

Introduction to the Special Edition on welfare conditionality

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Introduction to the Special Edition

This Special Edition of *Social Policy & Administration* focuses on welfare conditionality which, as a discourse and as a reform strategy, has become central to the transformation of welfare systems in many countries (Brodkin and Marsden 2013; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). In broad terms welfare systems have become focused on promoting 'pro-social' behaviour rather than protecting people from 'social risks' such as unemployment. The intensification of conditionality in European and Antipodean welfare systems is the focus of our contributors.

The transformation of welfare systems reflects the powerful influence of ideas which have attributed responsibility for poverty and social marginality to the attitudes and behaviour of individuals and groups. This has been translated into ongoing reforms which have made the receipt of welfare goods and services conditional on the behaviour of recipients. This has been coupled with the threat of substantial financial penalties via benefit sanctions in several English speaking countries (Wiggan, 2015; Wright, 2012). Moreover, sanctions have become increasingly severe for those whose conduct fails to conform to requirements. In the UK the original maximum penalty of six weeks loss of benefit was increased to 28 weeks in 1988 and then to three years in 2010. Although in May 2019 it was announced that three year sanctions would be abolished, leaving the harshest fixed term sanction of 182 days. While in the US immediate full-family sanctions operate in a variety of states (Mead, 2011). The stringency of conditions and severity of sanctions has also increased in Canada and New Zealand and in many countries claimants are required to accept job offers at much lower rates of pay, in unfamiliar occupations, as well as at a considerable travel times from their home (Langenbucher, 2015).

Behavioural conditions have also been applied to a broader range of welfare claimants. Benefits for sick and disabled people now have conditionality attached in a number of countries including the UK, Australia, and several Scandinavian countries, although with a greater degree of support in the latter and a greater willingness to sanction in the Anglosphere countries (Geiger, 2017). Lone parents have also been affected by intensifying conditionality, with almost all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries applying a 'work test' when the youngest child reaches a certain age- under one in some US and Canadian states, though higher in Europe and Australia (Finn and Gloster, 2010). Moreover, UK welfare conditionality is breaking new ground by targeting the low paid and those in part-time work. The roll-out of 'Universal Credit' means that those whose weekly gross earnings fall short of a 'conditionality threshold' are expected work more hours and/or increase their pay rate to avoid sanctions on their in-work benefits (Dwyer and Wright, 2014).

The range of welfare domains within which conditional approaches have been introduced has also grown (Watts et al, 2014). Social housing tenants in England and parts of Australia have been offered conditional fixed-term tenancies, with renewal procedures potentially taking into account income, employment status and various aspects of behaviour (Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2017). There has also been a trend towards increasingly conditional offers of support to the homeless alongside other policies which seek to alter the behaviour of rough sleepers (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010; Whiteford, 2010; Parsell, 2011; Watts et al, 2017). In the UK, US, Canada and Australia proposals have emerged to use social security benefits as a lever to compel people to address drug or alcohol

addictions (Fletcher, 2011; Wincup, 2014; Black, 2016). Conditional approaches have also been a growing feature of UK efforts to reduce re-offending by ex-prisoners (Fletcher, 2014).

Social assistance has increasingly been made conditional upon the individuals' submission to behavioural mandates which has led to the downgrading of social citizenship, replacing status with contract (Handler, 2003) and substituting entitlements for conditional rights (Dwyer and Wright, 2014). The new justification rests on a 'conception of fairness that is instilled in the notion of reciprocity', where 'responsibilities and obligations counter-balance rights' (Paz-Fuchs 2008: 1). It is in this context that Wacquant (2009) maintains that welfare claimants are saddled with 'abridged rights and expanded obligations.' Standing (2014) also argues that the state is systematically taking rights away from its own citizens thereby converting them into denizens.

Conditional welfare has been closely connected to the re-emergence of the underclass concept (Dwyer, 2004). Murray (1990) has been influential and defined the 'underclass' according to criminality, illegitimacy and alienation from productive work. 'The definitive proof that an underclass has arrived is that large numbers of young, healthy, low-income males choose not to take jobs' (Murray, 1990: 17). From this perspective the problem lies in a permissive welfare state which encourages idleness among the unemployed and renders single parenthood an economically rational choice. Perkins (2016) has argued that the welfare state provides perverse incentives that cause additional children to be born into disadvantaged households thus increasing the number of people possessing 'employment resistant personality characteristics'. Mead (1991) also maintains that welfare policies create a group that are unwilling to work which is a major cause of 'welfare dependency.' The task for the state is to make support conditional on work requirements and impose adequate disciplinary controls with the tactic of 'help and hassle' being important in this respect (Mead in Peck, 2001: 337). Dunn (2014) also argues for greater compulsion on the grounds that unemployed people are too 'choosy' about the jobs that they are willing to accept.

Consequently, the labour market behaviour of the unemployed has been a key focus. Many countries have witnessed a shift from 'passive' to 'active' labour market policies (the 'activation turn') and the ascendancy of more generic work-first oriented welfare regimes. Workfare i.e. compulsory work-for-benefit programmes have been implemented in several countries and have been justified with regard to the corrosive effects of 'welfare dependency' and the dangers of social exclusion (Loedmel and Trickey, 2001). Peck (2001) maintains that the imposition of compulsory programmes is an effort to construct a new system of labour regulation by enforcing labour market participation in a climate dominated by underemployment, low pay, and work insecurity. Similarly, Piven (2010) and Dean (2012) argue that workfare seeks to reinforce chronically insecure work. Byrne (2005) suggests that the purpose is to re-regulate the reserve army of labour and increase its size and closeness to the labour market by making it more employable. Whereas Adkins (2017) argues that conditionality is being used in the assembly of a market for the labour of the unemployed.

However, the regulation of the labour market behaviour of the poor is nothing new. UK workfare has antecedents going back to the English Poor Law of 1536 and especially the 1834 'new' Poor Law which sought to both relieve poverty and deter reliance on relief through the principle of 'less eligibility', which prescribed that workhouse conditions should be worse than those in the community. During the inter-war period labour exchange officials pressured almost 190,000

unemployed men to attend residential labour camps where 'training' took the form of tough, menial manual labour (Fletcher, 2015). Furthermore, the 1942 Beveridge Report proposed that the unemployed 'should be required, as a condition of continued benefit receipt to attend a work or training centre, such attendance being designed as a means of preventing habituation to idleness' (Beveridge quoted by Freud, 2009: 2). Consequently, the recent intensification of work requirements does not represent a historical rupture but rather the latest chapter in the ebb and flow of illiberal social policy.

Behavioural conditionality is viewed by some as part of a wider trend towards the criminalisation of social policy (Knepper, 2007; Grover, 2008; Rodger, 2008). This involves the redefinition of the aims and purposes of the welfare state including an abandonment of concerns for meeting human needs in favour of maintaining a disciplined and orderly society (Rodger, 2008). Consequently, behavioural conditionality can be conceptualised as a form of social control targeting welfare claimants where coercive power (Lukes, 2005) in the form of the deprivation of welfare goods is used to change the behaviour of those that need them (Watts et al, 2017). Wacquant (2009) has argued that a transnational political process is under way in to exert social control over the poor. Harsh penal policies ('prison-fare') and social policies ('workfare') can be understood as a symbolic and material apparatus to control marginal populations created by economic liberalism and welfare state retrenchment in some countries.

Fletcher and Wright (2018) show that a distinctly more 'punitive turn' has been taken in the UK which has criminalised benefit claimants via strategies of surveillance, sanctions and deterrence in order to combat 'dependency' and reduce costs. A number of studies have focused on the violent, rather than regulatory, nature of welfare conditionality. Burnett and Whyte (2017) draw upon first-hand accounts of claimants forced to participate in UK workfare schemes. They argue that workfare is a form of forced labour, and therefore a violent process in itself, which contains the potential for further violence by permitting employers to breach health and safety laws with impunity injuring and killing unpaid workers. Pring (2017) highlights the violent outcomes, including worsening mental health and suicides, associated with the UK work capability assessment which determines eligibility for disability benefits. Grover (2018) conceptualises severe cuts to benefits and the ratcheting up of conditionality as 'violent proletarianisation' which inflicts 'structural violence' i.e. where social systems or institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.

The way in which policy intentions are translated into front-line practices has garnered growing academic interest. The origins of 'street-level' research can be traced back to 1970s America, where Pressman and Wildavsky (1979) became increasingly concerned with the mismatch between policies as conceived and policies as executed. Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level bureaucracy highlighted the importance of the behaviour of front-line workers who are responsible for translating policy into daily, situated practice. Lipsky saw them as policy makers in an environment that they do not control. Consequently, many studies have drawn upon Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy to explore the implementation of greater conditionality in a range of national and institutional contexts (Hasenfield, 1992; Riccucci, 2002; Wright, 2003; Howard, 2006; Dubois 2010; Fletcher, 2011; Soss et al, 2011 and Brodtkin, 2012).

The articles chosen for the special issue provide a range of theoretical perspectives and country examples in order to test the underlying assumptions of 'conditionality' as a concept and how it is

being translated into policy and front-line practices and the meanings it holds for those implementing and being subject to it. The publication also showcases three articles presenting new empirical evidence from the first large-scale qualitative longitudinal research on the ethicality and impacts of conditionality in the UK from the pioneering ESRC-funded 'Welfare conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change' project (Grant No: ES/K0002163/2). The first three articles consider the street-level implementation of welfare conditionality in different national and institutional contexts. This is then followed by six contributions which explore how conditionality has been experienced by a range of groups including employers, unemployed benefit claimants, offenders, claimants with mental health impairments, lone parents, and Australian First Nation communities.

Van Berkel shows that front-line studies are vital for understanding what welfare reforms are in practice and how they affect the lives of unemployed people. Drawing upon a review of street-level studies he shows that implementation is structured by a range of factors including national policies, organisational contexts, the occupational status of staff and how they interpret their role. The author argues that context configurations and the moral ecosystem they reflect result in street-level practices that redefine the balance between the soft and harsh sides of welfare conditionality. The contributions made by Kaufman and Sadeghi and Terum underline the importance of national and organisational context. Kaufman focuses his attention on the experiences of 'activation' and 'behavioural conditionality' in the UK. He finds that the context of target-driven, work-first approaches, and highly constrained service provision means that discretion increasingly resides in the ability of staff to intensify or moderate the coercive potential of conditionality. This form of discretion, it is argued, provides an alternative frame to view the differential treatment of claimants understood as 'creaming' and 'parking'. In contrast, Sadeghi and Terum focus on manager attitudes towards conditionality in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NWLA) which is staffed by social workers and is rooted in social democratic values. A national survey of managers revealed overwhelming support for conditionality which emphasises the reintegration of the individual back into society and is understood in social democratic terms.

Ingold examines employer experiences and perspectives on active labour market policies and welfare conditionality in the UK and Denmark. She finds that employers are favourably disposed to employing unemployed jobseekers but hold negative views on conditionality which often led to large numbers of unsuitable job applications. She argues that the UK welfare conditionality regime risks irrevocably 'tarnishing' the reputation of those seeking work through negative policy and media rhetoric. The role of conditionality in problematizing the behaviour of some groups is also the focus of Murphy's contribution. She examines the experiences of Irish lone parents of growing conditionality in the welfare and housing systems. A key finding is that lone parents are increasingly problematized by policy makers as 'nesting' on in-work benefits and 'gaming' the social housing system by prioritising security of tenure. Klein discusses an income management programme in the East Kimberley region of Australia to explore contemporary assimilation in welfare policy. The Cashless Debit Card sought to place behavioural restrictions on consumption and instil 'responsible behaviour'. She maintains that the trial exposes how the state legitimises the promulgation of narratives of First Nations dysfunction constructing evidence of programme success through a flawed evaluation process that depoliticises settler colonialism and relational poverty.

The punitive dimensions of conditionality take centre stage in the final contributions. Wright and Fletcher presents original empirical evidence that shows that unemployed people in the UK experience claiming benefits and using employment services as predominantly punitive and criminalising. They show that there has been a fundamental shift from providing help with accessing jobs to monitoring compliance with behavioural rules enforced by harsh sanctions. Moreover, post-2010 they argue that there has been a decisive shift from symbolic violence to state perpetrated material violence which is conceptualised as a form of social abuse. McNeill seeks to complement analyses of welfare conditionality by examining the lessons of conditional punishment in the criminal justice system. He argues that the conditionality attendant to penal forms of supervision is as much about the dispersal of degradation as it is about the dispersal of discipline. Moreover, conditionality in both systems functions less to discipline the poor and more to disqualify them from the entitlements of citizenship. The contribution made by Dwyer et al also underlines the potential of welfare conditionality to be experienced punitively with the attendant risk of disqualifying groups from their entitlements. They explore the impact of welfare conditionality on UK benefit claimants with mental health impairments and its effectiveness in supporting such people into work. The evidence suggests that welfare conditionality is largely ineffective in moving people with mental health impairments into, or closer to, paid work. Moreover, in many cases it triggers negative health outcomes that make future employment less likely.

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