elite at the apex of the state apparatus'. More precisely, fresh exposure to the world marketplace and increasing economic dependence on internationally mobile capital has been argued to render political elites increasingly subordinate to 'business confidence' and the preservation of untrammelled capital accumulation (Block, 1977:16; Crouch, 2004). As such, welfare-to-work employment services have been residualised (Fletcher and Wright, 2018) and re-designed to 'erode labour power autonomy' (Wiggan, 2015:372) as well as shaming actions and behaviours deemed uncondusive to the sale of labour power. This is, in part, evidenced by Walker's (and others) transnational research on the relationship between poverty and shame. Walker (2014) uses the term 'stigmatisation' to describe shaming that is sponsored by the state and institutionally embedded within the 'framing, structure and delivery of welfare benefits' (Walker and Chase, 2014:11). In the UK, many studies have documented the institutionalised shame of claiming benefit entitlements, ranging invariably from demeaning street-level encounters at the Jobcentre (Jeffery, Devine and Thomas, 2018), to the humiliation of means-testing and rigid bureaucratic procedures. From Walker's (2014) perspective, such procedures can often be understood as an intentional effort made by the state to impose forms of emotional coercion through policies which induce feelings of shame and thereby 'motivate' the poor into becoming economically active. As shall be revealed, in this respect, benefit sanctions are no exception to other aspects of the claiming process.

Methods

The data presented in this article was drawn from a small scale qualitative study into the experiences of young jobseekers in receipt of out-of-work benefits. A purposive sampling strategy was deployed to select 20 participants based on their age (18-24) and type of benefit received. Participants were recruited through the distribution of leaflets and through direct contact by informally approaching service users outside a Jobcentre Plus office in one UK city. All participants identified as current or former jobseekers, with 17 receiving JSA, two receiving Universal Credit and one recently migrating onto Employment Support Allowance. Out of the 20 participants, 12 had received a sanction at some stage of their claim although none were undergoing a sanction at the time of the study. Among those sanctioned, the sample all identified as White British and was heavily skewed towards men (11, and one woman). While one did not reveal his housing situation, four were living in accommodation for those with a housing need, and the remaining seven were either living with parents or partners. Two had gone on to post-16 education, with eleven finding intermittent combinations of warehouse, labouring and customer service jobs in between periods of claiming. Claimants were not asked to identify their class background, though it might be ascertained from their living situation, educational attainment and labour market profile that all participants held a working-class position. Sanctioning periods ranged from four weeks to six months, though all participants cited low-level reasons for their sanction. As the study was not originally directly focused on experiences of benefit sanctions, participants were *not* selected on the basis of whether they had experienced a sanction in the past, though all data presented in this article is derived from claimants who had received a sanction at some point in their claim. The sample was also limited in that it only covered the experiences of one claimant subgroup (young jobseekers), although this is partially offset by evidence revealing that the under-25 claimant group face substantially higher risk of being sanctioned (Watts et al., 2014).

Participants were asked to undertake a 40-minute, semi-structured interview. Participants received a £10 gift voucher as a thank you for sharing their experiences. As the research was focused on young people and unemployment, the deliberate targeting of young benefit claimants was considered ethically justifiable. Good ethical practice was adhered to throughout, with emphasis placed on anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent. Authorisation for this research was received by the University of Amsterdam and conducted in line with the university's ethical protocol.

Findings: Benefit Sanctions in Everyday Life

Previous studies have acknowledged how shame is institutionalised and stigma is imposed upon the poor, unemployed through the delivery of welfare benefits (Walker, 2014). However, the present research suggests that this is also visible when observing the retraction of welfare benefits via fiscal sanction. This has a number of implications for theory which form the structure of this findings section. First, as part of its coercive

approach to correct behaviour, the benefit sanction reconfigures claimants as 'undeserving' citizens. Second, loss of benefit entitlement simultaneously levies a fiscal toll, forcing some claimants (not all) to embody abjection as a means of survival.

'Undeserving' Citizens

Hitherto, the behavioural change function of the benefit sanction is widely understood as located in its capacity to remove benefit entitlements. Put simply, the policy hinges on the notion that (threat of) destitution will inspire fear and anxiety (see Reeves and Loopstra, 2017), which in turn encourages claimants to alter their behaviour and conform to expectations set out in the claimant commitment. In the present study, another form of negative emotional coercion was found to accompany benefit loss. Benefit sanctions also comprise a set of pejorative inferences which, in turn, enact a form of tacit stigmatisation by rubberstamping claimants as undeserving of social assistance. This will require a close inspection of evidence.

During this study, there was a pervasive tendency amongst sanctioned participants to ridicule the legitimacy of their penalty and/or vindicate their behaviour. In other words, though some claimants accepted they had contravened the rubric of their claim, none conceded their loss of entitlement as a consequence of behavioural incompetence. Now of course, it is not suggested here that respondents were simply paying lip service and all sanctions were legitimately administered on the grounds of incompetence. In fact, evidence suggests sanctions can and have been legislated for reasons which have nothing to do with claimant misdemeanour (see Soss, Fording and Schram, 2013). It is, however, suggested that some claimants made attempts to vindicate their behaviour because of what sanctions infer about the moral character of sanctioned claimants. Paying close attention to the concluding sentence of the following excerpt, this can be detected in Dean's defensive recollection of his benefit loss:

"So I turned up to Jobcentre, Friday, 20 to three. I was like well I don't see Amy she's not here so I said to Paul, 'Paul, why is Amy not here? I've got an appointment in ten minutes'. And Paul went 'you don't'. And it's like well I do, and he said 'no cause Amy's not in today. You had an appointment yesterday at three o'clock.' And I went... 'crap'... It was completely legit (legitimate). It wasn't a case of yeah I was on a piss up the night before and I forgot or owt like that it was a genuine thing."
(Dean)

While Dean accepted that he had broken the rules, he remained determined to make it known that his sanction was not founded on behavioural incompetence ('on a piss up and I forgot or owt like that'), but a genuine mistake. In doing this, it became apparent that Dean was concerned the sanction had insinuated something undesirable about his character. Thus, when recounting his experience of benefit loss, Dean appeared to engage in a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959). He did this by repeatedly

underscoring the sincerity of his mistake (see excerpt above) in effort to place distance between himself and the undesirable inferences accompanying his sanction, ostensibly so as to manage the prospect of being maligned or cast apart by others (Goffman, 1963). According to Howe (1998:536), impression management is often a daily occurrence for the claimant unemployed, as they face a routine struggle to 'get themselves classified as deserving' of financial support in the eyes of others. This struggle was noticeably pronounced amongst claimants who had received a sanction, many of whom openly associated sanctions with 'undeserving' behaviours and were thus careful to manage recollections of their own benefit loss. Here, Jack's testimony presents an important case. When asked if he had ever received a benefit sanction before, Jack responded:

"Erm yeah I've experienced a sanction before... at the time I had a sanction because obviously I was 18 that's when I started the work and obviously I tried to play a bit smart and I won't lie because they've already found me for doing it." (Jack)

Jack had routinely undertaken temporary/atypical work throughout his working life in order to get by. Here, he confessed to 'play[ing] a bit smart' and working extra hours to accumulate more cash without informing his work coach. However, as the interview progressed, Jack began to repeatedly deny the legitimacy of his sanction—"obviously I got done for a little scam but I didn't know I was scamming"—and eventually became resistant:

"But when they're getting paid every two weeks some people they've got problems with drink, they gamble, they smoke cannabis, they'll take bigger drugs so... their allowances to be honest to me I think should get sanctioned" ... "sanctioning to me is a good thing. But then it's the people that deserve it, it's a good thing, the people that don't deserve it like me I didn't really do anything wrong I don't think." (Jack)

From his testimony, it was possible to infer with reasonable certainty that Jack had knowingly transgressed the terms of his claim. Despite this, Jack still chose not to concede. Rather, as he continued, Jack appeared to demonstrate increasing concern for how a valid sanction might be perceived, which outwardly led him to managing his recollection. This interpretation is strengthened when applying previous research and theory on the various forms of impression management used by claimants to manage the undesirability of claimant status. Notably, Patrick (2016) has described claimants as employing 'deflection'. That is, to fortify one's own deservingness of benefits by censuring some 'other' sharing identical status, yet is in some way conspicuously less deserving of support (see also Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013:299-300). Jack can be seen using an identical strategy to manage the undesirability of sanctioned status; taking measures to ensure he was seen as compliant and thus undeserving of sanction, despite his earlier admission, by constructing pejorative judgments upon those imagined to possess hedonistic predispositions. Similar to Jack, many other participants

demonstrated an acute awareness of those behaviours deserving—"if they're lazy, then yeah they do deserve it"—and undeserving of sanction—"obviously people like me who are looking for jobs and we get it for no reason, we don't deserve it" (Karen). The consensus was that sanctions were for those claimants demonstrating anti-work and/or felonious behaviours that, in effect, remained 'culturally different from workers' (Howe, 1998:535). Knowledge of this often made it necessary for claimants to establish distance and manage the legitimacy of their own sanction, so as to reinforce their own deservingness (of support) and, where possible, avoid stigmatisation in the presence of others.

Making Abject Denizens

While sanctions were often seen as a marker of undeservingness which sometimes required forms of management, the loss of stable income also infiltrated claimants' private lives, causing additional injury. It is suggested here that the benefit sanction can also be realised a brutal modality of social abjection, rendering some individuals completely estranged from any structures of formal support. To be sure, social abjection can be understood as an exclusive force harnessed and practiced by the state to reconfigure particular groups as disgusting (Tyler, 2013). In this study, the benefit sanction could be seen as a policy used to the same effect, by transforming claimants from citizens to economic denizens. And this process was empirically observable, as social abjection is not only enacted (by the state), but 'also experienced and lived by those constituted as disgusting in their experiences of displacement and abandon' (Tyler, 2013:26). Dave's recollection corroborated this interpretation, who, as a result of enduring drug addiction, was often unable to comply with the rubric of his claimant commitment. This left him liable for punishment and subsequent fiscal loss meant he had little choice but to find alternative means of subsistence:

"I don't really have no parents, mums not here she's up there [deceased]. My dad's in jail, so. So I had to go out tappin' (begging). Tappin' out every day... five days a week. Nearly got arrested as well like... nearly got fined." (Dave)

It is important to note that claimants declaring circumstances similar to Dave's do have the opportunity to apply for a 'hardship payment', that is, a reduced-rate payment (approx. 60%) sometimes available post-sanction. However, as Adler (2018:79-84) states, eligibility is subject to a stringent set of criteria while 'claimants are often not told about hardship payments'. In this study, many sanctioned claimants—particularly those with drug/alcohol problems and/or learning difficulties—did not convey awareness of the hardship payment. Receiving a benefit sanction therefore left many (not all) participants with no other choice but to 'become abject' on a routine basis (Tyler, 2013). This not only took the form of street begging, but loss of entitlement also incurred a retraction of 'housing benefit' (financial support for rented accommodation), leaving some completely destitute:

"He was like 'aw im sorry for this but... we have to... close your claim'. So they sanctioned me... of course because of my learning difficulties and they didn't believe me I had it" ... "Yeah I couldn't pay the rent cause of course my sanction. So of course I lost my accommodation, and I went homeless for six months. Yeah I was on the streets for six months." (Seb)

Again, benefit sanctions should not ordinarily extend to a loss of housing benefit. However, the Jobcentre will often contact the council to notify them of a change in circumstances, who in turn halt claimants' housing benefit until they are made aware of a change in income (Money Advice Service, 2017). Seb was not informed of this procedure which, alongside his inability to search for and document job opportunities (a mandatory condition of his claim) due to reading and writing difficulties, made him homeless. Like others in this study, Seb was left with little other choice but to engage in forms of survival crime as well as setting up shelter (tents) in public spaces. Through these testimonies, it became possible to observe how the state not only reconfigured welfare claimants as abject 'others' through pejorative discourse (Jensen and Tyler, 2015), but also took measures to ratify this claim by using punitive welfare apparatus as a means of forcing claimants into the performance of abject behaviours.

For some claimants benefit loss was not as devastating, or at least in the material sense. Sanctions were often experienced differently depending on claimants' ability to mobilise social capital. In particular, for claimants possessing stronger social ties, the fiscal dimension of benefit loss was more easily managed. However, abjection still pervaded their lives as loss of income imposed new, stigmatising conditions of dependency. Notably 'stigmatisation', that is, shame 'backed by the power of the state' (Walker 2014:53), can be seen as pervasive among those who had received a sanction:

"Well... after when I got sanctioned I didn't- obviously I didn't have no money to get by or owt so... I kept on asking my mum and people... and my friends to sort me out a bit of money to get by... I kind of felt ashamed cause... erm obviously I didn't want to ask 'em d'ya know what I mean? I didn't wanna ask 'em to borrow money... because I've been sanctioned." (Dillan)

As Chase and Walker (2013:748) found, the experience of poverty is 'inextricably linked to a persistent sense of failure in measuring up to social norms and expectations'. This is especially the case in contemporary Britain, 'where success is largely measured according to the attainment of economic goals' (Chase and Walker, 2013:740). Benefit sanctions appeared to compound this sense of failure for young claimants in poverty, resulting in renewed feelings of shame. As Dillan's testimony reveals, his sanction resulted, for a time at least, in him being unable to live independently from the fiscal support of family and friends—a customary expectation placed on young adults. The

difficulty of this situation was also described by Jack, as economic independence appeared to be a source of masculine pride:

“It’s just I feel guilty cause I see it as like I shouldn’t borrow money off family members... especially like my Mum and Dad cause they had me for that long and they’ve spent that much to provide for my life... I should have been the man I should have been and stood up” (Jack)

Jack expressed 'guilt', an emotional cognate of shame (Chase and Walker, 2013), to describe feelings surrounding benefit loss. Throughout the interview, Jack appeared to embody the values of traditional working class masculinity, which was no less reflected in his predilection for manual forms of labour (Nixon, 2009). In deindustrialised Britain, demand for Jack's skill set has been in consistent decline in place of a growing service economy (Nixon, 2009). As previously touched upon, in order to get by, Jack would combine sporadic agency work with benefit entitlements to maintain economic independence and reaffirm his masculinity. Losing regular income appeared to strip him of both his independence and pride, producing feelings of guilt and emasculation. Analogous to the experiences of other participants in this study, it can be seen how Jack had to manage a range of negative emotions that resulted from receiving a benefit sanction.

Discussion: Are Sanctions in the Interests of their Recipients?

Despite elite policymakers' cognisance around some of the hardships detailed above they remain committed to sanctions; viewing them as both effective and necessary on the grounds that (threat of) benefit loss fosters more intensive engagement with the labour market, prevents fraudulent activity and ensures a work-ethic that is amenable to the prospect of wage labour. Based on this, sanctions have been marketed to the electorate as serving the interests of the unemployed working class, helping them to 'focus and get on' with making positive choices that will ultimately benefit them in the long run (Duncan-Smith, 2016). Keeping this in mind, the commencing section will briefly examine the evidence surrounding benefit sanctions, questioning whether they truly serve working class interests.

Perhaps the strongest evidence favouring sanctioning regimes has come from outside the UK, with a number of studies across Europe finding those experiencing benefit loss as both more likely to find work and making faster re-entries into the labour market (Boockmann, Thomsen and Walter, 2014). Yet, the same body of research also reported detrimental transition effects, as sanctions encouraged individuals to accept lower pay than previous occupations and new tenures were sometimes short-lived (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2016:40). In the UK, sanctioning effects on labour market re-entry have been described as a 'phenomenal success', so much so that Britain is now 'running out of people to go back into work' (Duncan-Smith, 2016). However, the existing data appears less convincing. Loopstra et al.'s (2015) analysis of aggregate data sets revealed

only 7.4 claimants move into work per every 100 adverse sanctions over a two-month period, while qualitative data has shown how those that do enter work post-sanction are sometimes exposed to highly exploitative employment relationships (Briken and Taylor, 2018:449-451). Briken and Taylor demonstrate how sanctions can, particularly in slack regional labour markets, allow employers to increase the rate of exploitation over their workforce by prohibiting refusal and forcing unemployed individuals to accept atypical working conditions facilitated through temporary work agencies. These findings are indistinguishable from the present study, with the only participant reporting work post-sanction (Elliot) undertaking a temporary role as a warehouse 'picker-packer'. Without discussion or review, Elliot was immediately dismissed shortly after starting—because "your speed has to be at 90 per cent or over and [he] got 89.7". And although Elliot seemed to accept this with docility, perhaps even viewing short tenure and immediate dismissal as the norm, taking the job appeared to have made him worse off in the long-term. In the weeks after, the rigmarole of re-applying for JSA meant he had to endure a substantial period of time without any income.

Irrespective of the questionable effects on labour market participation, sanctions are still considered necessary to ensure the unemployed possess a suitable work ethic (Mead, 1992). As regards evidence supporting this, Dunn's (2014) investigation of voluntary unemployment presents important findings. Resulting from his dissatisfaction with the 'left-of-centre' political bias embedded within social policy research (51-54), Dunn set out to design a project with 'neglected conservative arguments in mind' (6) by focusing on claimants' labour market behaviour. Despite arriving from this position, claimants were still found to possess identical proclivities to the bulk of the working populace. In other words, claimants possessed a strong desire to work and held preferences about what kinds of jobs they would feasibly undertake. Moreover, Dunn found no evidence of welfare dependency (191-193), instead acknowledging that 'unemployment is best understood as largely a structural problem' (189). Thus, despite Dunn having 'fewer qualms than some commentators about imposing severe benefit sanctions' (194), his findings largely controvert their policy rationale and instead reinforce evidence already collected by those 'quasi-titmuss' social policy authors he so vehemently contends.

Despite rates of benefit fraud remaining consistently around 1% of total expenditure (DWP, 2018), sanctions have also been argued as necessary to prevent abuses of the system (DWP, 2011). Ordinarily, or among conservative commentators at least, fraud is attributed to a 'repertoire of scrounging skills' developed by the unemployed in pursuit of 'a life of future idleness' (Marsland, 1996: 112; see also 123-124). Yet in this study, the only case of fraud (see findings section above) appeared intriguingly as antithetical to such claim (c.f. MacDonald, 1994). In other words, Jack's transgression did not arrive from lack of work ethic: "It's like with the agencies you have to go in there a bit aggressive and be like I want work today...And if they don't put me down then I'm gonna make a complaint". Rather, Jack's case appeared more accurately as a 'survival strategy'

(MacDonald, 1994:520); an underhand attempt to retain stable income and/or accumulate more cash in effort to satisfy consumptive needs/desires whilst locked in a cycle of low-paying and precarious job opportunities. Therefore, contrary to pejorative 'scrounger' narratives, this for the most part kept him aligned with the 'dominant value system' of the worker-consumer populace (Dean and Melrose, 1997:116). Taking this into account, Jack's transgression should neither be played down nor ignored, but acknowledged equally as an indictment of an 'opportunity' structure which ostensibly precluded him from accessing more permanent, better paid work (see Shildrick et al., 2012).

The evidence and argumentation in favour of sanctioning presented hitherto should also be considered against a growing body of research documenting the many hardships accompanying benefit loss (Adler, 2018). A recently concluded five-year Welfare Conditionality project found sanctions to initiate and sustain a range of negative behaviour changes, ranging from mental health impairments to 'begging, borrowing and stealing' (Dwyer, 2018:150-154: see also Batty et al., 2015:vi). Sanctions have been found as encouraging some claimants to disengage with employment and support altogether; further compounding a range of vulnerabilities and ultimately reducing individuals' chances of finding work in the future (Dwyer, 2018). This is supported by quantitative evidence, as Loopstra et al. (2015) found claimants several times more likely to drop out into 'unknown destinations' rather than enter formal work after receiving a sanction. Whilst Grover (2018:12) demonstrates how those unwilling or unable to sell their labour power are vulnerable to 'social murder', as mechanisms such as sanctions have been found to incur deaths related to penury.

Taking the balance of evidence into account, it remains difficult to see how benefit sanctions serve the interests of the unemployed. In other words, there is scant UK-based evidence to support the claim that sanctions support faster labour market entry, let alone help people make positive, rewarding choices. Acknowledging this, then, it seems important to question precisely whose interests are sustained and/or progressed via the current regime. One interpretation can be provided by situating experiences of sanctions within Britain's wider politico-economic context. This will be briefly considered here.

The last forty years have seen new pressures incurred by economic globalisation encourage political elites to become increasingly sensitive to 'business confidence', that is, 'the capitalist's general evaluation of the political/economic climate' (Block, 1977:16). For the state, attempting to satisfy business confidence has entailed creating an economic climate favourable to profitable investment (Harvey, 2007), whilst taking measures to ensure the 'working class are under control' (Block, 1977:16) and available as a compliant and economically useful pool of labour power (Umney, 2018). This has not only taken shape through privatisation, tax breaks and dismantling key labour market institutions (such as welfare) in efforts to drive down wages and reduce impingements on profit-making potential (Glyn, 2006). But also in designing new

methods of ensuring the unemployed fractions of the working class are either made valuable to capital, or otherwise exposed 'to a material and symbolic degradation worse than the most demeaning jobs' (Wacquant, 2009:108)—and the role of the benefit sanction in this endeavour should not be underestimated.

As a policy of labour market discipline, the benefit sanction can be seen to inflict material and emotional harms in efforts to control unemployed labour power. This has been found as claimants not only experienced material harms resultant of fiscal loss (Batty et al., 2015), but also emotional harms emerging in multiplicities of fear and anxiety (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017), anger and frustration (Fletcher and Flint, 2018), as well as stigma and shame (see above). Given these harms have been found as overwhelmingly ineffective in enabling claimants to make positive, rewarding choices in the labour market (Dwyer, 2018), such phenomena can be interpreted as part of a wider strategy to ensure 'business confidence'. This is because, on the one hand, harms imposed via sanctions directly benefitted capital, subordinating claimants to exploitative employment relationships (Briken and Taylor, 2018). Whilst on the other hand, sanctions have been found to reduce aggregate caseloads (Watts et al., 2014) by, in part at least, ostracising claimants for behaviours (e.g. poor time keeping) which did not reflect the discipline often required to perform wage labour. The latter is strengthened by evidence which has found those more likely to receive a sanction as synonymously those experiencing drug, health and/or competency problems (Batty et al., 2015). Put another way, penalised individuals were more often those unable to demonstrate the necessary behaviours and competences (e.g. good time keeping/basic reading and writing skills) commonly required to participate in the labour market. Taking this in context, the usage of benefit sanctions over such individuals appeared to reflect a disavowal of commitment towards many of those possessing behaviours and/or circumstances which weren't readily exploitable under a wage relation. As such, albeit only temporarily in the instances of this study, the benefit sanction became a useful tool for alleviating fiscal claims made by those often perceived as 'fit-to-work' (c.f. Loopstra et al., 2015), yet were in some way unlikely to be of immediate value to capital (see Reeve, 2017; Grover, 2018). This was not only done by forcing such claimants into abject dependency upon members of the citizenry through begging and borrowing, but also by forcing others to take out loans and thereby creating a consumer base for pay-day loan capitalists.

Thus, when considering the existing UK evidence base and situating experiences of sanctions within Britain's current politico-economic context, the benefit sanction appears more accurately as a weapon used against the unemployed. Failing to promote positive and rewarding choice-making, the benefit sanction is widely evidenced to inflict an array of harms via the punishment and, in some cases, abandonment, of those unwilling, or unable, to exhibit behavioural deference to a state possessing only 'one true and fundamental social policy: economic growth' (Foucault, 2008:144).

Conclusion

Briefly recapping, the first objective of this article was to reveal how stigma and shame are channelled through benefit sanctions. Here, sanctions were found to impose stigmatisation by marking claimants out as behaviourally incompetent and hence 'undeserving' of social assistance, while shame arose in the measures some were required to take in order to cope with benefit loss. An important limitation of these findings, however, should be acknowledged here. The sample was restricted to young people and, in particular, young men. Whilst this sub-group are among the most likely to receive sanctions, it would be more than plausible to imagine that the emotional impacts of benefit loss manifest in different ways and to differing extents for other sub-groups. This might warrant further investigation, although any scholarly interest in such an endeavour should first consult the already comprehensive (and still pending) output of the Welfare Conditionality project.

The second objective was to question the intentionality of the benefit sanction. Though policymakers argue that sanctions encourage the unemployed to make positive labour market choices, a growing body of evidence has exposed this as a fallacy. As such, especially given the range of harms known to accompany a sanction, it remains difficult at first glance to see how this policy meets its professed objective as a 'correctional device'. There is, however, a final point to consider here. Although sanctions fail to 'correct' behaviour in the fashion publicly described by policymakers, this isn't necessarily a view shared, perhaps tacitly, by those with vested interests in managing the economy or purchasing labour power. Over the years, tougher welfare-to-work regimes have proven successful in forcing large volumes of people off welfare and, albeit slightly less successfully, into low-paid work (Peck, 2001:283). Therefore, the extent to which one views the efficacy of benefit sanctions might only be a matter of perspective. For some political and economic elites, the benefit sanction could well have succeeded in correcting claimant behaviour; or at least insofar as it fosters more intensive engagement with an increasingly derisory pool of job 'opportunities' while, in unison, keeping overall claims made on the state to a minimum. This is not, however, a view that should be shared by those loyal to evidence-based research and/or those with an impenitent interest in ameliorating social inequities. From this perspective, the benefit sanction has not only been a resounding failure, but one customarily suffered by some of the most vulnerable among us.

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