

*“The victim is always everyone that’s on the bottom, the working class, the physically and mentally ill”*

Disabled claimants’ lived experience of  
punitive welfare conditionality

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BSA 70th Anniversary Virtual Conference:  
Remaking the Future –

Medicine, Health and Illness Stream Plenary

# Introduction

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**Welfare Conditionality**

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE



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# Overview of session

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Understanding the lived experience of punitive welfare conditionality:

- **The Work Capability Assessment (WCA)** - the changing definitions of disability
- **Mental health and welfare conditionality** – a therapeutic relationship?
- **The impact of welfare conditionality** - claimants sense of self and resistance

# Overview of projects

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## **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.

## **Associated Doctoral Research Project**

- Aimed to understand the lived experience of disabled welfare claimants
- Fieldwork centred on 36 semi-structured interviews with people 'claiming' Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and 5 interviews with welfare staff.

## **Mental Health and Conditionality Project**

- A secondary analysis of the WelCond claimant interviews was conducted for a Health Foundation project, using the criteria: 1) Discussed mental health problems at any interview wave 2) Were receiving a benefit with work search conditionality or were in employment at any interview wave
- Analysis based on 372 interviews in total.

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# Actually Existing Neoliberalism and Punitive Welfare Conditionality

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# The Neoliberal Leviathan

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*“[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

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

Welfare as field where symbolic capital is converted into economic capital.

The state's concentration of **symbolic capital** is used to perform 'social magic' – "*imposing a new vision and a new division on the social world*" (Bourdieu 1992: 223). Welfare reform as re-classification of benefit claimants.

Stigmatising discourse of benefit cheats and scroungers (Tyler 2020).

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 mission of welfare reform

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*“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

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Welfare reform has seen the privileging of work, linking welfare rights with behavioural conditions to actively look for work.

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).

Social panopticism - surveilling and policing of the poor by social agencies (Wacquant 2001)

**Welfare reform and austerity over this period impacted disabled people disproportionately (Franklin and Marsh, 2011; The Hardest Hit, 2012; Edwards, 2012):**

*“The Coalition government were championing and cheering on a round of cuts that are increasingly devastating in their impact upon disabled people” (Franklin and Marsh 2011 :45).*

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# The Work Capability Assessment (WCA) - the changing definitions of disability

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# The WCA process

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Eligibility for Employment and Support Allowance or Universal Credit

Application followed by assessment with healthcare professional on nature of illness or disability and the impact of the condition on day to day functioning.

Outcomes:

- Fit for work
- Unfit for work, but fit for 'work-related activity' (the Work-Related Activity Group of ESA)
- Fit for neither work nor 'work-related activity' (the Support Group of ESA)

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Conditionality has been a key feature of the Work Programme: “improve work incentives to all” (HM Government, 2010, p2)

Extension of conditionality to disabled people (eg Dwyer et al, 2020; Bambra & Smith, 2010; Patrick, 2011)

# The biopsychosocial (BPS) model of disability

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WCA is based on a biopsychosocial (BPS) model of disability (Waddell and Aylward, 2010)

BPS model emphasises negative attitudes of disabled people towards work rather than their impairment of condition (reinforces the psycho rather than social). Victim blaming disabled claimants, and distinguishes between 'real' and 'fake' benefit claimants (Shakespeare et al, 2016)

Reduces assessment to functionality and capability to work (rather than incapacity) (Grover and Piggott, 2010)

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Proposals for a 'real world assessment' (Baumberg et al, 2015)

WCA offers little support to overcome barriers to work and does more damage (Barr et al, 2016; Hansford et al, 2019; Williams, 2021)

# Impact of WCA- evidence from literature

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Barr et al (2015) increases in suicides, mental health problems and antidepressant use.

Hansford et al (2019) lack of understanding of mental health, contradictory to medical advice, re-traumatization and feelings of shame, alienation from health and support services and impacting recovery from addiction

Garthwaite (2013) fear of the WCA impacted health and wellbeing, experience of stigma

Burgess et al (2014) damaging effects following WCA and assessments described as “abusive”, “callous” and “prejudiced”

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Dwyer et al (2020) WCA is inappropriate and largely ineffective for moving people with MH conditions into work and triggers negative health outcomes making future employment more unlikely.

# Experiences of the Impact of WCA

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## The process:

*“It’s a barbaric way of assessing it”*

*“It’s an interrogation now. It’s not an assessment because the agenda is to fail you the minute...They just attack, attack, attack, attack. And on one assessment they said to me, I couldn’t be feeling suicidal ‘cause I didn’t action it”*

## Hidden mental health:

~~*“It’s all very much based on physical stuff, and they don’t take into account the emotional and the mental stuff”*~~

*“When I was unwell I remember my assessment had nothing, no questions, nothing, about my mental ill health it was all about whether I could stand up, sit down, lift a weight, squeeze my fist... I remember saying I’m not here about my physical health, I’m here about my mental health”*

*“Because I walked from a bus stop to the front door. That’s all they put down... “he walked to the medical.” That was it. Everything else was ignored.”*

# Experiences of the Impact of WCA

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## Exacerbation of mental health issues:

*"I'm sort of dreading them coming back to me for a reassessment cos I know they will throw me out again and I know I will become more mentally ill...I was so depressed I lost two stone in weight during that waiting for that tribunal"*

*"The thought of being put back in that situation where I was going to the Jobcentre and the prospect of sanctions and such like, I actually had a panic attack"*

*"They're not understanding... they ask you a lot of questions and 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."*

*"I really did want to commit suicide, because I know I'm not fit for work...[on successful appeal] Overjoyed, basically, because you know you're not fit for work, but they're saying you are. The distress levels it causes. The worrying you do about it."*

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**Mental health and welfare conditionality –  
a therapeutic relationship?**

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# Welfare Conditionality as Purgatory

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Active Labour Market Policies operate under a purgatorial ethic (Boland and Griffin 2017).

**Emphasis on ‘negative attitudes towards work’:**

*“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)

Psycho-compulsion as necessary to move claimants into employment (Friedli and Stearn 2015)

Policy shift to privileging work not only as best route out of poverty, but also as a ‘cure’ for health problems... (Frayne 2019)

# Mental health and ‘worklessness’

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*“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)

“When unwell, people with mental health problems have varying degrees of self-awareness [...] Feeling negative is characteristic of having a mental health problem.” (DWP & DoH 2017, 54)

“Nonetheless, appropriate **work is generally good for health and wellbeing**, including for people who have mental health problems. And returning to suitable work can improve mental health.” [original emphasis] (DWP & DoH 2017, 55)

# Invisibility of mental health

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## Lack of recognition:

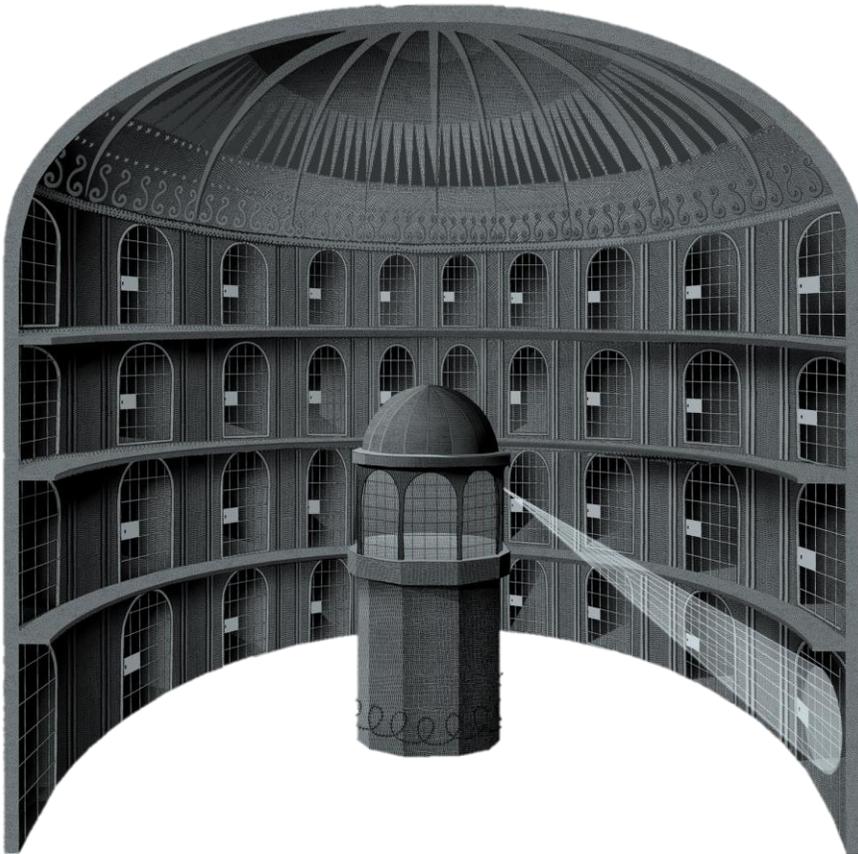
*“[The Work Programme provider] don’t understand the mental health side [...] All they want is to hit their targets and for me to do their training and get back to work. They were sending me out appointments for two weeks at a time where I was supposed to be in every day for nearly six hours at a time [...] 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*

# An Imperfect Panopticon?

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“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)

“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’.” WSU-LO-KJ-035

# Persistent pressure

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## Sanctioned without warning:

*“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.” WSU-GL-AS-015*

## Repeat stress and anxiety:

*“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*

## Sanctions as predestined:

*“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.**

# A Sisyphean Task

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## 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*

## 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*

## Trapped in conditionality:

*“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*

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# The impact of welfare conditionality - claimants sense of self and resistance

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# Impact on self

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## **Impact on Citizenship:**

The Disability Rights Commission (2005) set out a pledge that disabled people should have equal opportunities to participate and contribute in the social, economic, civic and community life by 2020.

## **The operation of welfare policy often erodes people's citizenship:**

*'Current government policies are removing the assistance required to promote our self-determination, participation and contribution. And in the process, people feel less safe, are more likely to live in poverty, are denied opportunities open to others, and in some cases have shortened life expectancy. Government policy, in other words, far from promoting our citizenship, is actually doing us harm'* (Morris 2016).

# Experiences of Impact on self

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## Feeling like a 'second-class citizen':

*"Everyone's got something to give and I think that a lot of time when you're in mental health services or you're on benefits, people think you're a second-class citizen"*

*"It's just a culture. I am working so I've got rights. I'm better than you. I'm the taxpayer... once they're given State money, it ain't free. They're going to have to pay a price for it and that isn't an easy price"*

## Feeling like you need to 'give back':

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*"I'm not working but I do a lot, like I do a lot here and I run a couple of sessions...but I give back into the community cos I feel like I've had a lot so I do, I give back what I can"*

*"I felt that when I was on benefits, I didn't have a right because I was living on other people's money, so its self-stigma. I didn't believe that I had a right to have nice clothes when I felt well enough to go out for a meal"*

# Impact on self

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## Impact on Identity:

*'Spoiled identity'* and *'discreditable attributes'* (Goffman, 1968).

*'Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalisation of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything - that they are sick, lazy and unproductive - that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness'* (Freire 1972).

Having to present yourself as 'needy' or presenting yourself at your worst to ensure entitlement is not removed.

# Experiences of Impact on self

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## Rejecting the 'Disabled identity':

*"I wouldn't class meself as disabled. I mean I walk about with a walking stick, but I wouldn't say I was disabled"*

*"Well I'm blind and registered disabled, but I wouldn't like to be classed as disabled anyway, try and fit in with everybody else and I can't"*

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## Internalising:

*"You're like oh well can I do it and then it just becomes like a confusion for you and you're like well what do I do? I'm not going to be able to cope with work and then you start like doubting yourself and you think am I just making this up? Am I really depressed? Am I just making this up?"*

# Experiences of Impact on self

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## Othering:

*“I know people who do pull the ropes on the benefits system and I think that spoils it for a lot of people...I do know that there are people that do spoil it for everybody else...fair enough a lot of people do discriminate the system but there are people that are genuinely ill and they have to suffer, as well”*

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*“The genuine ones are tarred with the same brush”*

*“We get trapped in that same bracket as just people that refuse to work”*

**Collective resistance as an opportunity for crafting alternative narratives ...**

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# Conclusions

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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

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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

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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.