Article:
Fletcher, D., Flint, J. orcid.org/0000-0001-6272-9575, Batty, E. et al. (1 more author) (2016) Gamers or victims of the system? Welfare reform, cynical manipulation and vulnerability. Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, 24 (2). pp. 171-185. ISSN 1759-8273

https://doi.org/10.1332/175982716X14650295704731

AUTHOR FINAL COPY

Gamers or Victims of the System? Welfare Reform, Cynical Manipulation and Vulnerability

A paper to be published in the ***Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*** by

Elaine Batty (Sheffield Hallam University), **Del Roy Fletcher** (Sheffield Hallam University);

John Flint (University of Sheffield) and **Jennifer McNeill** (University of Sheffield)

May 2016

Corresponding author:

Professor Del Roy Fletcher

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

Sheffield Hallam University

City Campus

Howard Street

Sheffield

S1 1WB

d.r.fletcher@shu.ac.uk

0114 225 3487

Gamers or Victims of the System? Welfare Reform, Cynical Manipulation and Vulnerability

Abstract

New mechanisms of conditionality enacted through current reforms of the UK welfare system are framed within contested narratives about the characteristics, rationalities and conduct of welfare users. In the problem figuration of welfare reform the orientations and conduct of welfare recipients have been conceptualised and depicted across a spectrum ranging from cynical manipulators gaming the system and subverting the original ethos of the welfare state to vulnerable individuals experiencing compounded disadvantage. This paper aims to strengthen the conceptualisation of cynical manipulation and vulnerability and to empirically investigate how narratives of these ideas are deployed by key stakeholders in the welfare system and the extent to which manipulation or vulnerability are present in the orientations and conduct of individuals in receipt of welfare support.

Key words: conditionality, manipulation, vulnerability, welfare reform

Introduction

The reform of the welfare system in the UK, including the enhanced use of conditionality, is situated within a particular problem figuration (Van Wel, 1992) and rationalities of government (Foucault, 1991) about the characteristics, rationalities and conduct of welfare recipients. UK governmental and much media discourses have emphasised the potential cynical manipulation of welfare mechanisms by individuals gaming the system to claim benefits that they are not entitled to or who fail to actively engage sufficiently in actions aimed at ending or reducing their dependency on welfare support. However, these rationalities are challenged by an alternative problem figuration which emphasises the structural causes of reliance upon welfare and the multiple forms of vulnerability experienced by many welfare recipients; forms of disadvantage that, it is argued, are compounded by new regimes of conditionality and fiscal sanction.

Despite the prominence of concepts of cynical manipulation and vulnerability within policy rationales and welfare discourses, these terms require further conceptualisation. There is also a lack of empirical understanding about how such discourses are constructed, interpreted and deployed by key stakeholders within welfare regimes. In addition, although claims for the primacy of manipulation or vulnerability as defining characteristics of welfare recipients are widespread, there is, to date, limited empirical evidence about the extent to which these orientations and conduct are present among this population.

This paper seeks to address these gaps in our knowledge by analysing interviews with senior policymakers, politicians and representatives of campaigning and charitable organisations in England and Scotland; and interviews with individuals in receipt of welfare payments and subject to new mechanisms of conditionality. The interviews focused on understanding how welfare conditionality and the discourses it is framed within, is interpreted and experienced by actors in the welfare system, including ideas of cynical manipulation and vulnerability.

The paper describes the policy context of contemporary welfare reform in the UK and the specific problem figuration of welfare by government and other elite actors that emphasises the motivations and conduct of welfare recipients. It then develops a conceptualisation of cynical manipulation and vulnerability and empirically investigates these concepts as they are defined, interpreted and utilised by key stakeholders within welfare regimes, including the recipients of welfare support. The authors conclude that while dominant governmental narratives of manipulation are resisted, they are pervasively present and reflected and refracted through the discourses of actors. Such discourses are nuanced and ambiguous but represent polarised understandings about the contrasting elements of cynical manipulation and vulnerability as defining characteristics of, and explanations for, the orientations and conduct of welfare recipients. The paper concludes that, despite the prominence and rhetorical power of cynical manipulation, there is little evidence of this being widespread among welfare recipients, who often mirror governmental understandings of the ethical problematisation of such behaviour. Rather, forms of vulnerability, structural factors, and the problems arising from the operationalisation of conditionality within the welfare regime more convincingly capture the lived reality for welfare recipients and practitioners.

The Problem Figuration of Welfare Dependency

The contemporary problem figuration (Van Wel, 1992) of welfare reform by policymakers has increasingly attributed primacy to causal explanations, and responsibility, for poverty, unemployment and social marginalisation emphasising the orientations and behaviour of individuals, partly based on a continuation of underclass theory: 'The poverty of today's underclass differs appreciably from poverty in the past: underclass poverty stems less from the absence of opportunity than from the inability or reluctance to take advantage of opportunity' (Mead, 1991). Rationalities of governance are built on three key pillars: a denial of structural explanations for social and economic vulnerability; a concern that the reciprocal ethos of the welfare state is being subverted; and that there is a need to reactivate targeted individuals (Cruikshank, 1996) in terms of their skills,

orientations and activities to reduce welfare dependency. These pillars are encapsulated in the emphasis on enhanced conditionality in welfare reform in the UK: 'conditionality embodies the principle that aspects of state support, usually financial or practical, are dependent on citizens meeting certain conditions which are invariably behavioural' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2008: 1). These enshrine the emphasis on individual conduct, the need to reverse the subversion of the emphasis on individual responsibility in the birth of the welfare state, and the need to realign individuals' orientations and behaviour. This is enacted through new requirements on individuals to behave in particular ways or undertake specific actions, such as job search, in exchange for benefit payments, operationalised through new legal or fiscal sanctions that reduce, suspend, or end access to payments.

The tightening of eligibility criteria and new penalties for non-compliance commenced in the mid-1980s and continued with the Jobseekers Agreement in 1996 that intensified behavioural requirements and sanctions. The Claimant Commitment introduced in 2013 requires jobseekers to further evidence their efforts to find employment and there has been a dramatic increase in the length and scale of sanctions imposed for failure to meet work-related activity requirements, including compulsory attendance at appointments. Similar governance mechanisms have been deployed in relation to eligibility to access, and remain in, social housing. Therefore, the contemporary problem figuration of welfare within government rationalities emphasises converting the benefits system into a lever for changing behaviour (Rodger, 2008; Larsen, 2011).

There is a long-standing problematisation of impoverished individuals subverting the basis of state or charitable support (Rousseau, 1762) and a strong conservative tradition of individualistic and behavioural understandings of poverty (Hobbes, 1651; Burke, 1790; Smith, 1776). The discursive demonization of the 'underserving poor' was sustained throughout the welfare state era in public attitudes and media portrayals characterised as 'scroungerphobia' (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 59), although governmental discourses avoid direct usage of such terminology. But, it is argued that

there has been a more recent intensification of the demonization of welfare recipients and, indeed, the working class more generally (Larsen and Dejgaard, 2013; McEnhill and Byrne, 2014; Tyler, 2008; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Garthwaite, 2011; Jones, 2011). Research has also found that the public view welfare claimants as less deserving than was the case 20 years ago (Baumberg et el., 2012). For Slater (2012) these media discourses and public attitudes are linked to attempts by the UK government to deliberately manufacture ignorance, 'agnotology' to dominate debates about welfare reform, specifically the use of stereotypes of extreme undeserving cases. Similar processes have been identified in the Unites States since the 1980s, with references to 'cadillac and welfare queens', teenage pregnancies, 'deadbeat dads' and immigrants (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014; Wacquant, 2009).

For Shildrick and MacDonald (2013), these processes produce hegemonic ideas of the undeserving poor, exacerbated by a media fixation on the pervasiveness of benefit cheats, including through high profile television programmes such as Channel 4's 'Benefits Street' portraying welfare recipients as lazy, feckless or immoral and emphasising the lack of effort or reciprocity of claimants (Shildrick et al., 2014; Baumberg et al., 2012; Hills, 2015). Research commissioned by the UK Government (Mitton, 2009) claimed that the complexity of the benefits system enabled some users to use an excuse of misunderstanding processes and entitlement, but also found that the motivations for benefit fraud were complex. Other research categorically found no evidence of a dependency culture and that, in fact, the stigmatisation of welfare recipients was reducing legitimate take up of benefit entitlements (Reeve, 2015) as welfare recipients position themselves against stigmatisation by drawing upon the hegemonic pejorative discourses stigmatising welfare payments (Goffman, 1974; Dean and Taylor Gooby, 1993; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Despite this research evidence, which has highlighted the vulnerability of many welfare recipients and structural explanations for this; there remains a governmental focus on individuals illegitimately manipulating the welfare system, with conditionality and sanctions mechanisms to provide: 'a real deterrent for some people

who are either not trying or who are gaming the system' (Chris Grayling MP, quoted in Department for Work and Pensions, 2012).

Conceptualising Cynical Manipulation and Vulnerability

Despite the pervasiveness of notions of cynical manipulation in welfare discourses, the concept has not been adequately defined. We conceptualise such conduct as requiring at least four constituent elements: the capacity to act rationally to maximise personal benefit; sufficient knowledge of welfare systems and processes to facilitate such rationality, including calculating risks and rewards; sufficient agency to undertake manipulative acts; and a normative or moral propensity to do so. All four elements would be required, for example, in making false or exaggerated claims of personal circumstances to secure benefit entitlement or subverting requirements relating to seeking employment. As will be evidenced in the analysis of our findings, actors' narratives implicitly draw upon each of these four elements without explicitly naming them or disaggregating each element from a general perception of gaming the system.

Considerably more conceptual work has been undertaken on the concept of vulnerability. Although there is no universal definition, it is aligned to notions of victimisation, insecurity and risk (Delor and Hubert, 2000) and may include individuals through criteria based on specific situational positions (e.g. unemployment, domestic violence) or more innate lifecourse stages (e.g. being a child or elderly; or transient or at risk periods such as homelessness or leaving local authority care) (Brown, 2014). Vulnerability is often related to other policy discourse such as 'complex needs', 'marginalised' or 'troubled families'. Safeguarding the vulnerable has been an increasing focus of governmental policies in housing, health, social care and welfare and vulnerability is also used as a means of allocating resources and targeting interventions (Brown, 2011; Sanders and Campbell, 2007).

Vulnerability is often utilised to denote weakness, a lack of rationality, limited agency or capacity (Brown, 2011). Therefore, vulnerability may, on one level, be conceptualised as a binary opposite of

cynical manipulation, as vulnerability is defined precisely as a lack of the rationality, calculative processes and agency and capacity to act that characterises cynical manipulation; hence a polarisation between those defining the primary characteristics of welfare recipients being one of these two positions. However, both concepts also share commonalities. Firstly, they are both defined in the discourses of more powerful social groupings (Parley, 2011) and interventions with both groups are related to claims of social justice (Babajanian and Hagen- Zanker, 2012). Secondly, they emphasise individual orientations and capacities and have the potential to disempower as well as to empower groups (Brown, 2014). Thirdly, the research evidence suggests a more complex and ambiguous reality for vulnerable groups, for example in relation to their rationality and agency (Barn and Mantovani, 2007) than depicted in governmental discourses, just as research has identified the complexity of welfare dependency. The paper now turns to exploring these complexities in the experiences and narratives of actors in the UK's contemporary welfare system.

Methods

The data presented in this paper was generated from an ESRC-funded study (2014- 2019) of the efficacy and ethicality of welfare conditionality in England and Scotland (see: www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk). The study comprises international literature reviews, interviews with 45 national agency stakeholders and 27 focus groups with frontline welfare practitioners. In addition, qualitative longitudinal research is being undertaken with three waves of annual repeat interviews with 480 welfare recipients located in ten case study cities and towns in England and Scotland and drawn from nine welfare user groups subject to new forms of conditionality: disabled individuals; homeless individuals; individuals subject to anti-social behaviour or family project interventions; lone parents; migrants; social housing tenants; unemployed individuals claiming Jobseekers Allowance; offenders; and Universal Credit claimants. The interviews with national stakeholders were conducted between April 2013 and May 2014 and included senior policymakers; representatives of political parties; campaigning and practitioners groups and representatives of

charities. The interviews with welfare recipients presented in this paper are drawn from the first wave of interviews conducted between August 2014 and September 2015.

The interviews with national stakeholders explored their understanding of conditionality in terms of its rationalities, its ethicality, how it was being operationalised in policy fields and the outcomes for welfare policy, practice and welfare users. The semi-structured interviews with welfare recipients explored their family, employment, housing and health histories, their experiences of welfare conditionality and its outcomes (including both support and sanctions) and their normative perspectives on the ethics of such mechanisms. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Issues of cynical manipulation and vulnerability were covered in the interviews, although they were not the primary focus of the interviews and neither term was referred to explicitly by interviewers unless the terms were used first by research participants. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed by the researchers to identify key themes of cynical manipulation and vulnerability. The data drawn upon in this paper are based on the full sample of key stakeholder and welfare recipient interviews (across all nine user categories in all case study locations) undertaken to date. But the purpose of the analysis is to identify key emergent themes and illustrative narratives; it is not to make claims about the extent to which such perspectives are representative of particular stakeholders, different categories of welfare recipient or geographical patterns between the two nations and different localities within the study. In interpreting the data it is also important to recognise the limitations of interview techniques and, specifically, how individuals in potentially stigmatised social positions often articulate their views and experiences in response to such stigmatisation (Dean and Taylor Goody, 1993 Goffman, 1974; Batty and Flint, 2013). The data presents findings from the specific contexts of England and Scotland, rather than other national welfare regimes.

Cynical Manipulation?

Gamers or Victims of the System?

Key stakeholders reported a pervasive, if incorrect, understanding among the UK population of widespread cynical manipulation of the welfare system, as one Labour Party politician described: *"I hear again and again on the doorstep where 'she never does a stroke of work. There's nothing the matter with her, but she gets £500 a week."* Stakeholders argued that although the extent of gaming the system was exaggerated, it required a social policy response. As a representative of a national charity argued:

"The proportion of people taking the system for a ride is small, but nonetheless you have to have controls…I think trying to avoid reciprocity in the design of social security is a mistake…[but] public opinion is wrong about the extent to which people are actively trying to avoid their reciprocal obligations."

The Labour politician argued that the original conceptualisation of the welfare state had included mechanisms to manage potential abuse of the system and to facilitate the self-activation of claimants, but that this historical framework had been realigned more recently to increasingly emphasise a gaming of the system:

"It may well be that there was just an understanding in the 1940s and 1950s that in human nature there are some people who need a bit of a prod sometimes. That, while you always want to think the best of people, there are some people who will sit back…in 2010 you can see that the way in which the welfare reforms were put into the public debate was very much about scroungers and benefits cheats and numbers."

Only a very small number of key stakeholders made explicit reference to the normative orientation of some welfare recipients, with one claiming that *'they're sometimes not very likeable characters'* and another stating that *"people do make choices to be on benefits and I think that should be challenged."* One service provider also identified a small criminal element: *"We certainly come*

across people who have an alternative lifestyle- crime- but they needed a legal lifestyle [as cover] and it's called benefit."

More frequently, key stakeholders suggested that there were more ambiguous forms of rationality, arguing that maximising benefit entitlement was a legitimate calculation within the system. As an officer of a national charity stated:

"If they're going to be efficient about it there's an argument that it's not going to be entirely faithful to their experience because they will naturally- and who wouldn't?- represent their situation as being worse than it is just to give them a bit of a cushion, because it takes so long for stuff to be sorted out."

This observation identifies three important caveats to narratives of manipulation- firstly that the system itself inculcates a form of rationality (efficiency) that incentivises certain types of claim; secondly, that recipients share a normative position with the wider population who would act similarly in such circumstances; and thirdly, that the agency and rationality of individuals in such cases is a response to the limited capacity of the system itself to adequately process decisions and provide support. This individual knowledge of the system and the agency to act effectively upon it could also be demonstrated collectively, as a service provider explained: *''They form little packs, little groups, and then they will advise each other on what benefits to apply for, what the loop holes are."*

Some stakeholders suggested that rationality among some welfare recipients could be misplaced, for example around budgeting priorities, as a national charity officer stated: *"There is something about if you can't afford your rent and things like that, you might have to look at the things that you're spending money on. Can you afford this top of the range Sky package or whatever?"*

But the prevalence of even misplaced rationality was disputed by many stakeholders who argued that many welfare recipients were characterised by a lack of knowledge about the system, a limited capacity to act rationally within it, and very constrained individual agency:

"With the group we are working with they're not making a rational choice because they don't actually know what the rules of the game are before they start it" (Service provider)

"Half the time they're actually not claiming the benefits they're entitled to and that's part of their chaotic situation" (Representative of national charity).

In such an understanding, gaming the system is not possible as the rules of the game are unknown, while calculating rational actions to maximise personal benefit is not feasible given chaotic circumstances and an outcome that results in the under-claiming of legitimate entitlement. One charity officer made the further point that there was an inherent lack of capacity and rationality within the procedures of the welfare system itself that reduced the human agency of actors to respond to such complexity and vulnerability:

"There's people who feel like they are just staring at a computer going 'No- computer says you're sanctioned now, there is nothing I can do'. That is what the system is…the [lack of] discretion to know, for example, that someone is also missing their [job centre] appointment because they've got a probation appointment on the same day."

So, in summary, stakeholders identified the power of narratives of cynical manipulation in shaping public attitudes to welfare and the presence (albeit exaggerated) of individuals gaming the system and argued that both required a social policy response including conditionality. While stakeholders identified some manipulation of the system based on moral propensity and subverted forms of rationality, more commonly they argued that the vulnerability of many welfare claimants was characterised by a lack of knowledge, calculation or agency and that these deficits were exacerbated by the limitations of welfare system processes.

Welfare recipients articulated a strong normative stance aligned with governmental discourses about dependency cultures and abuse of the system, and therefore the ethical justification of forms of conditionality:

"People who don't want to work or are doing fiddle work and they're happy getting benefits plus fiddling work" (Male social housing tenant).

"I can understand government, why they do it because there's a lot of lazy people around. If someone's chucking money at you just for signing your name, then people are going to do that all the time" (Female Family Intervention Project recipient).

"It's fair [to require medical assessments] because otherwise you do just get people that just try and cheat the benefit" (Male, subject to anti-social behaviour interventions).

Several welfare recipients referred to sanctions as ways of the government giving individuals 'a kick up the arse' and suggested that this was justified. Although perceptions of the abuse of the system were partly generated by media coverage, some recipients claimed to have direct personal knowledge of the system being gamed:

"I'm aware of people out there who don't want to work, who, you know, abuse the system" (Female lone parent).

"When I went in [to a work capacity assessment] there were people in this ATOS [a private sector welfare assessment provider] health centre coughing and limping you know, really putting it on. If they would have been coughing in that office, they would have been coughing outside and coughing on the way, but do you know what I mean? You can tell" (Male recipient of Disability Living Allowance).

Very rarely, recipients acknowledged personal involvement in what may be constructed as knowing manipulation of the system:

"*I know when to do stuff and when to get out of stuff because I'm older now and I know the craic, if you know what I mean. I know how to get away with things and that…But that three months [when a sanction was being processed] that's why I went on the sick so I still managed to get my fortnights…I*

played the wise one…I thought I'd get them before they got me type of thing…and while they were like sorting it out I beat them to it and got a sick note" (Male Ex- Offender).

But far more prevalent were recipients acknowledging that they did not understand how the system operated, what conditions they were required to adhere to, and how sanctions would be applied:

"I don't know, I think I'm work-related. I think. I'm not sure. I can't understand it myself" (Female, subject to Family Intervention Project)

"Where's the letter [from the Job Centre]? I've got to write a letter or ring them. Well actually I'm on the sick at the moment, so hopefully that weren't relevant to me. It will be all right" (Male, subject to anti-social behaviour interventions).

In summary, welfare recipients articulated support for the principles of conditionality and distanced themselves from stigmatising discourses of gaming the system (see Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992) which they attributed to others. Personal admissions of cynical manipulation were extremely rare. While this may be anticipated given the social constraints of a research interview, such responses directly challenge the notion of an underclass with distinct social norms. Rather, it was recipients' lack of knowledge of the system and their limited agency to act within it that was far more prevalent, suggesting forms of vulnerability to which the paper now turns.

The Vulnerable

Many of those expressing reservations about welfare reform highlighted the difficulties that vulnerable individuals encountered when their rights were made conditional on following particular patterns of prescribed behaviour. Interviewees often conceived vulnerability as being situational rather than innate and tied to certain transgressions or predicaments. These individuals include disproportionate numbers of the homeless, offenders, the mentally ill and those with drug and / or alcohol addictions. Individuals frequently had multiple and complex needs. Vulnerability was closely

connected with compromised notions of human agency which made it difficult for such individuals to understand their responsibilities:

''There is a lack of understanding either because the person's not capable of understanding what's required of them, or they've signed up for things they can't possibly achieve because all they want is to get their benefit'' (Charity officer).

''Look, I'm confused as hell. Help me out. No-one did; all they seemed to want to do is get someone out of the door and sanction them'' (Homeless Male).

The use of sanctions within the welfare system is designed to change behaviour. The individual's conduct is closely supervised and rectified by restrictive measures to achieve behavioural modification. It relies on welfare claimants being able to behave rationally and alter their conduct in order to avoid a financial penalty. However, problematic drug misuse, mental ill health and learning difficulties often severely compromised the ability of some individuals to behave in a rational fashion. In addition, the most vulnerable were portrayed as lacking knowledge of the system which left them vulnerable to falling foul of its requirements:

''Some groups and some people have particular challenges that aren't the same as everybody else's and you shouldn't sweep this under the carpet…. There are other chaotic issues that bring chaos to your life, so you're not necessarily thinking the same as Joe Bloggs'' (Senior Civil Servant, Government Department).

Some felt that the expectations placed on vulnerable individuals were unrealistic. A representative from a homeless charity argued that: *''Considering our client group, I think quite often that in relation to compliance there are unrealistic expectations and conditions put upon people.''* Moreover, vulnerabilities often meant that such individuals were simply unable to demonstrate the requisite behaviour even to turn up to pre-arranged appointments. Consequently, a representative of a charity argued that this underlined the inappropriateness of the model to vulnerable individuals:

''This [Conditional Welfare] is very much based on the idea that these are people who have their life perfectly under control and can meet you if you want them to be somewhere…so, if they're choosing not to, then that is indeed a choice and that says something and either they're working on the side or they don't need the money or they need some serious motivation'' (Charity officer).

Interviews with welfare claimants frequently highlighted the complicated, disorganised and present-orientated nature of their lives which was often in conflict with the requirements of conditional welfare. Consequently, the authors encountered individuals who had been sanctioned for missing Job centre appointments due to attending probation / hospital appointments or had prioritised more pressing needs. The communication between the welfare agency and those subject to conditional welfare was sometimes disrupted by the chaotic nature of lives that some individuals led. This meant that it was difficult to convey messages about conditionality and sanctioning:

''I got my first sanction by missing an appointment. I was a bit here, there and everywhere, so they didn't really know where to send my mail'' (Male Rough Sleeper).

''Although letters make it very clear about the consequences of not meeting their obligations what happens if you can't read or your first language is not English?'' (Charity officer).

Some argued that this meant that the most vulnerable unfairly bore the brunt of sanctioning. This is supported by international evidence. Howard (2006) has found that Australian 'breach penalties' disproportionately affected vulnerable persons such as the homeless and those with mental health problems. Handler's (2006) review of US welfare reform has also discovered that those least able to succeed in the labour market were the most likely to be sanctioned. Similarly, Crisp and Fletcher's (2008) comparative review of workfare programmes in the US, Canada and Australia indicated that welfare recipients with multiple barriers often found it difficult to meet their obligations and were sanctioned.

At the same time, the most vulnerable complained that the welfare system and its privatised elements provided very little support. The testimonies of many of those interviewed indicated that they had been 'parked' by public and private sector providers and their multiple and complex needs had been largely left unaddressed. This sense of injustice was sometimes compounded by the alleged poor personal treatment received at the hands of front-line staff:

''The only place you ever get any kind of help are charities. Everywhere else is a waste of time'' (Male Offender).

''They [Jobcentre Plus] would say, ''Oh, it's your work programme who are meant to help you''. The only thing they ever did was help me find out I was actually dyslexic. Other than that they're just as bad as the Jobcentre. ''There's a computer there, go and do your job search'' (Homeless Female).

This lack of support was also emblematic of the criminal justice system. Some interviewees had recently been released from prison with little money, no accommodation or job and continuing problems with drink or drugs. Public expenditure cuts and prison overcrowding have reduced the pre-release support provided to many prisoners. Some had made benefit claims and almost immediately incurred financial sanctions. A lack of support in one system pre-disposing individuals to sanctioning/punishment in the same or another system emerged as a key theme in many interviews with welfare service users:

''So it was only a little six week stretch….but they didn't find me anywhere to live. So I'd come off the streets, gone in jail and they kicked me back onto the streets'' (Homeless Male).

''Because I've always got short sentences they've never found me anywhere to live….You get back in the same situation where you're homeless, getting drunk, see your mates. Then cause problems in the town centre because you're drunk and whatever. Then you end up in prison for another couple of months'' (Male Ex-Prisoner).

Previous research has indicated that levying financial penalties in order to change behaviour may be ineffective with some groups that are accustomed to deprivation (Newton et al, 2012). A key interviewee acknowledged that this probably was the case. *''Well, historically you're leaving prison with quite a small discharge grant and you're having to wait for your benefits are sorted out…so you've got a group of people that are already having to cope''* (Senior Civil Servant, Government Department). Shorn of its behavioural logic this raises the possibility that for some conditional welfare is primarily punitive. Reflecting upon their previous experience of working in the criminal justice system a key interviewee argued that punishment was only effective in particular circumstances:

''For people who were set to lose something - lose relationships, lose status, lose employment, lose the life they valued - that's when punishment and sanctions had a real impact. But if you're starting from the position where you've nothing really much to lose then sanctions and punishment mean very little'' (Charity officer).

The insensitivity of conditional welfare regimes to the lives of the vulnerable had the potential to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. A representative from a charity felt that: *''It's horrific. Well at worst it increases their chaos, their crisis it increases their vulnerability. It leads to increased reliance on street begging. Vulnerabilities increase with regard to addiction. It's just the worst outcomes you can imagine.''* Another individual argued that: *''When you work with people who are so vulnerable psychologically, emotionally, materially - spiritually even- and try to drive them to behaviour change with sanctioning and forcefulness, their lives are so brutal anyway that they don't use that as a lever for change. It just feeds into despair and disengagement''* (Charity officer). This can have devastating consequences. A disabled woman whose health was deteriorating and was faced by a benefit sanction confided:

''I thought of taking my own life because I was overwhelmed, misunderstood and everything was collapsing'' (Disabled Female).

The way in which vulnerable individuals cope with the loss of income resulting from sanctioning underlined the importance of personal social networks of family and friends. However, the vulnerable are predominantly drawn from impoverished communities and often have social networks overwhelmingly comprised of the very poor. This places severe limitations on the type and extent of support that can be provided and puts further strain on existing personal relationships. A policy officer for a national charity drew our attention to an individual that he had encountered in a Food Bank:

''She got out from her bag an envelope and it was just tickets from pawn shops. She hadn't had any money. She'd just had to pawn all kinds of things, jewellery whatever, gone to money lenders…This puts strains on their existing social systems because they help each other out enormously.''

Traumatic childhood experiences such as abuse (physical, sexual and emotional) meant that family support was sometimes not available or sought. *''If you think about the needs of the kind of people we're talking about it's usually childhood trauma, mental health problems, drug problems, problems interacting, rarely ever been in a job, insecure housing, repeat contact with the criminal justice system''* (Charity officer). It was in this context that some welfare users reported that sanctioning had led them to engage in criminal activities in order to make ends meet:

''I've had to shoplift to get by me, because I haven't had enough money ….I've had to do this because I haven't had anyone to turn to'' (Female Lone Parent).

Nevertheless, some individuals were either managing to circumvent conditionality in the welfare system or it was having very little material effect upon them. Negative agency (irresponsible and destructive choices) rather than compromised agency was the key issue. Offenders who claim Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) are supposed to enter the Work Programme from 'day one' of their release from prison. Any individual claiming JSA within thirteen weeks of leaving custody are also mandated to the Work Programme. However, many offenders reported that they had not known

about 'day one' access and had not taken part in the Work Programme. This may be partly the result of a lack of Employment and Benefit Adviser support in the prison system and an understandable desire to avoid incurring financial penalties. It may also reflect the participation of some in criminal sub-cultures. A Government Department interviewee argued forcefully that:

''The ones that come out of custody no fixed abode, they're barely able to be contacted…If they manage to get to a Jobcentre to sign it will be a miracle. And they're back in custody before it [sanctioning] happens. It's not a real world idea - just by saying so offenders will turn up, do what they're told and be good. If we knew how to do that we'd have done it years ago''.

Conclusions

This research supports the claim that a principle of conditionality in welfare and the need to protect against the cynical manipulation of gaming the welfare system is a pervasive, if not hegemonic, idea supported by welfare practitioners and recipients (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992). Welfare recipients articulated a general sense that some other claimants were manipulating the system and, in some cases, claimed to have witnessed such subversive conduct. They strongly supported forms of sanction to deter this. However, in almost all cases they denied personally enacting such manipulation and the data do not support a widespread cynical manipulation of the system by welfare recipients.

Rather many key stakeholder participants emphasised that the extent of gaming the system was significantly exaggerated in media and governmental discourses. For these participants, despite recognition of the power of dominant narratives to influence public opinion, vulnerability was the primary defining characteristic of welfare claimants and this vulnerability precisely countered the rationality, capacity, agency and normative orientation required to enact cynical manipulation. However, in turn such vulnerability may not be recognised in the perspectives of welfare recipients

themselves although they powerfully articulated the maladministration, and indeed often irrationality and limited capacity, of sanctioning procedures which further diminished the agency and capacity of those subject to them.

These narratives of vulnerability and victimhood were deployed by stakeholders to better sensitise mechanisms of conditionality, such as benefit sanctions, in order to reduce their propensity to penalise those whose agency is weakest; rather than to argue for the removal of conditionality altogether. In addition, narratives of vulnerability and victimhood articulated by research participants could, unintentionally perhaps, also result in a focus on individual weaknesses and a compromised agency, which negates the wider changing economic and social contexts within which welfare reform is being enacted. Sanctioning and punishment and arising material insecurity and precariousness, rather than forms of supportive intervention, are increasingly the lived reality for welfare recipients. Wacquant (2009) has argued that the growing use of sanction in penal and social policies are a symbolic and material apparatus to exert new forms of control over populations increasingly marginalised by economic changes and welfare state retrenchment. These governmental projects deploy enhanced surveillance, deterrence and stigma as mechanisms for achieving behavioural modifications. This paper has aimed to enhance our empirical and conceptual understanding of how such mechanisms pervade the perspectives and actions of all actors within the contemporary UK welfare system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. Grant Number: ES/K002163.

References

Babajanian, B., & Hagen-Zanker, J. (2012). *Social protection and social exclusion: an analytical framework to assess the links. Background Note*. London: ODI.

Barn, R., & Mantovani, N. (2007). Young mothers and the care system: Contextualizing risk and vulnerability. *British Journal of Social Work*, *37*(2), 225-243.

Batty, E. and Flint, J. (2013) 'Talking 'bout poor folks (thinking 'bout my folks): perspectives on comparative poverty in working class households', *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 13(1): 1-19.

Baumberg, B., Bell, K. and Gaffney, D. (2012) *Benefits stigma in Britain*, London: Elizabeth Finn Care/Turn2us.

Brown, K. (2011). 'Vulnerability': Handle with care. *Ethics and social welfare*, *5*(3), 313-321.

Brown, K. (2014) Beyond protection, in Harrison, M and Saunders, T (Eds.) *Social Policies and Social Control: New Perspectives on the 'Not-so-big society'*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Burke, E. (1793) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. London: Penguin.

Crisp, R. and Fletcher, D. (2008) *A Comparative Review of Workfare Programmes in the United States, Canada and Australia*, Research Report No. 533, London: Department for Work and Pensions.

Cruickshank, B. (1996) Revolutions within: self-government and self-esteem, in A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose (eds) *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism and Rationalities of Governance*. London: UCL Press: 231-251.

Daguerre, A. and Etherington, D. (2014) *Workfare in 21St century Britain. The erosion of rights to social assistance.* London: Economic and Social Research Council.

Dean, H. and Taylor-Gooby, P. (1992) *Dependency Culture: The Explosion of a Myth*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Delor, F., & Hubert, M. (2000). Revisiting the concept of 'vulnerability'. *Social Science & Medicine*, *50*(11), 1557-1570.

Department for Work and Pensions (2008) No-one Written Off: Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility, London: HMSO.

Department for work and Pensions (2012) 'Mandatory work scheme extended', press release, 12 July, DWP, London.

Foucault, M. (1991) 'Governmentality' in G. Burchell (ed.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Garthwaite, K. (2011) 'The language of shirkers and scroungers?' Talking about illness, disability and coalition welfare reform, *Disability and Society*, 26(3):369-372.

Goffman, E. (1974) Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Golding, P. and Middleton, S. (1982) *Images of Welfare*, Oxford: Martin Robinson.

Handler, J.F. (2006) 'Ending welfare as we know it: welfare reform in the US', in P. Henman and M. Fenger (eds.), Administering Welfare Reform: International Transformations in Welfare Governance, Bristol: the Policy Press.

Howard, C. (2006) 'The new governance of Australian welfare: street-level contingencies', in P. Henman and M. Fenger (eds.), Administering Welfare Reform: International Transformations in Welfare Governance, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Hills, J. (2015) *Good times, bad times: The welfare myth of us and them*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Hobbes, T. (1651) *The Citizen*, edited by B. Gert, 1993. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Jones, O. (2011) *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso.

Larsen, J.E. (2011) The Active Society and Activation Policy. Paper presented at the Cost A13 Conference: Social Policy, Marginalisation and Citizenship. Aalborg University, Denmark.

Larsen, C. A., & Dejgaard, T. E. (2013). The institutional logic of images of the poor and welfare recipients: A comparative study of British, Swedish and Danish newspapers. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *23*(3), 287-299.

MacDonald, R., & Marsh, J. (2005). *Disconnected youth? Growing up in Britain's poor neighbourhoods*. Palgrave Macmillan.

McEnhill, L and Byrne, V. (2014) 'Beat the Cheat': portrayals of disability claimants in print media, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 22 (2): 99-110.

Mead, L. (1991). 'The New Politics and the New Poverty'. *Public Interest*, 103, pp3-20.

Mitton, L. (2009) *Factors affecting compliance with rules: Understanding the behaviour and motivations behind customer fraud*. London: Department for Work and Pensions.

Newton, B. et al (2012). Work Programme Evaluation: Findings from the 1st Phase of Qualitative Research on Programme Delivery. London: Department for Work & Pensions Research Report No. 821.

Parley, F. (2011). What does vulnerability mean?. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *39*(4), 266-276.

Riley-Smith, B. (2012) *Disability hate crime: is 'benefit scrounger' abuse to blame?* The Guardian, 14 August.

Reeve, D. (2015). Disgust and self-disgust: a disability studies perspective. *The Revolting Self: Perspectives on the Psychological, Social, and Clinical Implications of Self-Directed Disgust*, 53.

Rodger, J.J. (2008) *Criminalising Social Policy: Anti-social behaviour and welfare in a de-civilised society*. Cullompton: Willan.

Rousseau, J.J. (1762) 'Emile' in B. Foxley (ed, 1963) *Emile*. London: Dent.

Sanders, T., & Campbell, R. (2007). Designing out vulnerability, building in respect: violence, safety and sex work policy. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *58*(1), 1-19.

Shildrick, T. and MacDonald, R. (2013) Poverty talk: how people experiencing poverty deny their poverty and why they blame 'the poor', The Sociological Review, 61 (2): 285–303

Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., & Furlong, A. (2014). 'Benefit Street'& the Myth of Workless Communities. *Sociological Research Online*, *19*(3).

Slater, T. (2012) 'The myth of ''Broken Britain'': welfare reform and the production of ignorance', *Antipode*, doi: 10.1111/anti. 12002.

Smith, A. (1776) *The Wealth of Nations, Books I-III*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Tyler, I. (2008) "Chav mum chav scum" Class disgust in contemporary Britain. *Feminist Media Studies*, *8*(1), 17-34.

Van Wel, F. (1992) 'A Century of Families under Supervision in the Netherlands', British Journal of Social Work, 22: 147-166.

Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham: Duke University Press.