

Welfare conditionality and blaming the unemployed

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Abstract

Welfare recipients are increasingly subject to various forms of work-related conditionality that, critics argue, presuppose a ‘pathological’ theory of unemployment that stigmatises welfare recipients as de-motivated to work. Drawing on surveys of Australian frontline employment services staff, we examine the extent to which caseworkers attribute being on benefits to recipients’ lack of motivation, and whether this problem figuration of unemployment is associated with a ‘harder edged’ approach to activation. We find that it is, although it is diminishing. This reflects how frontline discretion has become more routinised from the application of more intensive forms of performance monitoring and compliance auditing.

Introduction

A key characteristic of contemporary liberal welfare states is the stronger forms of conditionality that attach to many welfare payments. This manifests in threats of benefit withdrawal if recipients fail to comply with minimum administrative, job-searching and other behavioural requirements designed to encourage them to take any job rather than remain on benefits - the so-called ‘work-first’ approach. In Australia, welfare recipients typically must apply for 20 jobs per month, undertake six months of ‘mutual obligation’ activities such as Work-for-the-Dole each year, and comply with any other activities listed in the plan agreed with their job service stipulating ‘what they will do to improve their work readiness’ (DoE, 2014, p. 2). Those who refuse, or are unable,

to meet these requirements face benefit withdrawal with job services providers recommending payment penalties be applied in 763,920 cases in the 12 months to 30 June 2018, compared with 472,435 cases in the 12 months to 30 June 2016 (DSS, 2018; 2016). This enforcement of conditionality is framed by policymakers as grounded in a principle of mutuality (Carney and Ramia 2002) and the idea that everyone with some capacity has a duty to contribute productively (Handler, 2003, p. 235). A kind of ‘luck egalitarianism’ pervades this emphasis on mutuality, in which claimants must show that their reasons for claiming benefits stem from circumstances beyond their control rather than ‘unresisted dependency’ (Attas and De-Shalit, 2004, p. 310). They do this by complying with behavioural requirements that symbolically ‘legitimise their wider claims as those of the “deserving poor”’ (White, 2004, p. 280) whereas in the absence of conditionality the presumption may remain that many recipients are *voluntarily* unemployed.

The enforcement of work-related conditionality, in this way, tacitly considers that many recipients are unmotivated to work, and requires the investment of substantial administrative resources in determining ‘whether individuals’ suffering might be their own fault’ (Eubanks, 2018, p. 176). This negative portrayal of welfare recipients’ appears to be shared by much of the public in neo-liberal welfare states (Schofield and Butterwoth 2015), and is regarded by critical commentators as underpinning the ‘mounting compulsion’ (Wright, 2012, p. 309) of social security systems over recent decades. However, a critical element in how unemployed people experience this intensification of work-related conditionality in everyday life are frontline employment services staff, and how they enact welfare-to-work programs on the ground. As Brodtkin (2011, p. i255) argues, street-level organisations and the frontline workers within them ‘are manifestly responsible for making policy *work*’ in that the choices they make in performing their roles effectively determine how policy impacts upon the lives of individual citizens. Accordingly, in this study, we consider the extent to which negative evaluations of welfare recipients are held by the caseworkers responsible for supporting them from welfare-to-work and, more particularly, whether caseworkers who internalise the ‘discourse of culpability’ (Wright, 2012, p. 321) underpinning work-related conditionality embrace more ‘regulatory welfare measures’ (Deeming, 2016, p. 161):

directing clients to take any job rather than remain on benefits ('work first') and recommending sanctions for non-compliance with various behavioural obligations.

Addressing this question of caseworkers' attitudes towards the unemployed and their relationship to the use of regulatory welfare instruments such as sanctions sheds important light on the extent to which the widening use of behavioural forms of conditionality is being propelled by a hardening of attitudes among those delivering welfare programs, or by other operational changes at the frontline such as the introduction of managerial and governance reforms designed to orient frontline workers' decision-making towards desired policy goals. Hardening attitudes towards the unemployed, and the application of more intensive systems of performance monitoring within welfare organisations, have both been canvassed as key contributing mechanisms to what many commentators perceive as a 'shift toward conditionality' that has 'eroded or even replaced rights-based benefits' (Brodkin, 2015, p. 1). At the heart of welfare-to-work reforms, argue Whitworth and Carter (2014), is a focus on shifting discourses and understandings of the unemployed 'so as to "other" them and create the space for desired behaviourally oriented policies' (p. 111). Several studies highlight caseworkers' stigmatising attitudes towards the unemployed 'as precursory belief structures' (Jordan, 2018, p. 61) influencing program operation, with Jordan (2018, p. 71) suggesting that the conduct shaping dimension of welfare-to-work casework requires, 'by definition, a strong belief in the existence of a pathological, welfare-dependent underclass.' Nonetheless, as Soss, Fording and Schram (2009, p. 8) observe, new ways of organising the governance of welfare administration also 'go far towards explaining' (p. 8) the patterns of behavioural conditionality experienced by the unemployed and must not be discounted. But while there is now a large and growing body of literature on the role of managerial and governance reforms in shaping the street-level delivery of welfare-to-work (e.g. Author C et al. 2015; Brodkin, 2011; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2015; Soss et al., 2009), few studies have been able to systematically consider the role of caseworkers' attitudinal orientations in influencing the production of conditionality on the ground. This is because the existing research on the role of caseworkers' evaluations of participants in shaping service delivery is based almost entirely on studies of

individual caseworker-client interactions. Accordingly, we know little about whether, and how, frontline workers' wider appraisals of the moral deservingness of welfare recipients *as a group* are salient influences on the forms of regulatory activation now being applied to the unemployed.

We address this question drawing on data collected over four surveys of Australian frontline staff in employment service agencies between 1996 and 2016. This period spans several major reforms to Australia's public employment services system, beginning with the commencement of privatisation in the mid-1990s following the Keating Labor Government's *Working Nation* reforms. Several hundred for-profit and non-profit agencies were licenced to deliver case management services to the long-term unemployed alongside the publicly-owned Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) in a direct attempt to introduce competition between public and private agencies. This marketisation accelerated under the *Job Network* (JN) system, a full-scale tendering model introduced by the Howard Government in 1998. The first JN contract (1998 to 2000) involved a mix of over 300 private, community and government providers, with the non-public providers contracted to deliver approximately two-thirds of all services under a performance-based payment model. The market share of contracted providers increased to almost 90 per cent under the second JN contract, before the publicly-owned provider was dissolved entirely at the start of the third JN contract in July 2003 (Thomas, 2007). There have been several subsequent major redesigns of Australia's employment services, including *Job Services Australia (JSA)* (2009 – 2015) and *Jobactive* (2015-20). These new iterations have mainly involved layered changes to the contract management and funding model, as well as the jobseeker compliance framework, with the quasi-market design remaining an enduring feature of Australia's approach to welfare-to-work program delivery (Author C et al, 2014). This contracting-out of welfare-to-work program delivery is *conceptually* distinct from the enforcement of work-related conditionality, which can (and has) been implemented via a publicly-owned implementation structure. Nevertheless many commentators see it as no accident that the two have frequently coincided, with Bredgaard and Larsen (2007, p. 294) arguing that public employment officers have historically been viewed 'as barriers towards such a shift in employment policy' whereas work-related conditionality may be easier to implement

via quasi-markets in which commercial agents are incentivised to find ‘the quickest route possible to (re)employment.’ The marketization of welfare-to-work program delivery can thus be likened to a process of ‘double activation’ (Author C et al., p. 30) in which the same forms of inducement used to activate jobseekers are applied by the purchaser to contracted agencies and their staff.

Within this new managerial context an understanding of activation workers’ evaluations of the unemployed is important for several reasons. It is at the frontline that welfare policy ‘comes alive’ (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002, p. 175) and is ‘translated into a client’s individual experience’ (Author C et al., 2014, p. 474). However, a key insight of the street-level bureaucracy literature is that frontline workers are not administrative automatons who generically implement policy as written (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012). Rather they partly shape policy by how they navigate the tensions between bureaucratic rules, local organisational demands, and the complexities of individual cases. Street-level theorists characterise frontline work as ‘rule saturated not rule bound’ (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, p. 334) in that there remains ‘ample space for discretion in policy implementation’ (Brodkin, 2011, p. i258). The constancy of administrative and program rule changes coupled with growing work demands from rising caseloads mean that ‘workers must make choices about the relative importance of various tasks’ (Sandfort, 2000, p. 736). This leaves them uniquely positioned to bend, thwart or advance policy agendas according to how they determine which rules to accentuate, and which to downplay. In particular, caseworkers may inhibit conditionality policies if they exercise leniency when deciding whether to recommend sanctions for non-compliant behaviours such as declining job referrals (Grant, 2013). Furthermore, several key studies suggest such determinations are partly influenced by how caseworkers *morally* appraise individual clients as persons (e.g. Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011a): workers who empathise with clients may resist ‘pressure to “blame the poor”’ (Møller & Stensöta, 2017, p. 2) whereas, without sympathy, it becomes ‘too easy for the busy worker...to impose sanctions’ rather than taking the time to solve problems (Handler, 2003, p. 239).

Nevertheless, as we highlight in this study, this assumption of caseworker discretion is problematic in the context of the intense forms of performance monitoring and managerial accountability that caseworkers are now under. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the rigorous contract and performance management systems that have been developed to steer the Australian quasi-market in employment services. As we show, while caseworkers' normative understandings are still relevant when considering their willingness to press clients towards 'work-first' strategies, the scope for their personal orientations to influence their decision-making is diminishing. This appreciation of how discretion is filtered through organisational contexts and governance regimes is critical to understanding the iterative dynamics between the spread of welfare conditionality and the stigmatising welfare discourses motivating the disciplinary turn in social policy. To this end, a key contribution of this article is to demonstrate the influence of governance reforms over and above attitudinal shifts at the frontline in intensifying the application of disciplinary and regulatory approaches to activation at the street-level. We proceed by reviewing the intensification of work-related conditionality in Australia and the framing of unemployment underpinning it. This is followed by a discussion of the literature on activation workers' perceptions of the unemployed and the role that normative judgements play in shaping how caseworkers enact welfare-to-work. We then consider the findings on Australian activation workers' perceptions of claimants and the extent to which their evaluations of clients' motivation to work have a measurable impact upon their willingness to enact the available forms of work-related conditionality.

Welfare conditionality and the moral economy of activation

Welfare conditionality stretches back to the Victorian Poor Laws (Pantazis, 2016), although its more recent history can be traced to the late 1980s when conditionality requirements began to be (re)introduced in response to rising caseloads. In Australia, following the recommendations of the 1986 Social Security Review, recipients of out-of-work payments began to have to register and report their job search efforts to the CES in order to continue receiving assistance (Deeming, 2016). This was soon followed by the introduction of a new case management model under *Working Nation*, which required jobseekers to take any offers of suitable employment while

empowering caseworkers to recommend payment suspensions if clients failed to attend interviews, training courses or ‘other activities deemed to be helpful’ (Author C, 1999, p. 189). In exchange for increasing the intensity of recipients’ conditionality requirements, the government committed to a reciprocal obligation to provide paid work opportunities for those who had been unemployed for 18 months or more (Fowkes, 2011). However, following the election of the Howard Coalition government, reciprocal obligation became ‘mutual obligation’ in the form of a requirement to undertake Work-for-the-Dole (WfD)—unpaid community work placements—for six months out of every year. This was legislated under the *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Work for the Dole) Act 1997*, applying initially only to those under 25 before being extended to all those under 50 in the early 2000s (Deeming 2016). In 2009, a new *JSA* system was introduced by the Rudd Labor Government, in part to address wide-ranging concerns that JN had become too prescriptive and that difficult-to-place jobseekers were being given little or no assistance. The funding model was adjusted to increase the incentives for agencies to focus on supporting harder-to-help clients and the compliance framework was partially softened, as the focus turned to ‘connection and cooperation’ via *temporary* payment suspensions rather than the ‘standardised loss of payment’ that had previously applied to a wider range of circumstances (Ramia & Carney, 2010, p. 268). However, many of these changes were removed when JSA was replaced by *Jobactive* in 2015. There was a return to strongly enforcing WfD requirements, and agencies’ powers to suspend clients’ payments and to recommend penalties for persistent non-compliance were increased (DoE, 2016).

This work-related conditionality model is underpinned by a deficit model of welfare recipients that was controversially advanced by Laurence Mead and others in the mid-1980s to explain the rise in the number of young working-class people on welfare. Rather than seeing this as a consequence of weakening labor market conditions, Mead attributed much of it to the de-motivation of the poor and the inability of administrators ‘to obligate the recipients of programs, even for their own benefit’ (1986, p. x). He saw welfare as a kind of moral hazard in which the longer people remained on benefits the greater at risk they were of becoming de-motivated and crippled by the fatalist belief, fostered by being on benefits, ‘that their fate turns on forces outside themselves’ (1986, p.

145). He called for social security entitlements to be coupled ‘with serious work and other obligations’ (1986, pp. 3-4) as recipients, in his view, had ‘too many other sources of income...to work reliably unless programs require them to do so’ (1986, p.13). Mead’s arguments paved the way for a transformation in the institutional character of the neo-liberal welfare state from a ‘people processing’ to a ‘people changing’ logic (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012, p. 494). Frontline workers became pivotal to this project of ‘resubjectivation’ (Whitworth & Carter, 2014, p. 110). Through regular appointments and targeted sanctions, they became responsible for inculcating in clients ‘the attitudes and behaviour representative of responsible self-government’ (McDonald & Marston, 2005, pp. 390-391). This emphasis on shaping how claimants ‘think about and regulate themselves’ (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 4) most distinguished what Mead termed a ‘politics of conduct’ (2014 [1991], p. 93). It was not enough for governments to coerce people. Welfare recipients, Mead argued, must be persuaded ‘to *blame themselves*’ (1986, p. 10).

Activation workers’ perceptions of the unemployed

This ‘conduct shaping’ dimension of frontline work has been negatively evaluated by critics of conditionality, who point to its potentially corrosive effect on the caseworker-client relationship (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012). As McDonald and Marston argue, ‘strengths-based’ approaches depend on caseworkers adopting ‘an optimistic attitude towards the unemployed’ (2008, p. 316). However, analysing the views of 183 *JN* staff expressed in open-ended survey questions, they found that the majority held predominantly negative attitudes towards their clients, indicating that they were ‘content on benefits’ and ‘needed to be forced into the workforce’ (McDonald & Marston, 2008, p. 320). In more recent interview-based research with *JS4* and emergency relief caseworkers, Agllias and her colleagues (2016, pp. 302-303) found that most appealed to ‘individualistic psychological explanations’ of unemployment although workers tended to adopt more structural explanations the more contact they had with clients. These findings are consistent with research by Dunn (2013) on agency workers’ perceptions of U.K. Work Programme participants, with most estimating that 30 per cent or more of their clients did not want to work

and were ‘too ‘choosy in the jobs they were willing to undertake’ (2013, p. 799); a finding replicated in Jordan’s (2018) ethnographic study of two Work Programme delivery-sites.

While previous studies have highlighted the extent to which frontline workers endorse behavioural explanations of unemployment, whether this is also associated with an increased willingness to use sanctions and enforce ‘work-first’ remains unknown. Although the literature on the discursive framing of policy discourses points in this direction insofar as it is the presumption that welfare recipients are de-motivated to work that ‘explains why work-first content tends to focus on ... compelling people to “do more”’ (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2015, p. 528). It stands to reason that activation workers who endorse this framing will be more disposed to using behavioural policy instruments. Several studies within the street-level bureaucracy literature also point in this direction insofar as they highlight how caseworkers’ determinations about who to treat routinely, minimally or even harshly, and whom to give extra attention are often guided by normative judgements about clients’ perceived moral worthiness. This is highlighted by Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s (2000: 348) ethnographic research with police officers, teachers, and counsellors. The street-level workers they interviewed saw themselves as citizen-agents ‘who act in response to individual citizen clients in specific circumstances’ rather than agents of the state responsible for administering bureaucratic rules. The type of decision-making they described encompassed *moral reasoning* about clients *as persons*, which then shaped whether administrative rules were interpreted ‘to help those they consider[ed] worthy [or to]...punish those they deem[ed] unworthy’ (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, p. 351). Soss, Fording and Schram (2011: 249) draw a similar conclusion on the basis of their research with welfare-to-work caseworkers in Florida, finding that ‘few factors are as decisive as the case manager’s assessment of the client as a person’: whether they are ‘a straight shooter, trying hard, or playing games’. Importantly, their research suggests that caseworkers’ evaluations of clients in these regards are also shaped by ascribed *social* identities ‘in far-reaching’ (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 248) and racially-coded ways that generate strong biases in program implementation. This is confirmed by their experimental research, in which caseworkers were more likely to sanction clients with discrediting behavioural markers such as a history of non-

compliance if they were depicted as from a minority (especially black) group. This disparity in the racial targeting of sanctions, they argue, reflects how the images of the poor used to justify the disciplinary turn in social policy ‘did not emerge de novo’ but drew on a powerful pre-existing cultural template by which dysfunctional stereotypes about ‘the black poor were generalised to the poor as a whole’ (2011, p.82). These dysfunctional stereotypes play a critical performative role in the ‘cultural denial’ of poverty as something ‘that happens only to a tiny minority of pathological people’ (Eubanks, 2018, p.175). Moreover, as Eubanks’ work on the spread of digital decision-making in public assistance programs shows, these cultural and racial minorities are not just singled out for targeting by caseworkers’ biases. Their lives and choices are also increasingly monitored by more intensive forms of digital surveillance that disproportionately expose them to ‘the rational discrimination of high-tech tools’ (Eubanks, 2018, p. 192).

Our data do not allow us to consider whether the implementation of welfare-to-work in Australia is similarly biased by implicit processes of racial and cultural coding (although see Klein, 2016). Nonetheless, we can reasonably hypothesise that activation workers’ perceptions of the unemployed more generally will influence how they enact work-related conditionality on the ground. To the extent that increasing numbers of caseworkers come to endorse behavioural explanations of unemployment, we would expect to see a convergence around work-first approaches that prioritise ‘encouraging increased effort in standardised job-search activities’ (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2015, p. 535). Although any such convergence might alternatively be accounted for by the more intensive forms of performance monitoring applying to activation workers due to NPM implementation reforms.

Performance measurement and the erosion of discretion

It is axiomatic within the street-level bureaucracy literature that discretion is inherent in frontline work (Brodkin, 2011; Sandfort, 2000). However, this characterisation is challenged by studies of the impact of some NPM governance reforms, such as performance benchmarking, on decision-making at the frontline (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007; Brodkin, 2015; Author C et al., 2015; Larsen,

2013). These studies suggest that caseworkers' discretion to flexibly apply program rules has become increasingly bounded by performance measurement systems that have been designed to discipline choices and 'to raise the odds that preferred paths will be taken' (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011b, p. i204). This pressure can be observed in the evolution of the Australian quasi-market for employment services.

The first JN contract operated largely as a 'black box' model, with providers free to tailor their service offerings as they saw fit provided they achieved the requisite outcomes. However, this discretion was reigned in under subsequent contracts as more detailed regulations about minimum servicing standards were added in response to mounting concerns about widespread practices of 'creaming' and 'parking' within the system and evidence that providers were 'churning' jobseekers through short-term placements and even 'creating phantom jobs' to collect payments (O'Flynn 2007, p. 4). From the second JN contract, the government introduced a Code of Conduct for providers and a requirement 'to record in more detail the actual services delivered' (O'Flynn 2007, p. 3). The number of guidelines regulating employment services staff dramatically increased over subsequent years, reaching over 3,000 pages under JSA (ANAO, 2014) and, at the time of writing, including 45 pages of guidelines on managing clients' mutual obligation requirements (DJSB, 2018a). This emphasis on prescribing the management of mutual obligations illustrates how the re-bureaucratisation of the Australian quasi-market (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007, pp. 292-3) was driven not just by concerns about 'creaming and parking' but also by the government's desire to ensure conditionality was enforced. Over the early 2000s, an increasingly distrustful purchaser moved towards a stronger regulatory regime with greater powers to recover payments from providers deemed to have misused their discretion or breached contractual requirements. One way it did this was through introducing a Star Ratings system, which uses a complicated regression analysis to measure the relative performance of providers. The principal indicator has historically been the proportion of clients who sustain 13 and 26-weeks of employment, although under the *Jobactive* contract 20 per cent of agencies' Star Rating also depends on the proportion of clients they commence (and how quickly) in WfD (ANAO, 2017). Under this system, each agency site is

awarded a rating from 1 to 5, which then feeds into providers' overall performance rating at an employment region level. The system was introduced in 2001 following an official review, which found that jobseeker choice was playing only a minimal role in the selection of providers as they had little information about providers' performance and so found it difficult to exercise choice 'in a meaningful way' (O'Flynn 2007, p. 5). Accordingly, Star Ratings were introduced to drive competition for clients although they quickly became the key mechanism for awarding contracts and periodically (e.g. every 18 months) reallocating business shares from 'low' to 'high' performing providers. For example, approximately 60 per cent of the providers contracted to deliver the third JN contract were automatically awarded contracts on the basis of their performance, with only providers rated three stars or below required to tender (O'Flynn, 2007).

The elevation of Star Ratings into a major mechanism for awarding contracts and business shares increased the contestability of local business allocations. This had the effect of 'making all local practices more important to business viability than before' (Author C et al., 2015, p. 55) such that local office practices became subject to monitoring not only by departmental contract managers but also their own head office. This scrutiny was facilitated by the spread of IT systems, such as the ESS Web interface that frontline workers use to record multiple dimensions of their work, enabling departmental officers and agency managers to review the decisions of individual staff (Marston & McDonald, 2008). In a context 'where every transaction is visible' (Fowkes, 2011, p. 8), a 'fear of non-compliance' gripped agencies who responded by embracing standardisation 'as a way to minimise risks' (Author C et al., 2011, pp. 826, 827). This intensification of performance monitoring has not eliminated decision-making discretion entirely. But it has altered the choice-architecture under which frontline workers exercise discretion to reward rule-bound decisions while increasing the risks associated with flexibility and innovation (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012, p. 9). Although caseworkers' discretion continues to be broad in the sense that they are authorised to make a wide number of decisions affecting clients, they make these decisions 'as actors who know they are being observed and evaluated' (Soss et al., 2011b, p. i226). The intensity with which performance monitoring is being applied has affected what Brodtkin (2011, p. i260)

describes as the ‘calculus of street-level choice’ by motivating patterns of routinisation and service rationing as a way of maximising those aspects of performance to which rewards and penalties are attached. In motivating workers to do *different* things, and not just measuring the efficiency of what workers otherwise already do, performance monitoring systems ‘reshape agency itself’ (Soss et al., 2011b, p. i204) and in ways that risk ‘exacerbating workfare’s already considerable commodifying tendencies’ (Brodkin, 2015, p. 14). For example, in Brodkin’s (2015) study of Chicago welfare offices, performance benchmarking on the basis of client participation in job search training motivated organizational practices of refusing exemptions even for reasons required under law.

Data and methods

The data concerning this relationship between activation workers’ evaluations of welfare recipients and their willingness to report clients for sanctioning and to recommend work-first approaches to job searching are drawn from four surveys of Australian frontline employment services staff (client-facing workers who interact directly with welfare recipients to either make them job-ready or support them to find and sustain employment). The first survey was developed and refined between 1996 and 1998 as part of a study of the impacts of marketisation on service delivery. Subsequent surveys - adapted from the original instrument - were repeated in 2008, 2012 and 2016 to follow the longer-term impacts of street-level welfare reform in the Australian quasi-market. While the first survey included several hundred respondents from the publicly-owned CES as well as newly licenced contracted providers, the respondents to all subsequent surveys were contracted agency staff, reflecting the privatisation of Australia’s system in July 2003 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Survey respondents

| Year | Government employees | For-profit provider staff | Non-profit provider staff | Other/unknown | Total |
|--------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1998 | 273 | 118 | 196 | 38 | 625 |
| 2008 | n/a | 392 | 1056 | 64 | 1512 |
| 2012 | n/a | 316 | 882 | 66 | 1264 |
| 2016 | n/a | 393 | 799 | 41 | 1233 |
| Total | 273 | 1219 | 2933 | 209 | 4634 |

The survey instrument comprised approximately 100 questions about how frontline staff carry out their work as well as their perceptions of the system, and of the clients they work with (For details see Author C et al., 2015, pp. 171-178). Previously reported findings have addressed aspects of frontline staff decision-making discretion, the practices of creaming and parking, and the workload pressures facing activation workers' in Australia from rising caseloads and increasing compliance requirements. In this study, we focus on the responses to several items specifically addressing frontline workers' attitudes towards welfare recipients and the extent to which they are willing to use sanctions and adopt a 'work-first' approach to activation. While findings from the first three surveys on frontline workers' use of sanctions have been previously reported, this is the first study to report the findings on caseworkers' attitudes towards the unemployed. Significantly, the inter-temporal nature of our data enables us to track how these have shifted since the commencement of privatisation in the 1990s and whether this has corresponded with the adoption of a more regular approach to working with clients. The principal measure that we use to assess respondents' problem figuration of unemployment is the following question: 'In your experience, which is more often to blame if a person is on benefits: lack of effort on their part or circumstances beyond their control?' Respondents could answer on a 7-point Likert-scale from (1) 'lack of effort' to (7) 'circumstances beyond their control.' The question responses were recoded for analysis such that lower scores indicate more negative attitudes towards welfare claimants and higher scores less negative attitudes. Where appropriate we also report responses to other questions addressing caseworkers' attitudes towards the unemployed, such as one question asking: 'what percentage of people who apply for benefits or an allowance would rather be on benefits than work to support themselves and their families.' However, it is the question about whether respondents attribute being on benefits to recipients' lack of motivation that best captures the behavioural problem figuration of unemployment underpinning work-related conditionality. After presenting the results about frontline workers' attitudes towards welfare recipients, we report on the extent to which activation workers are increasingly adopting a work-first approach and using sanctions to 'motivate' the unemployed. The question items used for assessing these aspects of the enforcement

of work-related conditionality are described in the presentation of the analysis. This is followed by a consideration of the extent to which activation workers who internalise the behavioural problematisation of unemployment display an increased willingness to enforce work-related conditionality via *work-first* job searching and *sanctions*. Chi-squared and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to detect differences between survey years where the responses were categorical, ordinal and rank order. In cases of numeric responses or continuous variables, ANOVA was used.

Findings

The attitudes of frontline staff toward welfare recipients, and the extent to which they attribute being on benefits to recipients' lack of effort, are presented in Table 2. The changes in response between surveys are statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$) and show a hardening of attitudes at the frontline. In the 1998 survey, around a quarter of frontline respondents blamed being on benefits on the recipients' lack of effort, rather than on circumstances beyond their control. By 2008, however, this had risen to 43.5 per cent of respondents whereas less than 20 per cent perceived that being on benefits was more likely a product of circumstances beyond claimants' control. The proportion endorsing a voluntaristic rather than more structural problem figuration has declined marginally since but remains high at almost 40 per cent of 2016 survey respondents. This hardening of attitudes is further reflected in respondents' different estimates of the proportion of people applying for benefits 'who would rather be on welfare than work to support themselves and their families'. As Table 3 shows, in 1998, the mean estimate reported was just below 29 per cent although the high standard deviation indicates that frontline workers' estimates varied widely. In all subsequent surveys, however, the proportion of recipients who are estimated as preferring being on benefits to employment is closer to 40 per cent.

Table 2: Frontline workers' problem figurations of unemployment

| Year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------------------------------|
| | Lack of effort | | | | | | Circumstances beyond control |
| <i>Which is more often to blame if a person is on benefits?</i> | | | | | | | |
| 1998 (n=247) | 3.6 | 9.7 | 13.8 | 31.6 | 14.2 | 20.6 | 6.5 |
| 2008 (n=1095) | 6.8 | 16.2 | 20.5 | 37.5 | 12.0 | 4.8 | 2.2 |
| 2012 (n=897) | 9.1 | 10.4 | 21.5 | 39.9 | 12.3 | 3.8 | 3.0 |
| 2016 (n=820) | 8.9 | 10.7 | 20.1 | 37.0 | 14.4 | 6.3 | 2.6 |
| Chi-squared (3) = 55.305 $p < 0.0001$ | | | | | | | |

Table 3: Proportion of claimants who frontline staff perceive would rather be on benefits than work

| | 1998 (n =242) | 2008 (n=1101) | 2012 (n=891) | 2016 (n=805) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Mean estimate (%) | 28.88 | 40.95 | 41.41 | 38.79 |
| Standard deviation | 21.15 | 23.31 | 22.29 | 21.62 |
| WELCH ANOVA | F (3, 990.786) = 24.161 | | P<0.0001 | |

The spread of work-related conditionality

The enforcement of work-related conditionality via mandatory job-searching, WfD requirements, and sanctions for non-compliance with various forms of behavioural conditionality has become an increasingly central component of activation policy. This is reflected in the responses to several survey items addressing the sanctioning behaviours of frontline staff and their willingness to prioritise 'work-first' in low-paid, low-skilled employment over remaining on benefits (See Table 4). The latter is examined via participants' responses to the following scenario: 'After a short time attending your service, an average jobseeker is offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would make him or her better off financially. Assume he or she has two choices: either to take the job and leave

welfare *or* stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity.’ Respondents were asked what advice they would personally give clients in this situation, ranging from (1) take the job to (7) stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity. Over time, the proportion of respondents who indicate that they would adopt the strongest work-first orientation in this scenario has risen by 12.4 percentage points from 49.8 per cent of respondents in 1998 to 62.2 per cent in 2016. Conversely, the proportion indicating that they would be more likely to advise clients to remain on benefits has declined from 8.4 per cent in 1998 to 4.0 per cent in 2016. These changes are statistically significant (Chi-squared (3) = 30.958 $p < 0.0001$).

Similarly, as Table 4 shows, there has been a sizeable increase in respondents’ willingness to report clients for non-compliance under various circumstances ranging from whether a client is dismissed from a job or training program, to whether a client fails to attend an appointment, to whether a client refuses to apply for a suitable vacancy. Over the survey period, there have been 10 different circumstances that respondents have consistently been asked whether (yes or no) they would typically report a client for non-compliance in such a situation. These circumstances closely relate to the conditions specified under Australia’s *Social Security (Administration) Act* under which welfare recipients may be penalised for so-called participation failures, including: failing to apply for jobs, refusing to accept an offer of suitable employment, voluntarily leaving employment, being dismissed for misconduct, and failing to attend appointments with employment services providers. As such, the survey items on sanctioning are designed to consider the extent to which frontline employment services staff are prepared to enforce legislated conditionality requirements. The responses to these items have been recoded to give a numerical score of the total number of circumstances that frontline staff would report clients for sanctioning in. This score enables us to see how the reach of behavioural conditionality has either narrowed or expanded. For example, in the 1998 survey, most respondents were only willing to report clients for sanctioning in 3 to 4 out of 10 circumstances, and fewer than 10 per cent indicated that they would report clients in 7 or

more circumstances. In all subsequent surveys, however, more than three quarters of respondents have said that they are willing to report clients for sanctioning in at least 7 out of the 10 circumstances.

Table 4: ‘Work-first’ orientation and willingness to report clients for sanctioning

| Year | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|----------|--------------|------|------|------------|------------|--------------|------------------|
| | | Take the job | | | | | | Stay on benefits |
| After a short time attending your service, an average jobseeker is offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would make him or her better off financially ... What would your personal advice to a client in this situation be: either to take the job and leave welfare <i>or</i> to stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity.’ | | | | | | | | |
| 1998 | (n=249) | 49.8 | 27.3 | 10.4 | 4.0 | 4.4 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| 2008 | (n=1117) | 53.9 | 19.9 | 11.6 | 8.3 | 3.2 | 2.3 | 0.7 |
| 2012 | (n=910) | 63.6 | 16.3 | 9.9 | 6.7 | 2.2 | 0.9 | 0.4 |
| 2016 | (n=817) | 62.2 | 18.4 | 7.6 | 8.0 | 2.6 | 0.9 | 0.5 |
| No. of circumstances respondents would typically report clients for non-compliance under (% of respondents) | | | | | 1-2 | 3-4 | 5 - 6 | 7+ |
| 1998 | (n=575) | | | | 25 | 50.1 | 15.3 | 9.6 |
| 2008 | (n=985) | | | | 6.7 | 4.5 | 11.2 | 77.5 |
| 2012 | (n=839) | | | | 4.6 | 3.7 | 13.7 | 77.9 |
| 2016 | (n=827) | | | | 2.3 | 2.4 | 8.3 | 86.8 |

Comparing responses by agency type

Although these data suggest a significant hardening of attitudes towards welfare recipients among activation workers overall, this may conceal important differences between the orientations of frontline staff working under different organisational conditions. According to commentators such as Bredgaard and Larsen (2007: 294), one of the mechanisms through which NPM governance reforms help to substantially shift the content of welfare-to-work policy in the direction of ‘work-first’ is through outsourcing delivery to agents motivated by economic incentives, who are expected to be ‘tougher in availability assessments, use of sanctions, demands, and other

motivational initiatives.’ This is partially supported by Soss, Fording and Schram’s analysis of sanctioning rates by welfare-to-work program providers in Florida, which found that the odds of receiving a sanction were 25 per cent higher for clients in regions with a for-profit provider ‘relative to similar clients served by non-profit providers’ (2011, p. 218). Accordingly, we considered whether there were any significant differences between the work-first orientation of for-profit, non-profit, and government agency workers and their attitudes towards those on welfare. To consider this, respondents were grouped by agency type and their responses to the question items on ‘work-first’ orientation and attribution of blame to jobseekers were recoded into rank scores (where a lower rank score indicates a higher propensity to blame welfare recipients and to encourage ‘work first’ activation). As the Australian quasi-market was entirely privatised in 2003, government agency workers only feature in the 1998 data when, as the data in Table 5 shows, we found no significant differences between the degree to which government compared with contracted agency workers blamed jobseekers for a lack of motivation. There was a marginally significant difference in government agency workers’ willingness to recommend ‘work first’, but it was in the opposite direction to what many would expect: government workers’ were more inclined to recommend ‘work first’ than either for-profit or non-profit agency workers. This is consistent with previously reported findings on sanctioning rates in the 1998 survey data, in which government workers were more inclined to sanction jobseekers than either for-profit or non-profit agency workers (Author C, 1999, p. 194). Accordingly, it is unlikely that the hardening of frontline workers’ attitudes towards the unemployed since the late 1990s can be attributed to the privatisation of the Australian quasi-market. Similarly, we found no significant pattern of differences between the attitudes and ‘work first’ orientations of for-profit compared with non-profit agency workers. Although in earlier survey years non-profit agency workers appeared marginally less ‘work first’ than their for-profit agency counterparts this difference did not persist beyond the 2012 survey when, indeed, non-profit agency workers were more likely to recommend ‘work first’. Furthermore, other than the 2008 survey, there were no significant differences

between non-profit and for-profit agency workers' perceptions about the blameworthiness of clients. This suggests that the orientations of activation workers' in Australia towards the unemployed are relatively stable regardless of agency type, perhaps reflecting the deepening standardisation that has occurred as the Australian quasi-market has matured and become more intensively re-regulated (see Author C et al., 2015, p. 52).

Table 5: Attitudes and orientations of respondents by agency type

| Year | Agency type | Mean rank |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| <i>... which is more often to blame if a person is on benefits: lack of effort on their part, or circumstances beyond their control?</i> | | |
| 1998 | For-profit (FP) agency staff (n= 24) | 104.85 |
| | Non-profit (NFP) agency staff (n=64) | 112.2 |
| | Government (GOV) staff (n=132) | 110.70 |
| | Chi-squared (2) = 0.247 $p=0.884$ | |
| 2008 | FP staff (n= 291) | 493.27 |
| | NFP staff (n=778) | 550.61 |
| | Chi-squared (1) = 7.840 $p =0.005$ | |
| 2012 | FP staff (n= 213) | 451.42 |
| | NFP staff (n=647) | 423.61 |
| | Chi-squared (1) = 2.176 $p =0.140$ | |
| 2016 | FP staff (n= 246) | 396.37 |
| | NFP staff (n=543) | 394.38 |
| | Chi-squared (1) = 0.014 $p =0.907$ | |
| <i>After a short time attending your service, an average jobseeker is offered a low skilled, low paying job ... Assume he or she has two choices: either to take the job and leave welfare or to stay on benefits. What's your advice?</i> | | |
| 1998 | FP staff (n= 24) | 108.06 |
| | NFP staff (n=63) | 126.88 |
| | Government (GOV) staff (n=135) | 104.93 |
| | Chi-squared (2) = 6.020 $p=0.049$ | |
| 2008 | FP staff (n= 289) | 500.95 |
| | NFP staff (n=976) | 558.27 |
| | Chi-squared (1) = 8.506 $p =0.004$ | |
| 2012 | FP staff (n= 219) | 466.09 |
| | NFP staff (n=650) | 424.54 |
| | Chi-squared (1) = 6.076 $p =0.014$ | |
| 2016 | FP staff (n= 247) | 392.78 |
| | NFP staff (n=538)) | 393.10 |
| | Chi-squared (1) = 0.000 $p =0.983$ | |

Blaming, activation and discretion

Our study shows two patterns: (1) activation workers' attitudes towards welfare recipients have hardened considerably since the introduction of marketisation in the late 1990s; and (2) there has been a convergence towards the enforcement of 'work-first', particularly through a heightened emphasis on reporting clients for non-compliance. But the extent to which these two developments are linked remains unclear. For example, the circumstances under which sanctions can be applied for various forms of non-compliance are regulated under Section 42 of the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999*. The increase in the number of circumstances under which frontline workers reported they were prepared to recommend sanctions may simply reflect legislative changes, although this would not explain the increase observed from 2008 to 2012 when the range of circumstances under which sanctions could be applied was narrowed (see Ramia & Carney, 2010). The association between respondents' perceptions of welfare recipients and their willingness to enforce work-related conditionality was analysed by calculating the correlation coefficients between the extent to which respondents blamed recipients for their 'lack of effort', on the one hand, and the extent to which they would recommend 'work-first' and 'report clients for sanctions' on the other. Additionally, given the prominence of frontline workers' decision-making discretion in the literature on street-level organisations, we further compared these correlations across respondents who reported having high versus low decision-making discretion. This was based on their responses to the following question: 'When it comes to day-to-day work, I am free to decide for myself what I will do with each jobseeker.' This is one among several survey questions designed to track the extent to which frontline workers retain leeway to make decisions in their roles, or whether their use of discretion is increasingly disciplined by the spread of performance management systems and a more intensive focus on compliance auditing and outcome measurement by agency and contract managers. Findings to date point towards the latter, and that this narrowing of discretion is associated with 'a fear of making wrong decisions' and being penalised by the purchaser (Author C et al., 2015, p. 55).

Calling to mind Bovens and Zouridis' (2002: 177) concerns about 'screen-level bureaucracy' and the impact of 'knowledge-management systems and digital decision trees' on workers' scope for administrative discretion, approximately half of respondents in every survey since 2008 have agreed or strongly agreed that their computer system tells them 'what steps to take with clients/jobseekers and when to take them'. Over the surveys, the proportion of respondents who 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that they are free to decide what to do with jobseekers has nearly quadrupled from 7.1 per cent in 1998 to 26.4 per cent in 2016. Conversely, the proportion who strongly agree that they have administration discretion in this way has declined from 27.1 per cent in 1998 to 9.8 per cent of in 2016. These findings resonate with Eubanks' (2018, p. 195) work on the ubiquity of computer-driven decision-making in public assistance programs, and their legacy in redefining social work 'as information processing.' Insofar as Australian activation workers' scope for administration discretion has become more bounded, this suggests decreasing room for frontline workers' decisions to be influenced by their perceptions of welfare recipients. Indeed, many commentators have interpreted efforts to standardise case management through the development of client classification tools and IT-driven knowledge-management systems as part of a 'political struggle' to advance the enforcement of 'work first' through making it harder for activation workers to avoid adopting a 'rule-bound and administrative' approach (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012, p. 501). In reducing frontline workers' room for manoeuvre, Marston argues that the introduction of electronic assessment and profiling tools in Australia in the early 2000s 'made it harder for staff not to apply harsh new financial sanctions and penalties to the unemployed' (2006, p. 91). Larsen draws a similar conclusion about the introduction of standardised profiling tools in Denmark, arguing that they were essentially 'designed to limit the discretion of frontline workers' (2013, p. 114) who were distrusted by central government to advance a work-first approach. In the US, Soss, Fording and Schram argue that the threat of sanctions is one of the few remaining tools that case workers have left at their disposal given the lack of resources in programs to achieve performance targets via alternative means. With little

scope for individually working with clients to address their ‘real life’ problems, frustrated case workers ‘turn to the most basic threat they can wield—the sanction—as a way to motivate client compliance’ (Soss et al., 2011b, p. i224).

Underpinning this contestation over standardisation is the assumption that reducing activation workers’ administration discretion decreases their capacity to resist enacting work-related conditionality requirements on the ground. Accordingly, to the extent that there is any correlation between workers’ perceptions of welfare recipients and their willingness to enforce work-related conditionality via sanctions and a ‘work-first’ approach, we would expect this correlation to be weaker among those workers who report reduced decision-making autonomy. Conversely, we would expect the correlation to be stronger among those activation workers who report high decision-making discretion. This is not to say that this latter group are either more, or less, likely to endorse voluntaristic rather than structural explanations of unemployment. Rather, whatever their perceptions of the unemployed, these perceptions are expected to more strongly mediate the decisions they make about sanctioning clients and recommending ‘work first’ than in the case of frontline workers who report little scope for administrative discretion and who can be expected to follow a more ‘rule bound’ approach regardless of their personal views about clients. We consider this in the analysis reported in Table 7, which shows the strength and significance of these correlations across survey respondents overall and between those who ‘strongly agree’ (high-discretion group) that they are free to decide what to do with each client and those who ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ (low-discretion group).

Table 6: Correlations between ‘blaming welfare recipients’ and work-related conditionality

| Year | Personal ‘Work first’ orientation | Frequency | Coefficient (rho) | p-value |
|-------------|--|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| 1998 | Total sample | 244 | 0.22 | <0.0001 |
| | High-discretion group | 72 | 0.15 | 0.223 |
| | Low-discretion group | 12 | 0.24 | 0.454 |
| 2008 | Total sample | 1084 | 0.19 | <0.0001 |
| | High-discretion group | 159 | 0.20 | 0.013 |
| | Low-discretion group | 198 | 0.20 | 0.005 |
| 2012 | Total sample | 896 | 0.10 | 0.004 |
| | High-discretion group | 90 | 0.27 | 0.01 |
| | Low-discretion group | 175 | 0.08 | 0.297 |
| 2016 | Total Sample | 812 | 0.18 | <0.0001 |
| | High-discretion group | 73 | 0.25 | 0.032 |
| | Low-discretion group | 198 | 0.15 | 0.042 |
| All years | Total sample | 3036 | 0.16 | <0.0001 |
| | High-discretion group | 394 | 0.22 | <0.0001 |
| | Low-discretion group | 583 | 0.14 | 0.001 |
| Year | Willingness to report clients for sanctioning | Frequency | Coefficient (rho) | p-value |
| 1998 | Total sample | 222 | -0.21 | 0.002 |
| | High-discretion group | 69 | -0.29 | 0.017 |
| | Low-discretion group | 11 | -0.09 | 0.804 |
| 2008 | Total sample | 929 | -0.12 | <0.0001 |
| | High-discretion group | 145 | -0.26 | 0.002 |
| | Low-discretion group | 167 | -0.10 | 0.220 |
| 2012 | Total sample | 801 | -0.07 | 0.04 |
| | High-discretion group | 80 | -0.19 | 0.09 |
| | Low-discretion group | 151 | -0.14 | 0.082 |
| 2016 | Total sample | 773 | -0.35 | 0.34 |
| | High-discretion group | 69 | -0.31 | 0.01 |
| | Low-discretion group | 190 | 0.05 | 0.501 |
| All years | Total sample | 2725 | -0.10 | <0.0001 |
| | High-discretion group | 363 | -0.30 | <0.001 |
| | Low-discretion group | 519 | -0.06 | 0.188 |

Notes: Spearman’s Rho is reported as the measure of effect size. A negative correlation coefficient is expected between ‘blaming welfare recipients’ and ‘willingness to sanction’ because the response scales are inverse (i.e. a lower value on the ‘blaming’ question indicates a more negative attitude while a higher value on the ‘willingness to sanction’ measure indicates an increased willingness to report clients for non-compliance). The ‘high-discretion’ group is the group of respondents in each survey who ‘strongly agreed’ that ‘When it comes to day-to-day work, I am free to decide for myself what to do with each client/jobseeker.’ To capture a sufficient number of responses for meaningful statistical comparison, the ‘low-discretion’ group includes respondents who either ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with this statement.

Considering the overall sample, the data suggest that there is indeed an association between the propensity of frontline workers to blame being on benefits on recipients’ lack of motivation and

their willingness to report clients for sanctioning and recommend ‘work-first.’ However, the strength of the association is weaker than the criticisms of the behavioural problem figuration of unemployment suggest, and barely apparent at all (either not statistically significant or a coefficient of less than -0.10) in relation to respondents’ willingness to report clients for sanctioning in more recent iterations of the survey. Interpreting the data through the lens of respondents’ decision-making discretion, however, reveals a different picture. In particular, the size of the coefficient between ‘blaming’ and ‘willingness to report clients for sanctioning’ triples from -0.10 to -0.30 across all survey years when only the responses of those reporting ‘high-discretion’ are considered. This correlation is statistically significant and its strength does not diminish over time. Similarly, the magnitude of the correlation coefficient between ‘blaming’ recipients and the personal “work-first” orientation of activation workers increases when we consider only those respondents reporting high discretion – although not to the same extent. Conversely, when only the responses of those reporting ‘low’ decision-making discretion are considered, the correlation between ‘blaming’ and the ‘personal “work-first” orientation’ of respondents remains significant in only two out of the four surveys while the correlation between ‘blaming’ and ‘willingness to report clients for sanctioning’ loses statistical significance. This is in line with our predictions as well as debates within the literature on the political struggle over street-level workers’ discretion and its implications for the enforcement of a more rule-bound approach to activation. Although it must be noted that a limitation of our approach is that the survey question only addresses respondents’ self-reported perceptions of, and approaches to working with, clients; not how they actually implement and produce policy at the micro-level of ‘everyday organisational life’ (Brodkin, 2011, p. i273). Frontline workers may have minimal discretion over sanctioning decisions in practice. But this does not mean that their self-reported survey responses about the circumstances under which they would normally recommend sanctions should necessarily follow such a rule-bound logic. After all, their survey responses are not subject to managerial oversight in the way that their actual sanctioning decisions are. This makes the observed differences between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ discretion groups even more striking. Nonetheless, there are also reasons to believe that

participants' responses provide an accurate reflection of their behaviours. Numerous framing statements were included to prime participants to respond from the perspective of how government policies and contractual conditions impact how they do their jobs. At the start of the survey, participants were informed that 'The questions ask you about your experience as an employment services professional.' They were subsequently reminded several times throughout that: 'Agencies must organise their work based on government policy and the nature of the labor market, among other considerations ... We are interested in your opinion on how these factors impact on your agency and how you do your job.'

Discussion and conclusion

The data report in this study on changes in the willingness of Australian frontline employment services staff to sanction jobseekers and to recommend 'work first' activation provide a demonstration of how the reach of work-related forms of welfare conditionality has expanded over recent decades. At a policy level, the intensification of work-related conditionality is frequently underpinned by negative assumptions about welfare recipients' personal responsibility and motivation to work (Wright, 2012); a problem figuration of unemployment that the data reported in this study indicate is increasingly endorsed by a significant proportion of frontline activation workers in Australia. Although the reasons why activation workers' attitudes towards the unemployed have hardened remain somewhat unclear.

One possibility is that it is related to changing labor market conditions and broader social attitudes towards welfare recipients in Australia, which appear to have hardened since the 1990s. For example, in the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, approximately two-thirds of respondents endorsed the view that 'most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one' (Schofield & Butterworth, 2015). Ten years previously, just 44 per cent of respondents to a national survey agreed that 'reluctance to work' was a cause of high unemployment (Eardley, Saunders, & Evans, 2000). Whether these attitudinal shifts are connected to changing labor market conditions is difficult to say. In 1998, the unemployment rate averaged around 7.8 per cent,

declining to below 4.5 per cent in December 2008, and rising to 5.8 per cent in December 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Whether the 3.3 per cent change in the unemployment rate over the decade to 2008 sufficiently explains the 22 percentage point decline in the proportion of frontline respondents who endorsed a structural rather than voluntaristic explanation of unemployment over this same period is unclear. Moreover, the deterioration in economic conditions since 2008 appears to have had little impact on activation workers' attitudes towards the unemployed, which have softened only marginally since. Substantial policy shifts over the early 2000s may have equally contributed to the hardening of attitudes at the Australian frontline, including the widening of WfD requirements to undertake up to 15 hours per week of compulsory training or unpaid work experience activities for six months in every year. Although introduced in 1997, these requirements only initially applied to young people but were gradually extended to all jobseekers under 50 in the early 2000s along with 'new prescriptions as to the frequency of meetings and intensity of activity' (Fowkes, 2011, p. 6). As McDonald and Chenoweth (2006, p. 116) argue, changes in the institutional character of the welfare state 'promote a set of norms, expectations and structures' that transform how caseworkers view the nature of client problems.

Another important consideration is the organizational and professional context in which frontline workers carry out their jobs. Besides the privatisation of Australia's employment services system, there has been a persistent and deepening trend towards the standardisation and de-professionalisation of activation work. This is evidenced by declining levels of qualifications among Australian frontline staff over the early 2000s, when growth in the use of IT systems and client categorisation instruments replaced 'part of the skill set that a case manager might otherwise need' (Author C et al. 2011, p. 821). Caseloads within the Australian system are high, with caseworkers managing an average of almost 148 jobseekers, nearly two-thirds of whom have been unemployed for more than 12-months and 20 per cent for more than five years (DJSB, 2018b). Among jobseekers in the highest service stream, the average duration in employment services is more than five years. In the context of a system characterised by high caseloads, large proportions

of very long-term unemployed clients, and limited administrative discretion for frontline workers to exercise professional judgement, blaming the unemployed for their lack of motivation may be a way of coping, or living with the system constraints for workers (Marston, 2013). As Dunn (2013, p. 805) acknowledges when considering the predominantly negative framing of client-motivation by Work Programme agency workers, ‘workers might be inclined to over-emphasise clients’ unwillingness to seek employment in order to deflect attention from their own possible failings in helping them into work.’ Likewise, as Jordan (2018, p. 69) argues in relation to the programmatic constraints that hinder Work Programme staff from providing ‘any real help’, ‘belief in a pathological underclass’ enables workers to accept poor outcomes as ‘inevitable, and more importantly, to be the fault of the participants and *not* the staff.’ Seale and her colleagues similarly interpreted this blame-avoidance strategy as one reason why nearly half the North Carolina welfare-to-work program managers they interviewed ‘constructed clients as unmotivated or disinterested in doing the work necessary’ (2012, p. 51).

While the findings presented show the internalisation of stigmatising welfare discourses by increasing numbers of activation workers, our analysis suggests that these attitudinal shifts have contributed only marginally to the production and intensification of regulatory activation measures at the street-level. A limitation of the study, as already acknowledged, is that our survey data do not capture the actual behaviours of frontline workers in their interactions with clients in the way that ethnographies of street-level work do (e.g. Brodtkin, 2011; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2015; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000). And it is likely to certainly remain the case, as predicted by many of these studies, that *individual* caseworkers may go out of their way to help *particular* clients or to penalise others depending on how they appraise those specific clients as persons or view themselves as (professional) workers. But what the data in this study capture in a way that those ethnographies do not is the relationship between activation workers’ wider evaluations of the unemployed *as a social group* and their willingness to utilise behavioural forms of conditionality in general. In this context, the study shows that the general turn towards utilising regulatory activation

measures at the frontline of welfare-to-work in Australia has been driven not by activation workers' internationalisation of stigmatising welfare discourses but by the intensification of systems of performance monitoring and the (double) activation of frontline workers by the government purchaser. This is evidenced by the waning correlation between respondents' perceptions of the unemployed and their enforcement of work-related conditionality over time, as the more intensive use of performance monitoring systems has standardised frontline practice; and by the absence of any significant correlation between frontline respondents' views about the blameworthiness of recipients and their willingness to sanction clients among frontline workers reporting low decision-making discretion. While the personal beliefs and moral values of frontline workers have previously been considered important determinants of street-level decision making, Fuertes and Lindsay (2015, p. 530) emphasise how 'the organizational context is crucial in providing the setting for these norms to find expression'. The policy settings in Australia, and internationally, have embedded work-related conditionality as a primary pathway from welfare-to-work, while NPM governance reforms have intensified this conditionality through the choice-architecture of contracted agencies and their staff via more intensive performance monitoring. Although these reforms have not eliminated all scope for administrative discretion, they have established the conditions for workers to embrace 'routinised discretion' by making the choices 'that maximise (or at least satisfy) the goal of meeting benchmarks or procedural requirements' (Brodkin, 2011, p. i259). Our findings expand the results of Fuertes and Lindsay's detailed case study research into the implementation of the Work Programme in the UK. Although they found differences among caseworkers in their attitudes to the unemployed, these 'appeared to have relatively limited impact on the support offered to clients, which was consistently rooted in a narrow, standardised form of work-first practice' (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2015, p. 535).

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