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Bureaucratic Justice in Universal Credit

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Executive summary

Universal Credit (UC) claimants must continually engage with processes managed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Assessing whether these processes are just requires understanding the specific process qualities that shape claimants' perceptions of bureaucratic justice within the UC system.

Our research, based on a quantitative survey of 1,514 UC claimants conducted in collaboration with YouGov, and supplemented by 50 qualitative interviews with claimants, welfare rights advisors, and DWP officials, proposes a new five-part model identifying the key process qualities influencing claimants' perceptions of bureaucratic justice. The five factors in this model are:

- **Usability.** It is clear to people how to make a claim and update information about their claim.

- **Individualised treatment.** Officials and processes listen to people (including their concerns), have their best interests at heart, and try to accommodate their situation.

- **Dignity.** Officials and processes treat people with respect and kindness.

- **Efficiency.** People can easily contact officials to ask for assistance, and officials respond promptly to engage with their questions and/or concerns.

- **Neutrality.** Rules are applied consistently between people, and everyone is treated the same regardless of background.
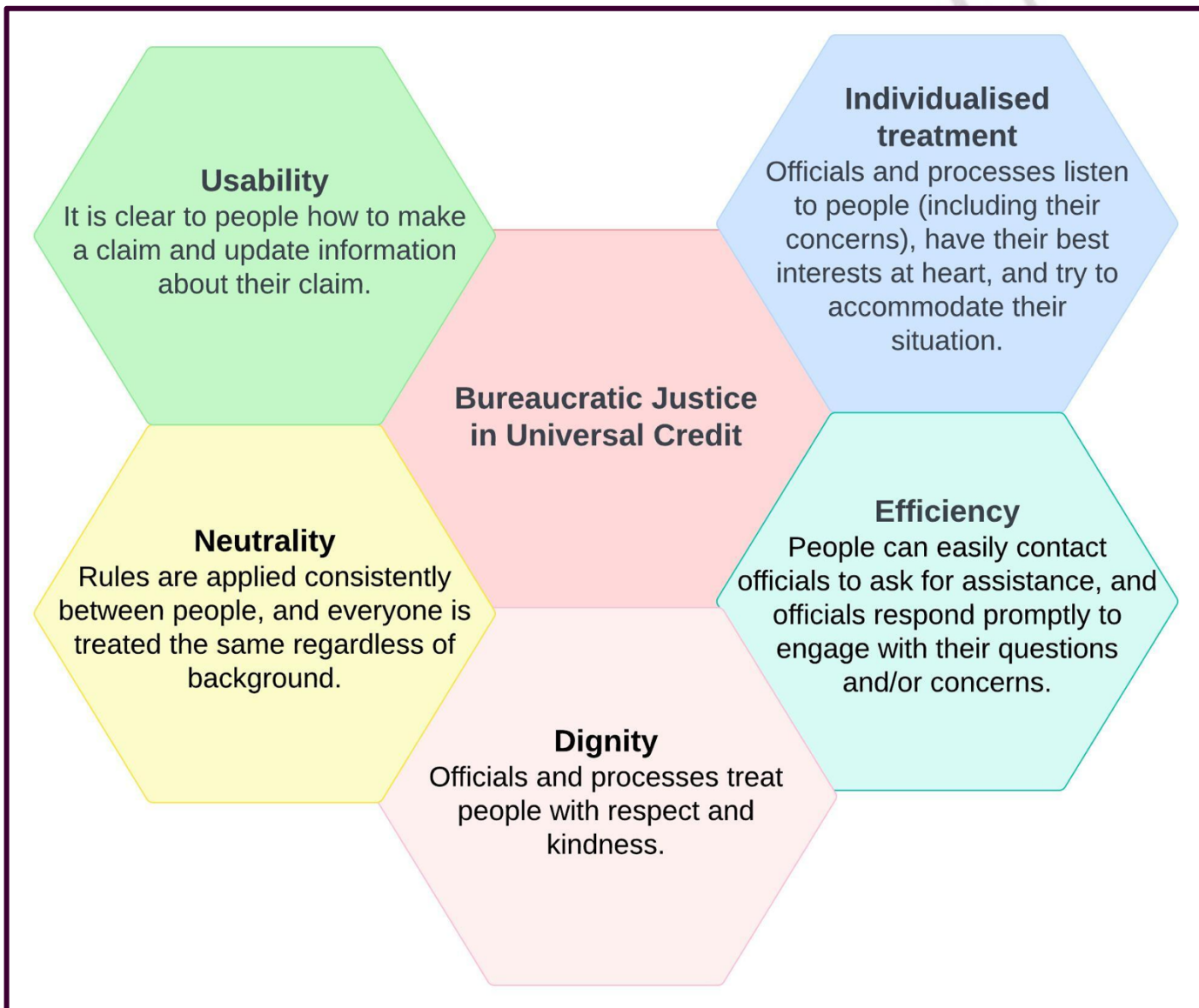
Based on this new model, we suggest three important questions arise that require further investigation and consideration.

The first question is whether UC processes and practices currently align with this model. Although this research does not investigate such alignment directly, our earlier qualitative research suggests that claimants' everyday experiences often diverge from this model. Consequently, this model could serve as a useful framework for reflecting on and potentially revising current processes and practices within the UC service. It could also shape any future reviews of the service.

A second question which arises is how the DWP manages trade-offs when issues arise in process design where there are clashes between different aspects of bureaucratic justice. Certain process design questions, for instance, might raise tensions surrounding how a conflict between neutrality and individualised treatment. We suggest that an important step in future research is to develop further empirical evidence of claimants' perceptions on these questions of trade-offs.

Third, we also recommend further exploration into the effects of (mis)alignment between our model of bureaucratic justice and claimants' experiences of UC processes. Ensuring alignment with claimants' perceptions of bureaucratic justice is inherently valuable, but it also has the potential to improve claimants' well-being and increase the overall effectiveness of welfare policy. It is important that a better understanding of these effects is developed, and the DWP considers making them more central in their policymaking.

Usability
It is clear to people how to make a claim and update information about their claim.

Individualised treatment
Officials and processes listen to people (including their concerns), have their best interests at heart, and try to accommodate their situation.

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Neutrality
Rules are applied consistently between people, and everyone is treated the same regardless of background.

Efficiency
People can easily contact officials to ask for assistance, and officials respond promptly to engage with their questions and/or concerns.

Dignity
Officials and processes treat people with respect and kindness.

Introduction

UC claimants must continually engage with processes managed by the DWP. Assessing whether these processes are just is an important part of any evaluation of how the UC service is performing. This raises a question about how UC claimants themselves understand what constitutes a just process in this context. Two principal bodies of existing research literature speak to this question directly, but both have limitations.

The first is research on bureaucratic justice in social security (e.g. Mashaw, 1983). This influential work seeks to understand how different administrative system designs legitimate public decision-making. However, this body of research typically focuses more on the official perspective rather than the claimants' viewpoint. At the same time, much of this research was developed before the mass introduction of digital welfare systems, which ushered in major changes to welfare processes and practices.

The second is procedural justice research, which has largely focused on policing but has also been developed in other fields (e.g. Tyler, 2006; Donner 2015). This body of research has sought to understand, using empirical methods, how people define 'procedural justice', usually in the context of interactions with public officials. It has also sought to understand the effects of officials like police officers behaving in a procedurally just fashion– the field has shown such effects include greater legitimacy being conferred on the law and officers and increased public willingness to comply with the law. However, much of this research takes the model in policing and seeks to export it and test it in other domains. However, there are good reasons to believe that very different process qualities will matter in different contexts–interactions with a digital social security system might come with very different public expectations about what a just process looks like compared to interactions with police officers on the street. As such, it is likely that a ground-up approach in different public service contexts will reveal service-specific dynamics.

Our approach in this study seeks to bring together what is best about these two fields of research and overcome what might be seen as their key limitations. Specifically, we seek to use empirical methods to examine how claimants understand bureaucratic justice in the specific context of UC–a large-scale, digital welfare system which continuously demands a range of interactions with claimants. Our central question is simple: what process qualities shape whether claimants believe they have been treated fairly and in a legitimate way by the UC service?

In this report, we explain our method for addressing this question and present a new model of 'bureaucratic justice' in UC rooted in new data about claimants' perceptions. We conclude the report by discussing the implications of this model for the delivery of UC in the future.

Method

Our analysis draws on a survey of 1,514 individuals who are either currently in receipt of UC (n=1,300) or have been within the last year (n=214). The survey–fielded by YouGov to their online panel in May 2024–covered three areas:

- Details about the individual claimant and their claim, such as whether they have had a limited capability for work assessment, a deduction or sanction, any assistance with their application (such as help from a third sector organisation), and for how long they have been in receipt of UC;

- Experiences of the UC system, through 25 items designed to test five bureaucratic justice factors: usability, neutrality, dignity, individualised treatment and efficiency; and

- Attitudes and behaviours, such as willingness to cooperate fully with officials, the value of complaining and appealing, and feelings of confidence in finding a job or better-paid work.

The items measuring the five factors we use to predict bureaucratic justice were developed based on interviews with a total of 50 semi-structured interviews with UC recipients, DWP officials, and welfare rights advisors (for more details, see Halliday, Meers, and Tomlinson, 2024). Based on this data, the research team identified a total of 22 potentially relevant process qualities. The relationships between these qualities was tested in two rounds of pilot surveys–the first with 290 UC recipients (testing 39 items in total) and a second, larger pilot with 583 recipients (testing a revised set of 40 items in total), both fielded on an online panel through the provider Prolific. Exploratory factor analysis of these data identified five factors in total, measured by the following 25 items (each with a 5-point response scale from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly').

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Factor	Items
Usability	- It is clear to me how to make a claim in the system. - It is clear to me how to update information about my circumstances in the system. - I found it difficult to make my initial application for my claim. - I find it difficult to update information about my claim.
Neutrality	- The Universal Credit system treats everyone the same regardless of their background. - Rules are applied consistently between individuals.
Dignity	- I feel like officials treat me with respect when I interact with them. - In my dealings with them, officials generally treat me with kindness. - Officials do not treat me with dignity.
Individualised treatment	- I feel officials have my best interests at heart. - Officials care about me and my situation. - If I have questions about benefit decisions that affect me, I feel officials listen. - Information the system provides to me is specific to my situation. - Officials understand my situation well enough to make a good decision on my case. - I feel I have opportunities to raise concerns about my Universal Credit claim. - The Universal Credit system lets me have a say about my claim. - I feel I can express my views before decisions are made about my Universal Credit claim. - If my situation didn't fit the rules exactly, I am confident the system has the flexibility to cope. - If required, I feel the system would give me the benefit of the doubt.
Efficiency	- It is easy to get hold of officials when I need to. - It takes too long to hear back from officials when I contact them about my claim. - Officials generally get back to me when I make a query about my claim. - Officials sometimes ignore concerns I raise about my claim. - Decisions and updates about my claim are made promptly. - The Universal Credit system works too slowly for me.

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In order to examine the association between these factors and overall perceptions of bureaucratic justice, the survey included a set of items to measure perceptions of fairness and system legitimacy. In analyses, these were combined into one 'bureaucratic justice' variable, comprising the items below.

Bureaucratic Justice Items

- In general, the Universal Credit system can be trusted to do the right thing.
- In general, I accept the decisions made by the Universal Credit system.
- In general, the Universal Credit system operates as it should.
- The Universal Credit system needs to be radically restructured.
- The Universal Credit system generally serves the greater good.
- The Universal Credit system is getting worse every year.
- The Universal Credit system is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.
- Overall, I have been treated fairly by the Department for Work & Pensions when handling my Universal Credit claim.
- Overall, the procedures for handling my Universal Credit claim have been fair.
- The Department for Work & Pensions treats people and handles their claims fairly.

Findings

Regression analysis of the survey data found that each of the five factors–usability, individualised treatment, dignity, efficiency, and neutrality—was a strongly statistically significant predictor of bureaucratic justice. We show the regression coefficients (*i.e.* the strength of the association between bureaucratic justice and each factor, net of all the other factors) in the graph. This shows that each of the five factors is, independently (*i.e.* over and above the effects of the other factors) a positive predictor of people's evaluations of bureaucratic justice (full results appear in the Appendix).[1]
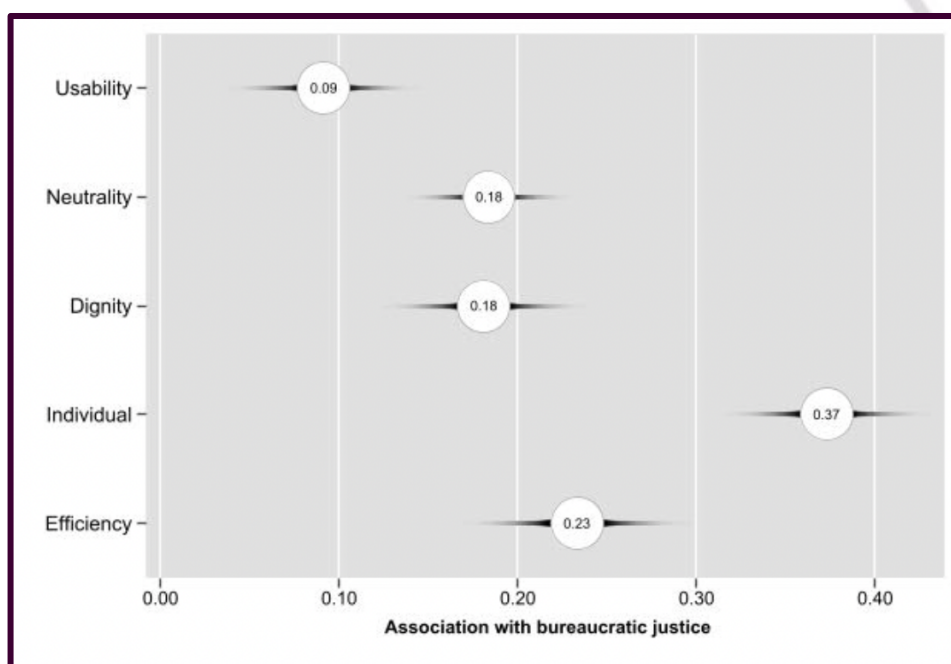
The graph shows that usability had a small positive association with bureaucratic justice. Dignity, efficiency and neutrality had moderate positive associations. Individualised treatment had a strong positive association. The results thus point to variations in the magnitude of each factor's predictive effects.[2]

The significance of the five factors (usability, individualised treatment, dignity, efficiency, and neutrality) did not vary based on respondents' gender or ethnicity, between those in the sample who had or had not received a deduction or sanction to their Universal Credit award, between those who had or had not received help from the third sector for

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[1] The figures capture how strongly each factor is associated with bureaucratic justice (*i.e.* how much perceptions of bureaucratic justice increase given a one-unit increase in the factor). The confidence intervals show the range within which we can be 95% confident the true figure sits.

[2] One note of caution, though, is that individualised treatment is measured through more items (10 in total) than usability (4 items) and, indeed, the other three factors. Indicators incorporating more items sometimes measure the factor more accurately, and this may explain part of the variations in the associations between each factor and bureaucratic justice in the results.

their claim, or between those who perceived their benefit outcome to be favourable or not.[3]

Overall, the findings provide strong evidence that the five factors–usability, individualised treatment, dignity, efficiency and neutrality–positively predict bureaucratic justice perceptions. Moreover, these effects are broadly consistent across the population.

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[3] Which we measured with the question 'Do you think you are receiving the Universal Credit benefits you are eligible?', and to which 70% answered 'yes', 15% answered 'no', and 15% answered 'don't know'.

Conclusion

Policy discussions surrounding UC reform often focus on the level of benefits provided to claimants, which is a critical issue (see Brewer and Clegg, 2024). However, the manner in which claimants are treated by UC processes is also of great importance. Assessing the just treatment of claimants can be complex, and a range of approaches is possible, but our proposed bureaucratic justice model, grounded in evidence from UC claimants, offers a valuable framework for any such evaluation.

Three major questions also arise from the model we present. The first relates to how the DWP manages trade-offs when issues arise in process design where there are clashes between different aspects of bureaucratic justice. Certain situations, for instance, might raise tensions surrounding how a conflict between neutrality and individualised treatment. We have very little empirical evidence on how the public perceives such trade-offs despite how critical they are to the design and operation of the UC. The DWP currently conducts user design research in the context of UC, but design practice could be helpfully supported by quantitative surveys with UC claimants that seek to understand their sensibilities regarding how complex process trade-offs are best resolved.

A second major question that arises from our research is whether UC processes and practices are actually aligned with this model. That is not a question we have investigated for this research, but our earlier qualitative research with claimants suggests there are everyday experiences that deviate from this model (Halliday, Meers, and Tomlinson, 2024). In this respect, we hope the model could be a helpful basis for both reflecting on current processes and practices and shaping any future overarching review of the UC service. It might also be a helpful guide as the Department pursues further reform, particularly when assessing the impact of any proposals to further digitalise services.

A third major question that arises is what the impacts of pursuing further alignment between the model we have identified and UC processes might be. There is an argument from principle here: that the Department ought to be treating people justly and ought to be taking into account what claimants perceive to be just in this respect. However, we propose that it is now necessary to explore further the effects of the Department pursuing greater alignment between this model and its own processes and practices. While aligning processes with claimants' sensibilities about bureaucratic justice may be a virtue in its own right, it also has the potential to increase the operation of welfare policy through, for instance, claimants being more inclined to cooperate with the DWP. Similar positive externalities of fair process experiences have been demonstrated in a range of different settings, including policing (e.g. Tyler, 2006; Donner 2015) and healthcare (e.g. Tyler, Mentovich, and Satyavad, 2014; Wittleder et al, 2024). It is critical that, now that we possess a clearer understanding of what bureaucratic justice means in the context of UC, we develop a better understanding of the positive outcomes that can be generated by the

Department aligning its work with it. The Department also ought to consider the positive externalities of bureaucratic justice more actively in its policymaking.

Our future research within this project will seek to explore these questions in more detail. We will publish our findings in future reports and publications.
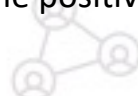
Appendix: Details of regression modelling

Factor	Coefficient	Standard error	p-value
Usability	0.09	0.02	<.001
Individualised treatment	0.37	0.02	<.001
Dignity	0.18	0.02	<.001
Efficiency	0.23	0.02	<.001
Neutrality	0.18	0.02	<.001

Despite high correlations between the five factors, there were no issues with multicollinearity, meaning that each factor provided unique information. This was confirmed by VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) values being less than 2.38, well below the typical concern threshold of 10.

The model explained 72% of the variance in perceptions of bureaucratic justice. This means that the five factors together provide a very strong explanation for variations in perceptions of bureaucratic justice. The model was statistically significant (F (5, 1201) = 629.76, p <.001), indicating a strong overall fit. The number of cases is 1,207.

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