



Welfare Conditionality

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

The experience of welfare conditionality for people with mental health issues

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Presentation outline

1. Introduction to WelCond project
2. Welfare conditionality for disabled people in UK?
3. Mental health and welfare conditionality
 - Work Capability Assessment
 - Sanctions and support
 - Movements into paid work
4. Conclusions

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

Twin aims:

- To consider the ethics and efficacy of welfare conditionality
- Fieldwork with three sets of respondents:
 1. Semi-structured interviews with 57 Policy Stakeholders
 2. 27 focus groups with 156 frontline welfare practitioners who implement policy
 3. Three rounds of repeat qualitative longitudinal interviews with a diverse sample of (n.482 wave a) welfare recipients who are subject to conditionality i.e. 1,083 interviews in total.

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What does welfare conditionality mean in the UK?

- Linking welfare rights to 'responsible' behaviour esp. job search /activity in PLM (Dwyer, 2004)
- 'Creeping conditionality' (Dwyer, 2004) to 'ubiquitous conditionality' (Dwyer and Wright, 2014)
- **Expansion** of benefit claimants groups subject to conditionality i.e. majority of lone parents, disabled people and under UC low paid workers required to attend work focused interviews, undertake job search or training or face benefit sanctions
- **Intensification** of benefit sanctions for non-compliance (2012)
- **Assumptions** of 'welfare dependency'

ESA (2008) Welfare conditionality for disabled people in UK

- **Work Capability Assessment (WCA):** 3 potential outcomes

Support group – ‘limited capability for work related activity’, no conditionality

Work Related Activity Group – mandatory work preparation requirements

Fit for Work – Jobseeker’s Allowance, full conditionality

- **Universal Credit (2013 - 2022)**

‘Limited Capability for Work Group’, loss of WRAG additional payment from 2017

- **WCA roundly criticized**

Greater focus on physical health than mental health in WCA (Marks, 2017)

Inefficient: 51% of appeals against initial WCA assessments are overturned on appeal (DWP, 2015)

Mental Health and welfare conditionality

- **Sample**

116 welfare service users (WSUs) who self-declared a mental health impairment at interviews waves a-c

All had experience of conditional out of work benefits e.g. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) or Universal Credit

Some though not all had other issues e.g. physical impairment, substance misuse, homelessness, public care, prison etc.

- **Three key questions**

I. What were their experiences re WCA?

II. How did they experience sanction and support inherent in welfare conditionality?

III. How effective is conditionality in moving people with mental health problems towards paid work?

Findings: Work Capability Assessment

- **Inappropriate, insensitive, painful, distressing, degrading**

It's all very much based on physical stuff, and they don't take into account the emotional and the mental stuff... Just because I can look somebody in the eye, and just because I can speak clearly enough doesn't mean to say that I'm not depressed and not upset. *(Female, 49, physical & mental health)*

They're not understanding... they open up a lot of wounds. I've always left in tears and heartbroken, really sobbing, and they're not interested in making sure you're all right or anything. *(Female, 36, mental health)*

- **For some, the WCA exacerbated the impairments for which they were being assessed**

I thought it was very intense and very stressful. I felt as though I had been attacked. *(Male, 52, sensory, physical and mental health issues)*

I find them very threatening and upsetting which puts my panic levels up, which means that I get in to a loop where I can't read and understand. *(Female, 53, sensory, physical & mental health issues)*

Findings: Experiences of Welfare Conditionality

- **Sanctions**

I was referred to a drug and alcohol service to be assessed, and it clashed with the Work Programme appointment...So I called them 'I'm really sorry, I've got this assessment, which I think has to be the priority, because I'll get help and treatment', ...then I got a letter from the DWP saying because you missed your Work Programme we're stopping your benefit. I was just beside myself...I was thinking even if I did get a job at the moment I wouldn't sustain it, because I'm depressed and drinking. So I just thought that's madness. *(Female, 49, mental health issues)*

- **Lack of support and pressure of conditionality**

There are so many demands and things like that set upon you when you're not well. My ailments were depression and anxiety plus the alcohol; you don't need extra things in your life to be worrying about. It's hard enough trying to deal with your issues and get well or get better and that on its own is quite a big thing.*(Female, 37, mental and physical health issues)*

Findings: Impacts of Welfare Conditionality

- **Positive for a minority**

I feel they've been slowly guiding me. They haven't been really pushing me or on my back. *(Female, 59, physical & mental health issues)*

Because of that carry on with the benefits I got in touch with [charity] to say, 'What's happening here? I'm preparing to shoot myself'...then I ended up starting and going to speak for them about my experience...and it's all just branched out...Thank you wee lassie in the benefits system...I love doing what I do....The only thing is it had to take me to get all different experiences to do that. *(Female, 54, physical & mental health)*

- **Negative for many**

I know I got so close to ending it because I couldn't cope with the pressure they were putting on me. *(Female, 32, mental health)*

Because there's this feeling in the country isn't there that everyone on disability benefits is defrauding the system...I know that there are, but I'm not. *(Male, 45, sensory, physical and mental health)*

Findings: Effectiveness of WC in moving DP with mental health issues towards work?

- **Movement into paid work**

It was through the Jobcentre. They put me on to the work programme. I started on that first and then he goes, 'Oh there's a chance of a job at (factory)'. I got it straightaway.”
(Male, 52, mental health issues and learning difficulties)

- **Pushing people further away from work**

Well, I was planning last year to be going back to work, and then it's the way I was dealt with by the benefits really knocked me back. I mean, it knocked me back, I had a bit of depression again. It caused me a lot of stress, a lot of anxiety, the way I was being treated and trying to deal with the changes and everything *(Male, 50, physical and mental health issues)*

- **Inertia/no movement**

It is demeaning, condescending, it is painful, it is damaging, it actually makes your disabilities worse if you've got some disabilities. And it is completely unproductive. It doesn't get people work. Nothing in what they've done to me has assisted me in getting back in to the employment market.*(Female, 53, sensory, physical & mental health issues)*

Conclusions

- Largely negative experiences of welfare conditionality with little effective support for many people with mental health issues
- WCA was widely condemned as inappropriate and insensitive
- Welfare conditionality exacerbated mental health conditions and caused stress for many
- Stigmatization and shame (Baumberg et al, 2012; Walker, 2014)
- Welfare conditionality for people with mental health impairments has negative consequences for citizenship and inclusion (Garthwaite, 2011; Manji, 2017)
- Is a more positive approach to social security for disabled people emerging?
 - Oakley (2016)
 - Work and Health Programme (2017)

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