



Welfare Conditionality

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Rewriting the contract: some reflections on the ethics of welfare conditionality

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Welfare conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change (2013-2018)

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Twin aims

- To consider the ethics and efficacy of welfare conditionality
- Fieldwork with three sets of respondents:
 1. Semi-structured interviews with 54 policy stakeholders
 2. 27 focus groups with frontline welfare practitioners
 3. Three rounds of repeat qualitative longitudinal interviews with a diverse sample of 480 welfare recipients who are subject to conditionality: 1440 interviews in total.

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Welfare conditionality?

- **A principle of (behavioural) conditionality**

Access to certain basic publicly provided welfare entitlements should “be subject to the condition that those who receive them behave in particular ways, or participate in specified activities” (Deacon, 1994: 53)

- **Understanding welfare conditionality**

Sanctions and Support (‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’) positive potential for coercive welfare? (Phoenix, 2008)

‘**Amorphous**’ (behaving responsibly) ‘**Concrete**’ (tightly specified) conditionality (Paz-Fuchs, 2008)

‘**Conditional**’ (sanctioning irresponsible behaviour) and ‘**Earned**’ (rewarding positive behaviour) citizenship (Flint, 2009)

Advocates: Justifying rationales for conditionality

- **Passive unconditional benefits promote welfare dependency**
unconditional entitlement to public welfare benefits and services are likely to promote idleness/unemployment and entrench welfare dependency among a section of the wider population
- **Behavioural conditionality provides the answer to irresponsibility**
help people 'do the right thing' by (a) offering mandatory training and support (**carrots**) or (b) reducing their rights to benefit if they don't (**sticks**)
- **Advocates utilise a mix of rationales to justify welfare conditionality/ALMPs**
 - Deterrence, morality, utilitarian/fiscal, contractual/quid-pro-quo (Paz-Fuchs, 2008)
 - Powerful mix of 'money and morals' (Dwyer, 2000)

Advocates: justifying welfare conditionality

- **Contractualism:** citizens and the state have linked obligations (e.g. to actively seek work/provide safety-net for unemployed people, reciprocal contractual duties/responsibilities of both the state and government).
- **Paternalism:** conditionality is in the best interests of welfare recipients, 'inactive' poor people lack competence, paid work is good for people, encourage or compel 'the demotivated' to train, work or engage with support
- **Mutualism:** people have obligations and responsibilities towards each other independent of the actions of the state, personal responsibility as the cornerstone of community

(rf. e.g. Deacon 2004; Paz-Fuchs, 2008; Watts et al. 2014; Patrick and Fenney, 2015)

Advocates: supporting conditionality

■ Contractualism

Never thought there was much wrong with Labour's language of rights and responsibilities... There are obligations on you as an individual, but provided you meet those obligations you have a right to support (PS6, Labour MP)

It's not fair if people are going out paying their taxes and you've got people like sitting on the backsides just like doing nothing and still getting money (WSU, male UC recipient, England)

■ Paternalism

Conditionality is a way of regulating or compelling them into a more orderly lifestyle which will then be good for them (PS12, Policy communications manager, UK disability organisation)

■ Mutualism

If you don't get off your bum... You'll get this much taken off you and you'll only get it back, basically, if you get a part-time job or a course or giving something back to the community rather than just take, take, take (WSU, female JSA recipient, Scotland)

Working with disabled children on school runs... putting something valued into the community... There are things like that in many different areas that they could do. Voluntary work... benefits the community and means that person's doing something rather than just sitting around doing nothing (WSU, male disabled person, England)

Adversaries: contesting welfare conditionality

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- **Builds from flawed individualistic assumptions:** causes and solutions to 'welfare dependency' located at the level of individual behaviour, wider structural factors secondary
- **A rationality mistake:** people may be unable to respond rationally to the 'carrots' or 'sticks' due to other issues ongoing in their lives
- **Punishing the poor:** 'coercive contractualism' is illiberal; punitive paternalism harms rather than helps benefit recipients; limited mutualism focuses primarily on paid work with other forms of valid social contribution marginalised
- **Undermines entitlement based on need:** all should have minimum rights to basic social assistance welfare based on citizenship or human rights

(e.g. Dwyer, 1998, 2004; Goodin, 2000; Freedland and King, 2003; Shildrick et al. 2012; Wright, 2012; Dean, 2013).

Adversaries: opposing conditionality

■ Punishing poor people

They've not been encouraging anybody to do anything... All they're doing is punishing them for things that probably is not even their fault (WSU, male JSA recipient, Scotland)

A kind of state imposed destitution in many ways. That lack of proportionality between the compliance failure and the punishment for it (PS42, Policy officer, welfare rights agency)

Totally incapacitated due to an accident at work... didn't turn up to his interview... ended up being sanctioned for six months... he'd gone into the sausage machine (PS4, Former government minister)

■ Limited vision of mutual responsibility

I'm a mother, I want to be a mother, I want to give my son his breakfast in the morning. I think it's wrong to demand I work and a stranger gives him his breakfast... Why's that wrong, for me wanting to be a mother and to be there for my children? (WSU, female lone parent, Scotland)

■ Social rights and entitlement to meet fundamental needs

There's a social safety net for a reason... an entitlement based system... rights are fundamental and they come from your humanity. They don't actually become conditional on a form of behaviour. Somewhat extreme probably, but it's a position... Its all those human rights words I haven't spoken for a long time (PS32, Senior representative national charity)

Concluding comments: some personal reflections

- **Ethics and efficacy: (How) does welfare conditionality work?**

Sanctions

‘Gulf between rhetoric and evidence of the effects of sanctions’ (Griggs and Evans, 2010)

‘The impacts of benefit sanctions are universally reported by welfare service users as profoundly negative’ (Dwyer and Bright, 2016)

Support

Availability of appropriate individual support the common thread linking stories of successful transitions into work, or the cessation of problematic behaviour (Dwyer and Bright, 2016)

- **Tegenprestatie: sense or nonsense?**

Principle: part of a new welfare contract, a ‘correction’ or a ‘distortion’?

Practice: implementation, the balance between sanction and support

Outcomes: does WC improve benefit recipients’ lives or make them worse?



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