Introduction: Rethinking welfare-to-work for the long-term unemployed

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Welfare reforms across OECD countries have seen social citizenship rights contractualised and increasingly repurposed as commodifying 'tool[s] of governance' (Patrick, 2017: 293) designed to reconfigure people from 'passive' benefit recipients into 'active' labour market participants. But despite a significant expansion in the groups of citizens targeted for 'activation', countries have persistently struggled to support the labour market (re)integration of social groups at risk of long-term unemployment: variously referred to in the social policy literature as social security recipients who are 'vulnerable' (Andersen, Caswell, and Larsen, 2017), 'harder-to-help' (Whitworth and Carter, 2014: 111), or have 'multiple problems and needs' (Dean, 2003).

This themed section brings together contributions from a network of international scholars researching the frontline of welfare reform to examine the ways in which contemporary activation and employability policies impact, and are experienced by, people who, in addition to unemployment, face a range of personal and social challenges. In so doing, it provides a critical commentary on two interrelated policy dynamics shaping the 'activation turn' that has characterised recent welfare state transformations:

1. The intensification of 'work first' and behavioural forms of welfare conditionality; or the *New Paternalism* (Mead, 1997; Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2011);
2. Managerial and governance reforms in the administration of welfare-to-work programme delivery; or the *New Public Management* of activation (Considine et. al, 2015).

Together these reform dynamics - which Soss et al. (2011: 128) systematise as a 'neoliberal vision of poverty governance' - have produced a fundamental transformation in the way welfare programmes are enacted. One that, Whitworth and Carter argue, has involved 'a consistent, if inevitably varied trend, towards "work first" activation delivered by a mixture of contractualism, managerialism, and marketisation' (2014: 104). As a result, the project of activation now extends beyond the unemployed

to the agencies and street-level staff delivering welfare-to-work in what amounts to a form of 'double' (Considine et al., 2015), and even 'triple' (van Berkel, 2013) activation.

Liberal welfare regimes have long been at the vanguard of this process of neoliberal institutional transformation. Australia pioneered the marketisation of public employment services in the 1990s, while the UK took market accountability instruments to their limits under the now-defunct Work Programme – with its 'black box', Payment-by-Results commissioning model. In more recent years, even Scandinavian countries that were formerly committed to human-capital building approaches (e.g. Denmark) have increasingly sought to active welfare recipients through a combination of performance benchmarking welfare offices and job centres, and a stronger emphasis on applying sanctions (Caswell and Larsen, 2017).

A central question in the social policy and street level bureaucracy literatures is the interplay between these two 'tracks' (Brodkin, 2013: 11) of welfare system change, and the interrelationship between governance and governmentality in propelling how citizens are targeted for activation (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2015; McDonald and Marston, 2005; Whitworth and Carter, 2014).

Addressing this interaction is crucial for understanding 'harder-to-help' participants' experiences of welfare-to-work, insofar as a range of studies indicate that a performance measurement orientation undermines possibilities for relational and therapeutic approaches in service delivery (Andersen et al., 2017; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2015; Rice, 2017). The phenomenon of contracted providers 'parking' more difficult clients in order to focus on those considered most likely to satisfice performance targets is a well-documented example (e.g. van Berkel, 2014; Carter and Whitworth, 2015; Considine et al., 2018). Although other studies also highlight how performance monitoring and measurement can direct caseworkers' attention to the use of sanctions rather than working to resolve 'difficult' problems (e.g. Brodkin, 2011; Caswell and Hoybye-Mortensen, 2015).

The thematic section draws together international experts in sociology, social policy, social work and political science who are united by their shared focus on examining how welfare-to-work policies are experienced and produced at the 'micro-level' (Rice, 2012) of policy implementation: in the caseworker-client relationship, in people's lived experiences of conditionality; and in the managerial regimes affecting possibilities for personalisation in employment services. This frontline and granular perspective is rarely brought into view in evaluations of activation programmes, which are denominated by econometric and quasi-experimental studies comparing outcomes between populations that have been included/excluded from programs. *How* programs work or don't work, the complex ways in which they are variously and unevenly implemented, and the lived experiences of

the challenges faced by both those who enact and are activated by them are too-often obscured. But, as Andersen et al. (2017: 343) argue, 'It may be just as important not only to understand *what* services and benefits the unemployed receive, but also *how* they receive them.' This research-orientation centrally grounds the contributors to this thematic section in their efforts to address a suite of questions concerning the dual strands of contemporary welfare system changes:

- What evidence is there that regulatory approaches to activation work for welfare recipients at risk of long-term unemployment?
- What are the critical assumptions about social security recipients underpinning contemporary welfare policies, and how do these manifest in the behaviours and attitudes of those at the frontline?
- How can we move beyond tried and tested ways of developing evidence-based policy to harness practice-oriented and localised forms of knowledge about what works?

In addressing these questions, the contributions draw on new empirical evidence from several studies exploring the implementation and lived experience of welfare-to-work reforms in Australia, Denmark and Britain:

- The Danish *Local Innovation in Social and Employment Services* (LISES) study, a four-year (2016-2020) project investigating new innovations in how employment services are delivered to vulnerable benefit recipients in Danish municipalities;
- The Australian *From Entitlement to Experiment (E2E)* project, which involved intensive case studies of high-performing employment services providers to explore what works in supporting 'harder-to-help' jobseekers into work;
- An evaluation of the Scottish *Making it Work* programme of personalised support for lone parent families with complex needs (2013-17); and
- Qualitative longitudinal studies of lone parents and jobseekers' experiences of behavioural welfare conditionality in Scotland and England: the *Welfare Conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change* (2013-18) project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESCRC), and the *Lived Experiences of Welfare Reform* (2011-20) project, funded by the ESRC and British Academy.

The data presented in the contributions, and drawn from these studies, provides a unique qualitative and cross-country comparative perspective on the double dynamics of welfare state change as experienced by both unemployed people subject to more intensive forms of conditionality and

frontline activation workers subject to the spread of managerial accountability and performance monitoring.

In the opening review article, Dall and Danneris take as their starting point the growing interest among policy makers in pursuing 'evidence-based' active labour market policies. Despite this, they argue that the evidence underpinning the efficacy of mainstream employability programmes in supporting more vulnerable clients is ambiguous at best. They review three strands within the existing literature on effective active labour market policies: research on the effectiveness of welfare-to-work policies; the street-level organisations delivering employment support; and the communicative practices between caseworkers and the unemployed. Building on the challenges associated with this existing research, they argue for an alternative approach based on what they term 'relational causality'. Defined as the idea that policies gain their effects in relational processes in which different actors continuously perform, (re)produce and enact given practices across various contexts, this approach understands causality as something that can take on a multitude of different forms in fluid and complex processes. According to Dall and Danneris, this calls for the recognition that individual studies cannot give an adequate answer to what works in welfare-to-work policies but only provide insights on some of the actors, activities and mechanisms that constitute change. It is only through the combination and accumulation of research and methodologies that knowledge about processes of causality can be fully achieved.

This call for the generation of evidence based on the combination of studies is taken up directly in the second contribution. Wright and Patrick bring together evidence from two qualitative longitudinal studies to examine unemployed people's lived experiences of the decidedly 'punitive turn' taken in UK welfare reforms since 2010. In exploring how this turn towards punitive conditionality has been experienced over several years by unemployed jobseekers, lone parents, and people with disabilities in Leeds and multiple different locations across England and Scotland, they illustrate the mismatch between the political representation of conditionality's activating potential and the practical ways in which it impedes rather than supports transitions into employment by causing suffering and hardship. This comparative approach provides compelling evidence that these experiences are not confined to the particularities of unique personal biographies or geographical locations but constitute a *social* experiential reality that is both *shared* and *typical* of those living under harsh sanction regimes. In so doing, their contribution also makes a methodological innovation in the use of qualitative study findings. Wright and Patrick argue that combining qualitative data generated over periods of time and in different locations involving distinct cohorts enables researchers to generalise more widely than is customary in qualitative research.

The mismatch between the political representation of the benefits of behavioural 'work first' approaches and what works in enabling transitions into employment is further reflected on in the Danish context in the third contribution. Danneris and Caswell report on a multi-year research collaboration between six Danish municipalities and an inter-disciplinary research team at Aalborg University to rethink and promote innovation in social and employment services delivery for those most at risk of long-term unemployed. In their contribution, Danneris and Caswell share findings from a sub-project within the study, investigating what can be learnt about the trajectory of current active labour market policies from the narratives of jobseekers that successfully transition to employment despite substantial health and/or social problems. Through interviews with twelve former benefit recipients and their caseworkers, their analysis point to three overall findings: 1) the main elements characterising the current work-first strategy (behavioural conditionality, sanctions, work incentives etc.) were almost non-existent in the narratives of what worked; 2) both former clients and their caseworkers point to the co-production of a 'right frame of mind' of the client as being pivotal to job success; and, 3) that system counselling, related to administrative processes rather than traditional social work and/or labour market oriented work, plays a central role in the support provided by caseworkers to clients that transition to work.

The final two contributions deal with the second track of welfare system change: the New Pubic Management (NPM) of activation. Although there are important sources of continuity with the earlier contributions insofar as these later contributions show how managerial and governance instruments hinder or promote personalised approaches to employment services delivery on the ground.

In the fourth article, O'Sullivan, McGann and Considine show how performance management and monitoring systems in welfare quasi-markets shape agencies' processes of client assessment and categorisation. Although the role of performance management systems in influencing provider 'risk selection' practices has been widely studied (for example van Berkel, 2014), analyses thus far have focused on the internal and informal sorting of clients by agency workers in response to performance targets – a practice that is largely 'hidden' from the public purchaser. Reporting on data from four case studies of contracted providers in Australia, their article focuses on re-categorisation practices that unfold at an inter-organisational and administrative level, and which determine the level of outcome payments that agencies can receive and the nature of participants' conditionality requirements. These categorisation practices, they argue, extend beyond previously documented practices of 'creaming' and 'parking', and serve as adaptive strategies to regulatory activation measures. Their analysis suggests that the category manoeuvres that agencies engage in paradoxically result in some 'harder-to-help' jobseekers being rendered fully or partially inactive, within the context of a system designed to activate. In so doing, O'Sullivan, McGann and Considine show how the

application of performance management at the frontline functions to direct caseworkers' attention to the forms of system counselling identified in Danneris and Caswell's earlier contribution.

In the final article, Lindsay et al. consider the potential of alternatives to NPM governance arrangements - in particular co-management and co-production approaches - in enabling more personalised employment service provision. Their article draws on an evaluation of local, third sector-led services targeting lone parents at risk of poverty and long-term unemployment in Scotland. In their analysis, they find that partnership-oriented co-governance mechanisms brought together a wide range of public and third sector stakeholders to plan holistic, personalised services. This commitment to co-governance in turn facilitated collaborative approaches to the management of services and processes of co-production between unemployed lone parents, key workers, and service providers. Further, as opposed to how unemployed jobseekers often describe their engagement with mainstream activation programmes characterised by high levels of compulsion and tightly defined performance targets, the lone parents in this project expressed positive views of personalised services that were co-produced. On this basis, they conclude that a commitment to collaboration and co-production may be more effective in promoting personalised services that are responsive to the needs of groups at risk of long-term unemployment. Such an approach may be more effective than the predominant approach of administering welfare-to-work programme delivery via market accountability and performance instruments designed to incentivise providers to move people into jobs as quickly as possible.

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