

Resistance at the street-level in
Australian Employment
Services:

the implications for social policy

Casey, S 2017, *Resistance in employment services: a critical account*, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Global, Urban and Social Sciences, RMIT University.



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We are the largest network of employment and related service providers in Australia and are funded and owned by its members.

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Working for a fair and equitable Australia

Jobs Australia is the national peak body for nonprofit organisations that assist unemployed people into work.

Our mission is to help members to make the most effective use of their resources and promotes the needs of unemployed people for the services and support that will help them to participate fully in

Member Benefits

- > Policy: Consultation, Representation & Advocacy
- > Nonprofit Management & Governance
- > Tender Advice & Review Services

What are Employment Services

- Jobactive 2015-2020
 - formerly Job Services Australia 2009-2005;
 - Job Network (1997-2009)
- Disability Employment Services (DES)
- Community Development Programs
- Others



Active labour market programs

General shift from 'passive' welfare to 'activation' policies in the mid 1980s under Hawke, then 'Working Nation' under Keating (1994) – introducing case management, ALMP



Photo: Peter Morris

"People who are denied employment for long periods are denied the income, social contact, and creative outlets that work provides – they are denied an essential element of what it means to be an Australian." (Keating)

Workfirst & mutual obligation

Workfirst - administered by marketised employment services through use of **activity tests** reinforced by sanctions

Mutual obligation: based on contractarian attitudes to welfare (Mead and Murray informed)

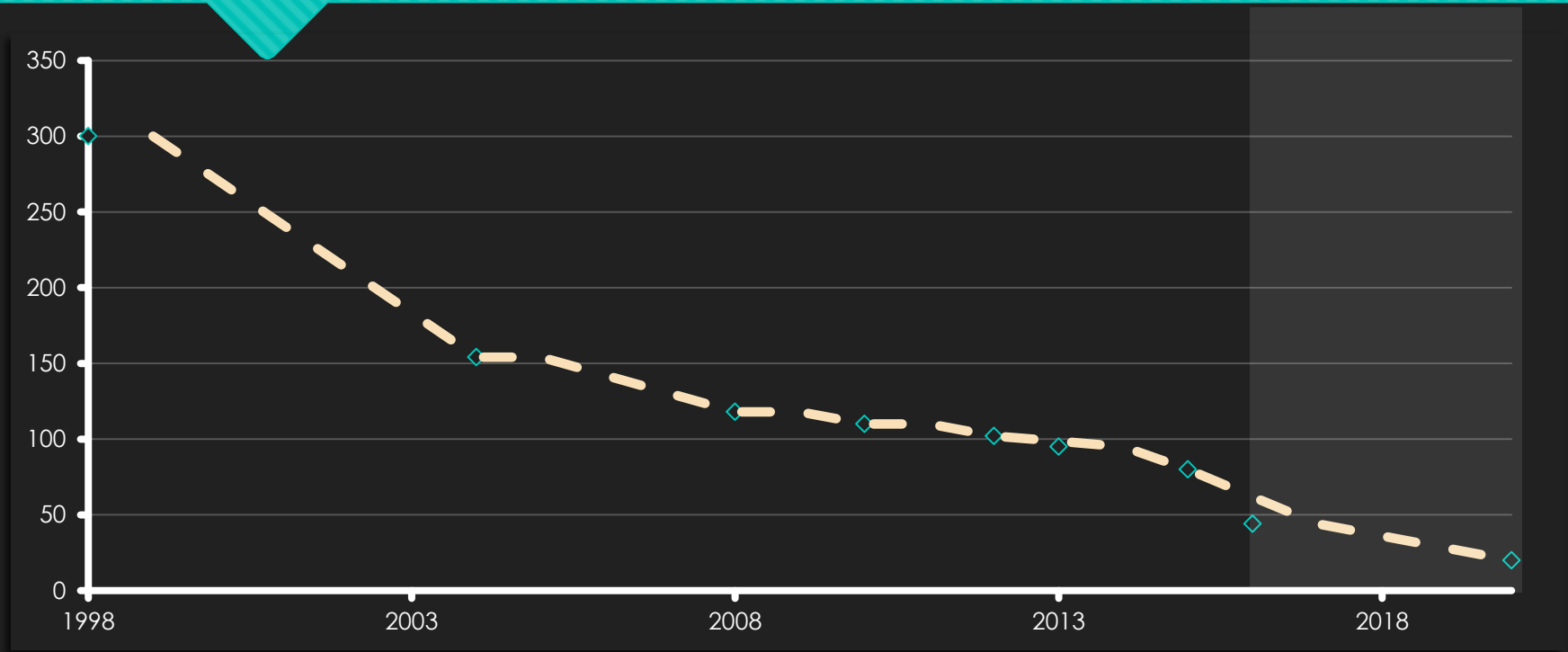
Discursive associations of underclass and welfare dependence

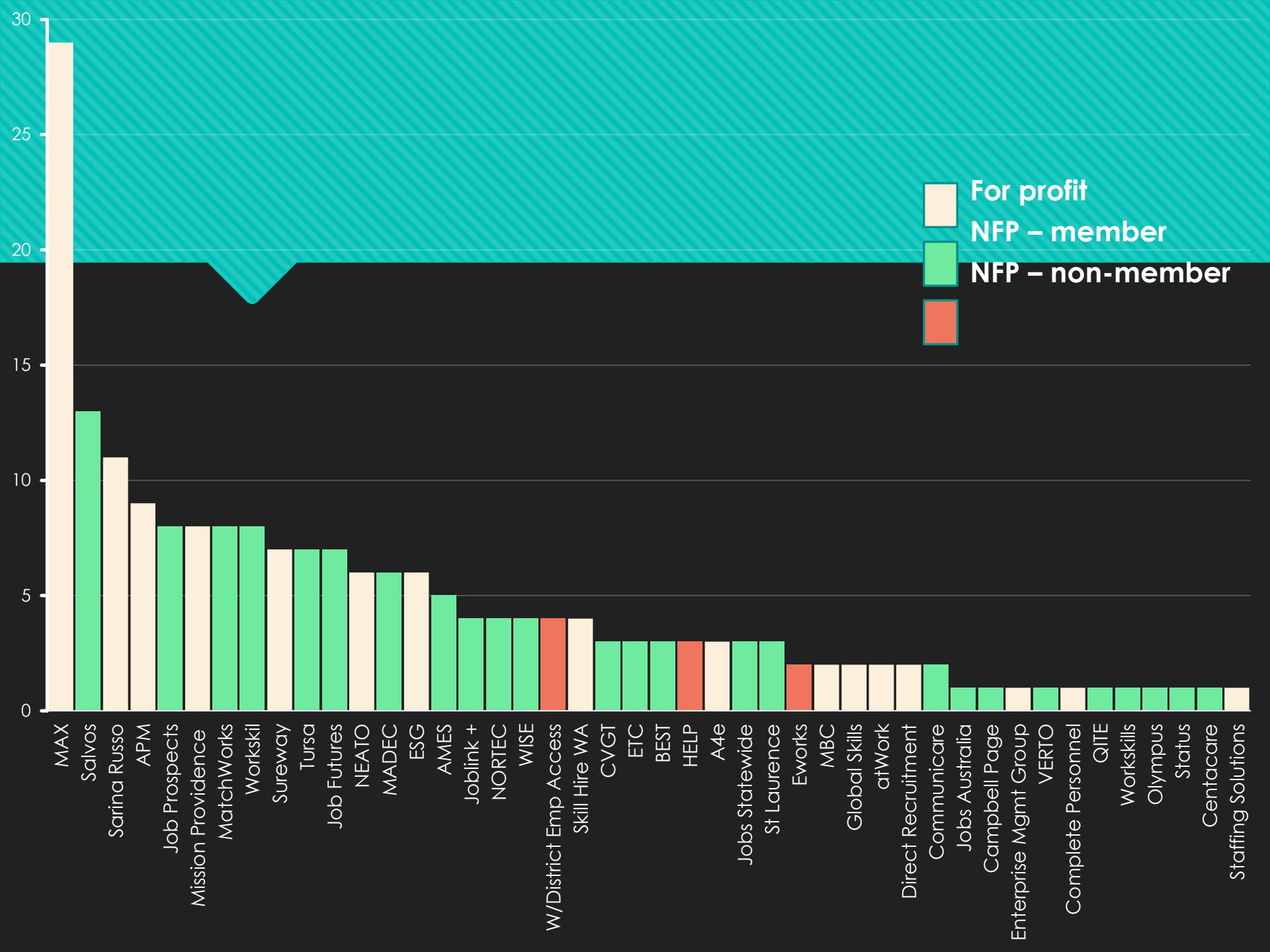
Behavioural economic levers to manage behaviour – increasingly punitive/disciplinary

Marketisation 1997-

- Quasi-marketisation
- Marketised and competitive
- Poor providers are eliminated
- Payment by results (employment outcomes)
- Game of survival

ES Providers over time





The motivation for the research

It's not right that some bully is using stand over tactics like some sort of Fat Controller, threatening to stop me receiving money if I don't do as he says, when I am struggling to exist on \$500/fortnight. I want something done about this. I do not want to see that awful man ever again. I bet I am not the only person who is being bullied by these Job Service Provider tyrants. Unemployed people need to be looked after by public servants who are bound by probity not by private organisations who benefit from people being out of work. As Centrelink have said "these people are a law unto themselves. They make their own rules". (Claudia, 2014)

Problem(s)

- Street level: conflict and antagonistic worker/job seeker relations
- Employment service agency: job seeker disengagement, waste of agency resources, conflict, worker burnout
- Social policy: not improving economic participation (more activation & conditionality, Workfare + eg under 25s)
- Public policy and administration: system noise and inefficiency (compliance and regulation)
- Political: poor reputation, bad management (compliance and regulation)

Research problem/question

- Gaps in existing scholarship left room to undertake street-level research n to better understand conflict and resistance in employment services...
- RQ: What forms of resistance arise in employment services (due to their role in administering welfare conditionality?)

Research methods

- Small scale qualitative study – purposive recruitment
- Narrative interviewing - 2 cohorts – 14 “job seekers” and 5 workers; 6 job seekers were single parents
- Re-construction of incidents involving threat of sanction
- Analysis - involved recurrence of themes and abductive development of theory



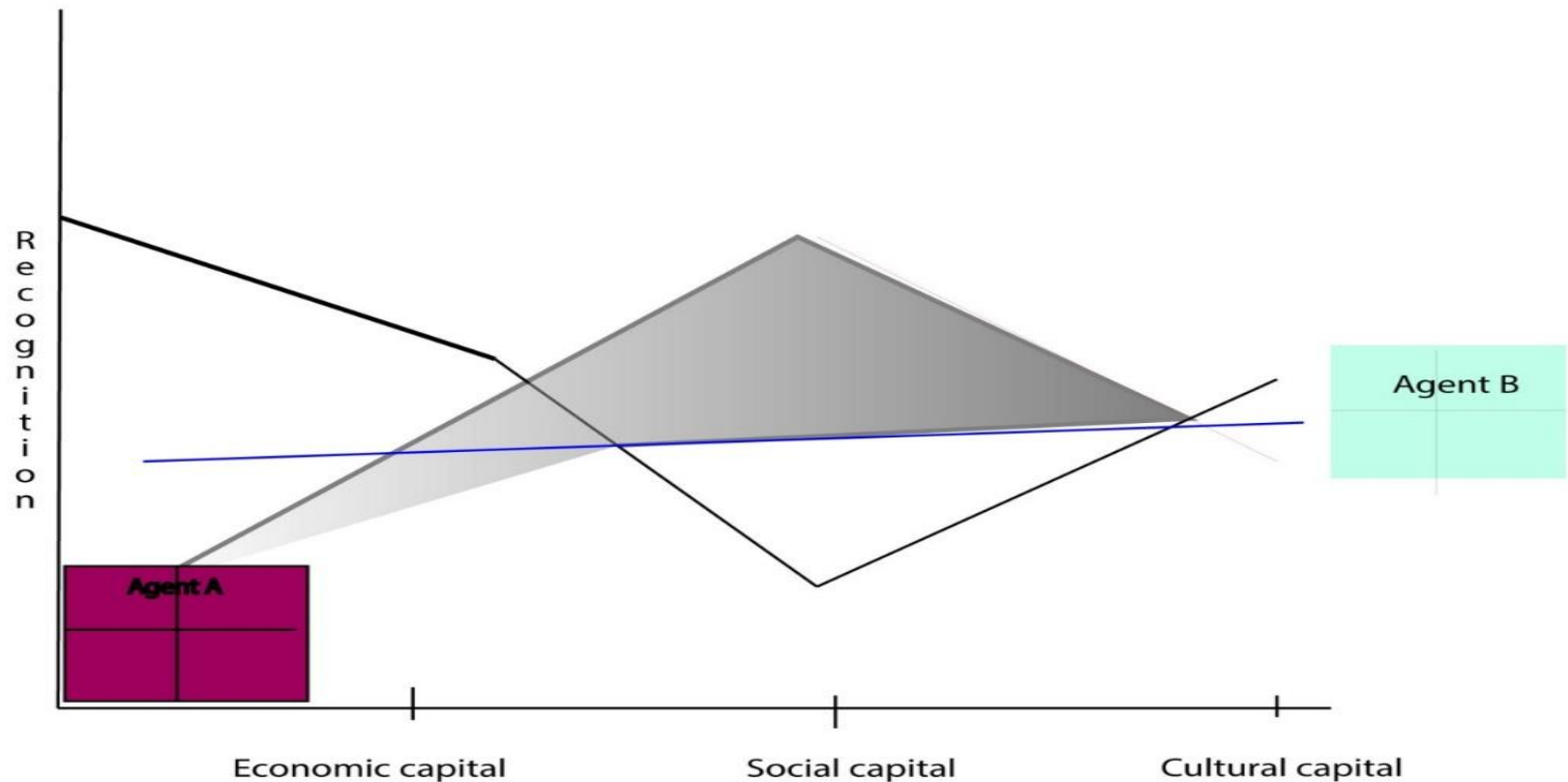
Critical orientation: interest-based

- Resistance – moment or device to explore conflict arising in relation to welfare reform
- Agency/structure debate
- Field analysis (Bourdieu, Peillon) : Bourdieu's theory of practice-relational concepts habitus, field, capital with an emphasis on interests
- Cultural reproduction involves conflict over interests and domination
- Agent behaviour – attachment to interests
- Agents – capable of reflective analysis/cognitive agency (not the same as habitus)

Properties of fields

- Objective, subjective properties
- Instrumental properties – rules/laws– provide limits/controls on behaviour/action
- Practiced conditions – re-enactment of rules of the field (game)
- Intersubjectivity and recognition
- Recognition is related to validation of the interests and the capital it prioritises

Welfare field – space conflict



Interest-based perspective on resistance

- Forms of resistance arise as reaction to domination across domains of interaction: personal, interpersonal and political
- Resistance : human actors capable of reflective analysis – and of influencing social change
- Policy making agencies and actors are interest-based - field conditions/outcomes align with dominant interests
- Compromised by marketisation as an explicit strategy arising from the neoliberalisation of social and economic policy

Findings Implications

- The findings bridge scholarship about the way in which significant shifts in distributive social policies/welfare reform can :
 - seed social movements because of the way they affect welfare rights and economic well-being;
 - Inform policy studies about the impact of sanctions and welfare conditionality on unemployed people
 - Social theory about agency and resistance

Findings

Centrelink is like being given rice when you need a meal. I mean it's nothing, like you're not starving but you're malnourished. Australia is a rich country but we are not very generous, we make our poor survive on next to nothing, there is no nurturing (Matthew, 2014).

Findings cont...

All I want, and all I've EVER wanted, is to find some kind of permanent, ongoing paid work (minimum 15 hours per week) that fits around caring for my children and which hopefully fits with my interests and chosen career path. It's now been a nine-year journey ... and appears that's too much to ask for! (Leanne, 2013).

Interest-based perspective on policy-making

A budget message from the head Vinnie's

Posted by GetUp!

112,130 Views

Deliberate
HUMILIATION

particularly of those who've been left out.

-1:39



Penalisation of the poor

It's easy to blame people for being outside the labour market or on its low- paid fringes. It's easy when you're passing judgment from a comfortable vantage point, well above the fray.

It's a battle that is being waged from below the poverty line. But the battle isn't just a financial one. The people we assist are waging a battle for respect. They are frequently demonised and all too often damned.

Our problem is not the bad behaviour of the so-called moral underclass. Our problem is inequality; an inequality of resources, of opportunities, of hope.

When you've even got the OECD berating us for the level of our unemployment benefit, worrying that it is counterproductive to a participation agenda, surely we should be sitting up and taking notice. (John Falzon)

CREEPING CONDITIONALITY & EVIDENCE BASED POLICY

It's difficult to see what the government will achieve from this paternalistic measure. Politically, it may appease the far right's "tough on drugs" rhetoric – but as a piece of policy, it is unlikely to achieve what it hopes to.

The experience from the US is that punitive measures just don't work. They reflect a deep lack of understanding about drug use, its effects and of what works to address drug-related problems.

This is not going to reduce drug use or harms. It has the potential to increase crime, infringes on civil liberties and it is going to cost a lot of money that would be better spent in harm reduction and drug treatment.

If the government really wants to put this kind of money into reducing drug use among those on welfare, providing more money to the underfunded treatment sector would be a better place to start.

(from: <http://www.ethics.org.au/on-ethics/blog/may-2017/welfare-drug-dependency-why-tough-love-wont-help>)

Public intellectuals...

JOHN FALZON: *We have seen the steady demonisation and stigmatisation of people who are forced to bear the brunt of poverty and inequality in Australia. People are being consistently blamed for being forced to the margins of the labour market.*

So we need to change the language, we need to change the policy that the language represents.

We need for instance to walk away from measures that are just clearly punitive and lead nowhere except perhaps giving some sense of therapeutic benefit to the welfare bashers - such as forcing young unemployed people to live on fresh air and sunshine for a month of every year. I mean, this is not going to create a single job.

Articles...

- Single parents and misrecognition in employment services
- Employment services workers and the misrecognised care work of Workfirst
- Update on literature review about employment services
- Creeping forms of welfare conditionality in Australia
- Theory on agency and resistance
- And...

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