

**Mental health and  
punitive welfare  
conditionality:  
'The only role  
they've had is just  
destroying my life,  
not bettering it'**

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# Outline

Neoliberal state-crafting

Punitive welfare conditionality

Symbolic violence and social suffering

Mental health and the lived experience  
of punitive welfare conditionality

# Wacquant & Neoliberal State-crafting



“[The core of neoliberal state-crafting] consists of an *articulation of state, market, and citizenship* that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third.” (Wacquant 2012: 71)

# The Centaur State

Neoliberal state-crafting uses the state's concentration of capital and institutional machinery to implement liberal policies for the market and punitive policies for 'problem populations'.

The state's concentration of symbolic capital is used to perform 'social magic' – the “power to produce existence” (Bourdieu 1992: 42), “of imposing a new vision and a new division on the social world” (Bourdieu 1992: 223).

Welfare as field where symbolic capital is converted into economic capital. Welfare reform has seen a change in the stratification and classification of benefit claimants. Discourse of benefit cheats and scroungers as a 'problem population'.

A focus on state-crafting moves from a thin economic account of neoliberalism to a thick sociological one that brings back the importance of the political and moral dimensions ...

# The moral purpose of welfare reform



“Given the chance, I believe people will want to make the most of their talents – but instead, what [welfare] did was trap them, with little opportunity to take control of their own lives [...]

Still now, some commentators fail to recognise the damage that worklessness and dependency can inflict on people’s life chances and aspirations [...]

Our conditionality system is designed to send a clear message that we expect every effort to be made to find and take work [...]

Our purpose must be to release people from the trap and so that they can break free from dependency.”

(Iain Duncan Smith 2014)

# Punitive welfare conditionality

Welfare reform has seen the privileging of work, linking welfare rights with behavioural conditions to **actively** look for work. This is backed-up by severe financial sanctions that stop benefit payments for 28 days – 3 years (later reduced to 182 days). 24% of JSA claimants between 2010 – 2015 received at least one sanction (NAO 2016).

The turn to punitive welfare conditionality has been variously understood as –

- Social panopticism - surveilling and policing of the poor by social agencies (Wacquant 2001)
- The social abuse of unemployed people as ‘state perpetrated harm’ (Wright et al. 2020)
- The purgatorial ethic of Active Labour Market Policies (Boland and Griffin 2017)
- Psycho-compulsion - unemployment as a psychological problem (Friedli & Stearn 2015)

# Mental health and ‘worklessness’

“Worklessness is a risk factor for the onset of poor mental health. Being out of or away from work can sustain the symptoms of mental illness and reinforce negative views about capability and future prospects.” [original emphasis] (Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health 2017, 17)

A person’s belief about what they can do can be as important as other factors, including their health condition, in determining how likely they are to find a job.” (Department for Work and Pensions 2013: 4)

Yet, existing research has shown the ineffectiveness of welfare conditionality in helping people with mental health problems back into work and actively worsens claimants’ mental health (Dwyer et al. 2019; Mehta et al. 2020), with a relationship between sanctions and increased antidepressant prescribing (Williams 2019).

# Mental health binaries

The external vs imminent relation sociology takes to mental health (Sedgwick 2015)

Implicit discourse of common / severe mental health problems

# Symbolic Violence and Social Suffering

The state “claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and **symbolic violence**” (Bourdieu 1994: 3).

Issue though with symbolic violence defined as misrecognition by both sides as legitimate - “Symbolic violence can only be exercised by the person who exercises it, and endured by the person who endures it, in a form which **results in its misrecognition as such**, in other words, which results in its **recognition as legitimate**.” (Bourdieu 1992: 140)

Social suffering as “**positional suffering**” (Bourdieu 1993), which Sik (2018: 14) criticises for failing to fully capture the varieties of social suffering and argues instead to look at the “**pattern of suffering**” produced by social constellations.

# Welfare Conditionality Project (2013-2018)

Aimed to consider the ethics and efficacy of welfare conditionality. Core component of fieldwork was three waves of qualitative longitudinal interviews with 480 welfare claimants.

A secondary analysis of these interviews was conducted for a Health Foundation project, using the following criteria:

- Discussed mental health problems at any interview wave
- Were receiving a benefit with work search conditionality (ESA-WRAG, JSA, and UC) or were in employment at any interview wave

144 participants matched the criteria, with 124 and 104 respectively taking part in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of interviews, providing 372 interviews in total.

# ESA medical assessments

The biopsychosocial model focused on discrete (often physical) tasks:

“A person I've never met before in my life, 15 minutes is all I spent with her and the questions that she should've asked, she didn't ask, 'Can you set your alarm, can you do the washing?' Yes, I can do that. People in wheelchairs can do that. **Just because you can do that doesn't mean to say you can do a full-time job.**” [WSU-GL-AS-016](#)

Mandated state agents who decide, not claimants and their medical professionals:

“**The government decided that I was able to work.** It didn't matter about the tablets I was taking that affected my balance and things like that, because I was physically able to lift my arms above my head basically I was able to work.” [WSU-BA-JM-002](#)

“**[It's invasive] because they're not walking in my shoes, they're only seeing you for, what, half an hour, forty minutes? They have got the right to sit that and say yes or no whether you should receive benefits?**” [WSU-GL-AS-032](#)

# The vision of the state

The ascription of negative symbolic capital:

“[My experience with the Jobcentre Plus] has been absolutely soul destroying. The assumption that I’m trying to get something for nothing, the guilt that was laid on me when I was trying to find work and seriously mentally ill with depression and anxiety, the information from people at the Jobcentre that I should just pull myself together.” [WSU-GL-AS-022](#)

Constant scrutiny of efforts undermines dignity and respect:

“When you're sitting there, they're looking at you like, you feel like - they're trying to weigh you up to see if you really do want to work. Honestly it makes you feel they're downgrading you.”

[WSU-ED-BW-036a](#)

# Invisibility of mental health

Lack of recognition:

“[The Work Programme provider] don't understand the mental health side [...] All they want is to hit their targets and for me to do their training and get back to work. They were sending me out appointments for two weeks at a time where I was supposed to be in every day for nearly six hours at a time [...] I can't sit in front of the computer for nearly four hours a day [...] and it was a case of if you don't then you could lose your benefit.” [WSU-PE-JM-010](#)

Just a number:

“[Work coaches] aren't really interested in your emotions or your problems. They're there to get you to go back to work or into a job or into a course to do something [...] - it's all about numbers. It's not about feelings. It's not about the person. It's about numbers and money.” [WSU-SH-JM-016](#)

# Persistent pressure and generalised anxiety

Assumption of guilt:

“Every time I go in and sign on, I feel like I am signing my name to the fact that in the past two weeks I have failed, and I have failed to find a job [...] It’s got harder to approach [Work Coaches], it’s got harder to walk in there, and that feeling of failure is even more evident actually, because the pressure’s been put more onto you to find work, to find something. But in fact you feel like you’ve done something wrong.” WSU-PE-JM-027

The risk of a sanction always present:

“It’s always there in the back of your head that your money can be stopped at any minute for any reason.” WSU-ED-BW-023

“I was so stressed out having to sign on every day I never used to miss it. It was one of those things that hung over your head that you could be sanctioned and if you were sanctioned you could be sanctioned for two weeks or up to six weeks with no money.” WSU-PE-JM-027

# Impact of sanctions

Intense material hardship:

“[Sanctions have] a very different impact. I felt as if you’re trying to survive without money that you’re due in. [...] Ducking and diving, trying to get money from somewhere to survive. No, that doesn’t make you want to look for a job harder. That just makes you struggle and that two weeks last for ever and makes you ill, I would say, with worry, everything.” [WSU-GL-AS-015](#)

Fear of sanctions and social insecurity:

“It’s just like a fear of actually losing my right to live. You know what I mean? Because I mean like if you haven’t got any cash you can’t function.” [WSU-ED-BW-026](#)

# Symbolic-Material Violence

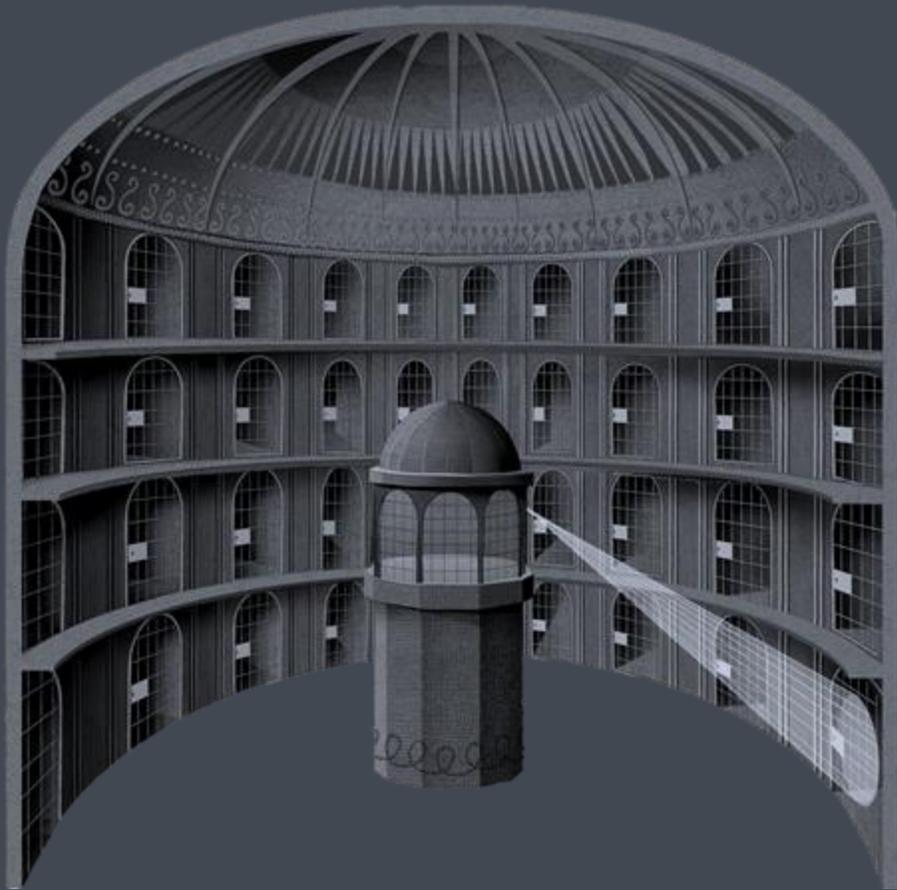
Violence not due to 'misrecognition as such' but the linkage between symbolic and material violence and maintenance of symbolic domination through threats of material deprivation:

“[The DWP are] trying to tell you that you're all right, that everything's hunky dory in your life. There's nothing wrong with you, you can work, you can get a job. [...] I said, 'Here look, I don't want to sign this [the Claimant Commitment for Jobseeker's], I'm physically all right to work but I'm mentally not' [...] She said, 'Well, if you don't sign it, you don't get any money'.”

WSU-GL-AS-016

“I said, 'There's what I've got [done]; and I showed them, but oh no, five days a week, 'You need to do this five days a week. Is that all right with you?' I went, 'Aye', you don't want to be awkward with them in case they stop your money.’” WSU-ED-BW-036

# An Imperfect Panopticon?



“So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary.” (Foucault 1991: 203)

# An Imperfect Panopticon?

Inconsistency:

“They don’t delve into your situation. Every time it’s a different person so every time you need to tell the whole story [...] ‘I can’t do work because I’m attending some counselling and everything’. Every time you need to repeat it. Then this is what they say ‘But you need to start looking for work’. So it’s a limited amount you have to listen.” [WSU-LO-KJ-035](#)

Pressure and time:

“The day before [I sign on] I’m a nervous wreck [...] It’s only when I’ve walked into that office, signed, and come back out, that’s when I relax, and then I relax for a week and then you start that build-up again. I remember thinking my God, this is not good for your heart at all, because I’m having [... a week] of stress. [...] I freaked out like hell the first year [I was claiming].” [WSU-ED-SJ-005](#)

# Sanctions as predestination

Sanctions despite compliance:

“It was my first sanction because I did everything to avoid sanctions, I jumped through every hoop they asked me to jump through. That’s what was so upsetting about being sanctioned, because I played to their every rule and I still got sanctioned. I did appeal it, I did hand it in and I’ve never heard back.” [WSU-GL-AS-015](#)

Impossibility of meeting conditions:

“I know what I have to do. I go [to an agency] once a week. I sign on once every two weeks and every day I go on Direct Gov but there’s always weeks [...] where I don’t apply for a job because there’s nothing to apply for and I always feel like I’m waiting for an axe to fall because I haven’t applied for anything.” [WSU-ED-SJ-005](#)

Produces hyper-vigilance and counter-productive adherence to conditionality.

# Worsening mental health

Creating mental health problems:

“I feel that forcing you’s actually putting too much pressure on you, because it’s ending up **it’s actually giving you more health issues, like stress and a bit of depression and things like that**, whereas I would have never been like that before. Whereas I’ve felt really stressed.” [WSU-GL-AS-035](#)

Impeding and undoing recovery:

“Whatever the medical profession are doing, the Jobcentre put all that anxiety back onto you, all the stress back onto you, which the doctors are trying to sort out in the first place, and **it’s just like it’s a vicious circle.**” [WSU-BA-JM-014c](#)

“But it can take six months of improving to a couple of weeks of stress, **it can put me back to square one again.** This is what I’m scared of.” [WSU-IN-AS-005](#)

Welfare conditionality pushing people away from employment:

“I think if the system had been more humane I wouldn’t now be quite **so far way from the world of work.**” [WSU-GL-AS-022](#)

# Unending struggle

Always must be ready for the next battle:

“My armour has never been able to be hung up. It’s been constantly polished. I’d love to have a set of rusty armour hanging in my wardrobe [...] I feel my life isn’t life healing [I’ve] got all these battles to get stuff that I need.” [WSU-ED-AS-002c](#)

Overwhelmed at thought of battles ahead:

“It felt like there might be more sanctions in the pipeline. I just went into meltdown for several weeks actually where I couldn’t function [...] All I could think of was the enormity of the struggle, to get out of this nightmare, get the sanction overturned, appeal the sanction, deal with the fresh threat of sanctions.” [WSU-LO-SJ-017a](#)

A sense that the purgatorial promise of 'redemption' through work was closed off to them...

# Trapped in conditionality

Welfare conditionality by judging the symbolic worth of claimants through scrutinising their desire and efforts to find work, transforms difficulties finding work into personal failures.

As a result participants were constantly at pains to stress their desire for work, including when discussing suicidal thoughts:

“It worsened it so much so I was ready to jump in front of a train because I got so sick of it. I wanted a job for years. I don't want to be on my benefits; I don't like it. I've always wanted to work but no-one will employ me. So that is one of the reasons I'm depressed but at the time they just started messing about on benefits, I came in here and went, 'I've given up. They can take my benefit, they can have the flat. I'll find someone to look after the cat. I'm done; I've given up'.” [WSU-SH-EB-001](#)

“I remember when that sanction happened, I literally did feel really quite suicidal, lowest point [...] I felt trapped really and just it doesn't matter what I do, if it's not going to be enough then there's no point, there's no point carrying on. I do really want to work, I do want employment, I do want meaningful employment.” [WSU-BR-JM-022](#)

# Freedom from conditionality?

Conditionality as the wrong form of support:

“I do want to work but I don't want to be forced to work. I want to have the help beside but just nudging me slightly along the way **not pushing me full force into a brick wall kind of help**. It's like they're just trying to slam you straight into work.” **WSU-ED-BW-046**

The relief of being moved into the Support Group:

“The support group is what I'm in now [...] which has **helped me come back out on the other side [... as]** soon as I was put in this category, instantly I had relief. Instantly I had, right, I know my money's going to be in this, **I'm not going to keep getting in further and further financial distress, which is equally causing me emotional distress.**” **WSU-BR-JM-021**

Yet without conditionality there is no support:

“I'm on the support group, who do I go and see? I thought I was to get something [laughs], but you don't see anybody.” **WSU-GL-AS-016**

# Conclusions 1/3

Neoliberal state-crafting through welfare reform has negatively charged the welfare field.

The state casts aspersions on all benefit claimants as potential cheats and scroungers, an imposition of a stigmatised identity, forcing claimants to engage in job-hunting to cast off this negative symbolic capital and avoid material deprivation.

There was little recognition of mental health problems from the biopsychosocial model informing medical assessments, with its focus on discrete tasks, to interactions with Work Coaches and Work Programme providers, based around surveilling and policing job search activity.

# Conclusions 2/3

This produced a specific pattern of suffering –

- The imposition of a stigmatised identity stripped claimants of their dignity and respect where their desire and efforts to look for employment were under constant scrutiny.
- Persistent, and often unbearable, pressure to meet all job search expectations without fail, with the task reset each fortnight.
- A generalised anxiety permeated the system, heightened by the imperfect social panopticon.
- A belief that efforts were inevitably futile and sanctions were predestined.
- Despair and hopelessness that their situation could ever improve, feeling trapped in conditionality.
- A worsening of claimants' mental health with an impeding and undoing of recovery.

## Conclusions 3/3

This social suffering was not a result of symbolic violence through unconscious agreement, but a **painful all too conscious awareness** of the symbolic-material violence enforced against them.

The purgatorial logic underpinning welfare reform was experienced as a Sisyphean task, a **system of maddening punishment** with an endless repetition of futile jobseeking.

A system that fostered **social insecurity** and intense material hardship that was **caustic to mental wellbeing**.