



# Welfare Conditionality

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND  
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

## The Universal Acceptance of Conditionality?

Exploring welfare service users' justifications and  
critiques

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# The ethicality of benefit sanctions

**Ethical justification has been crucial to welfare reform – ‘restoring fairness’, ‘skivers and strivers’, ‘making work pay’**

**Critical, governmentality, and social citizenship research - ethical arguments made by claimants not always central focus**

**“Our research shows that over 70% of JSA claimants say sanctions make it more likely they will comply with reasonable and agreed requirements, and it is understandable that people meet certain expectations in return for benefits.” – DWP spokesperson responding to WelCond research**

# Welfare Conditionality project

**Twin aims - To consider the efficacy and ethics of welfare conditionality**

**Three waves of qualitative interviews with 481 welfare service users who were subject to conditionality.**

**Sampled across nine policy areas from 11 cities in Scotland and England**

# On Justification (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006)

**Concern that critical sociologies reduce questions of morality to power relations and view people as 'cultural dopes'**

**Emphasizes instead people's own critical capacities to make demands of justice**

**General principles from a plurality of orders drawn on to critique or justify particular situations**

**Compromises and contradictions can exist between orders, and often a source for disputes**

**Attention to actants identified in ethical arguments and their relative size – victim, persecutor**

## Gap between principles and reality

**Widespread agreement with general principle of conditionality, though wrong people impacted:**

**“I can understand why, I mean there’s too many people took advantage of the system, and there’s people to this day who should have been sanctioned don’t get sanctioned and the ones who don’t deserve to be sanctioned get sanctioned”**

**WSU-BA-AS-012a**

**“I think it’s quite right because we should be looking for work, we should be looking. I think they’re coming down too hard on the wrong people.”** WSU-GL-AS-017a

**“I just think that there are certain people that screw the system, and others that get screwed by it.”** WSU-BR-AS-009a

# Singular – Collective and possibility of critique

## Singular:

**“Yes, they were [fair in sanctioning me], because it was my problem.” WSU-GL-AS-039b**

## Individualising to counter collective narrative:

**“I worked for three years straight [...] So when I got unemployed I was like well fair enough for the people that are wasters and don't get jobs [...] but] it's not fair for me to be going to the JobCentre every time and feeling embarrassed.” WSU-ED-BW-022a**

## Collective:

**“They're using the disabled among others, as an excuse for their cutbacks because of the economic incompetence.” WSU-ED-AS-001a**

# The plurality of orders

## Criticism of there being a target-driven industrial model:

**“I don’t think there should be amounts, as long as they’re obliging by continuing to search. Like my adviser said last time, ‘Yes, you’re doing the right things, you’re looking at courses, [etc...].’ Well, that’s you fulfilling your obligation, isn’t it? So why do they have to put a figure on it? Why do they have to put a number on it?” WSU-IN-AS-005b**

## Involvement of private companies seen as undermining the delivery of welfare and support:

**“They’re just private companies making a few quid and doing as little as possible. Same old story everywhere. Profit. You know, trying to do as little as possible and get as much as you can.” WSU-SH-JM-007b**

# The plurality of orders

**Perceived lack of a civic ethos, often seen as part of the industrial service model:**

**“They’re [Work Coaches] looking at you like you’ve never worked. [...] You walk in there, you’re just a number to them. You’re only a number.” WSU-ED-BW-036a**

**“I think basically it’s all very well blaming these people in the JobCentre, you can blame them for being employed there, but they are being put under pressure, political.” WSU-GL-SW-002a**

**Need to treat claimants with common humanity:**

**“People on benefits are human beings and should be treated as such and not as lower class citizens or animals who are pushed about and treated as crap” WSU-GL-AS-006a**

# The plurality of orders

**Critical of paternalism – majority who were sanctioned felt there was no need for them to change their behavior:**

**“My behaviour wasn’t wrong anyway. That’s the thing that’s weird about it. My behaviour didn’t need changing because they lost my form. They’re the ones who have got the trouble. No I wouldn’t make me change anything.” WSU-IN-SW-001b**

**Fallback universalism - even if sanctioned people should be able to live:**

**“We’re a civilized society, aren’t we? [...] We’re meant to look after each other, so yes. I think there should be, yes, a bare minimum, and then sanction the rest [...] You should be able to walk into a shop, buy a loaf of bread and a pint of milk. You shouldn’t be having to go to food banks” WSU-GL-SW-007a**

# A Broken Contract

**Claimants need to prove they are looking for work, but receive little support in return:**

**“You're telling people, 'I'm going to sanction you because you haven't done your job search properly, go away'. It's not like [...] ‘This is how you're meant to do it. This is what I want you to do. Do you need any help?’ [...] sanction people all you like but put support in place.” WSU-GL-AS-012a**

**The Claimant Commitment - a contract made under pressure:**

**“Well [I signed it] because basically, it's like if you don't sign [...] they're not going to give you any money. There's only one fish in the shop, and you've got to have it, you're going to pay whatever price there is [...] You've got to take it, haven't you?”  
WSU-BR-AS-014a**

# Conclusions

**General agreement with principle that claimants should meet certain expectations in return for benefits**

**However, concerns with intensity and extension of conditionality**

**Requirements were often considered unreasonable and non-negotiable**

**Little support amongst claimants for paternalism with harsh sanctions instead largely favouring contractualism with universal minimum**

**Plurality of ethical orders drawn on, including from those not traditionally associated with welfare**

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