



Welfare Conditionality

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

“I’ve always been a grafter”:
Older jobseekers’ experiences of
work and welfare

Katy Jones, University of Salford

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Presentation outline

1. Policy context
2. Sample of 'older' people
3. Findings from qualitative interviews
4. Conclusions

Policy context

- Ageing population – longer working lives (Loretto et al, 2007).
- New Labour's series of differentiated labour market programmes, including 'older' people (New Deal 25+, New Deal for Disabled People, New Deal 50+)
- Introduction of ESA (2008) - tightening of eligibility around incapacity benefits
- Coalition government's Work Programme, a two year programme for the long term unemployed ('payment by results', greater freedoms for service providers)
- The over 50s have poor outcomes on government funded welfare-to-work programmes (Ray et al, 2014)

Sample of 'older' welfare service users

- NB: Not initially selected on basis of age
- Claiming Job Seekers' Allowance or Universal Credit (subject to 'full conditionality')
- 43 'older' people (aged 50+)
- Majority male, white, British
- Most lived alone, many divorced/widowed
- A small minority lived with/had caring responsibilities for (older) children
- Most lived in social housing, several were impacted by the bedroom tax
- All reported struggling financially or 'just about getting by'
- Often reliant on family (including children) and friends for financial/in-kind support

Findings: Experience in the labour market

- Varied work histories, but most characterised by manual, low wage work
- Most had worked in physically demanding occupations (e.g. warehousing, care work etc)
- Several had experienced redundancy, and had since struggled to get a firm foothold in the labour market
- Observed trends towards increasingly precarious employment opportunities

Findings: Experience of work search

- Unemployment durations varied considerably across the sample
- Limited/no feedback from employers
- Some beginning to lose confidence:
 - *“You lose, start to lose your confidence when nothing’s happening...with not being in a job for a while it slips away from you” (WSU-ED-BW-036)*
- Interviewees identified a range of barriers to work:
 - Age
 - Skills and qualifications
 - Digital exclusion
 - Health
 - Immigration

Findings: Barriers to work

Age-related barriers

“Given the choice between a 24 year old and a 58 year old like I am, people are going to take the 24 year old, one, because nine times out of ten it will cost them less money, two, there’s a chance that if the company’s still going in 20 years’ time they’re not going to have to re-hire somebody else” (WSU-MA-KJ-016a)

Skills and qualifications

“Unless you’ve got this SIA badge...you can’t work in security anywhere: in a shop, on a gatehouse, you know, a factory or anything, you need this badge and although my experience is vastly more than any numpty who’s going to get one of those badges, I can’t get the jobs that they can” (WSU-MA-KJ-014a)

Digital exclusion

“I’ve had no real experience with computers at all... I’ve had no reason to own one, or no reason to use one, and they’re saying to me I’ll have to go and use a computer to go onto this, and send emails, and fax to people, and read your emails, and be able to do all these different things, where to me it’s like how do I switch a computer on?” (WSU-BR-AS-014a)

Findings: Labour market attachment

- Almost all interviewees displayed a high level of labour market attachment
- Most wanted full-time work
- A large proportion prepared to “do anything” to move off benefits
- Several respondents were keen to stress their identity as a worker rather than as somebody who claims benefits:
 - *“I haven’t been on benefits for over 20 years...I don’t care what job it is, I need to get off benefits”* (WSU-JM-014)
 - *“I’ve always been a grafter”* (WSU-AS-014)
- Limited evidence of ‘psychological retirement’/lessening attachment – although this may change...(Beatty and Fothergill, 2007; Maltby, 2007)

Findings: Experience of claiming benefits/employment support

- All either claiming Job Seekers' Allowance or Universal Credit (subject to 'full conditionality')
- Variable experiences in their interactions with job centre plus or work programme provider staff...

*"That lady helps me a lot, she's very nice. She's more like a friend really, you know what I mean, **because she's a similar age to me**, so it's nice" (WSU-WA-KJ-025a)*

*"She says, 'you're very clean and very well presented'. What on earth? **I'm bloody 60 years old**. What does she expect me to turn up like? Dirty jeans, filthy or what? This sort of attitude annoys me" (WSU-IN-AS-002a)*

....and levels of conditionality applied.

"I've got a really good advisor. She knows about my depression and things. She's not actually hassling me to seek employment" (WSU-ED-BW-026a)

- Several participated in Mandatory Work Activity (with mixed experiences)
- A number had been sanctioned (in their view, unfairly)

Findings: Experience of claiming benefits/employment support

Lack of meaningful training opportunities (Maltby, 2007)

A good proportion were open to retraining and gaining new skills, however several felt the opportunities for doing so were limited:

*“They’ve offered me interviewing skills, but **I’ve done all that**” (WSU-BR-AS-014a)*

*“[The job centre] could have put me on some sort of like course that I was actually learning something, but **I don’t know if they actually do courses like that anywhere for people my age. I know they’ve got stuff for 19 to 24**” (WSU-GL-AS-009a)*

On the other hand, some did not want to (or see the need to) participate in further learning:

*“**It’s too late for me now; I’m 55**, what do I want to learn more for?” (WSU-MA-KJ-017a)*

Findings: Experience of benefits/employment support

Limited personalisation of support

“If they’re treating me the same as a 19 year old, they’re either letting the 19 year old down or me down, because we don’t need the same things” (WSU-SH-JM-004a)

“I’m a builder; I’ve been in the building trade 40 years and he wanted me to apply for administration in a library... anybody would laugh at you, wouldn’t they?...I don’t think I’d be able to do the job and I don’t think any manager or supervisor would’ve employed me... that’s a bit silly really, isn’t it?” (WSU-MA-KJ-017a)

Changes in level of support from welfare system

“It used to be years ago. You could go, discuss a job with an advisor. They’re not there anymore to do that. They’re there to get your signature” (WSU-BR-AS-011a)

Ethical issues: on conditionality

- Interviewees broadly in favour of the principle of conditionality (but expectations must be realistic!)
- Most felt sanctions were unfair (objections related mainly to disproportionality and severity) - widespread support for a 'minimum income'
- In favour of (some form of) mandatory work activity – although some important caveats:
 - “[M]ake a stipulation that if you have somebody on work experience you at least offer them an interview at the end of it, or offer them the opportunity of an interview and possibly a job, because if the work’s there in work experience, it’s got to be there for somebody to do” (WSU-MA-KJ-016a)
- Paternalist justifications re young people – both in terms of stricter conditions and more support:
 - “At the job centre they should be concentrating more on training the young people, getting them on that first step to work, more than concentrating on them than the likes of me....you get a lot all round this area... they’ve left school and they’ve never had a job” (WSU-BR-AS-014a)

Ethical issues: on entitlement

Several interviewees justified their claims to welfare with reference to ‘deserving’ worker identities

- *“I’ve always worked so I think I should have been treated a little bit differently” (WSU-JM-014)*
- *“I think for somebody who has worked for so long they should look at that person in a different way” (WSU-MA-KJ-015a)*

Conclusions

- Characteristics and experiences of 'older jobseekers' at odds with dominant discourse around successful 'baby boomers'
- Older workers face a number of age-related barriers to the labour market, however support to overcome these is limited
- Interviewees broadly in favour of the principle of conditionality, although believe that even the most 'undeserving' should not be left with nothing
- Support for meaningful work experience opportunities
- Justified personal claims to welfare through reference to a 'deserving' worker identity

References

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k.e.jones@salford.ac.uk

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