

Navigating indifference: Irish jobseekers' experiences of welfare conditionality

Philip Finn

Department of Sociology, Maynooth University, Ireland

Abstract

This paper analyses the impact of the intensification of work-related conditionality on the lived experience of jobseekers in Ireland. Post-crisis Ireland has witnessed the emergence of a definitive policy trajectory which seeks to enable a lifelong attachment to the labour force through work-related conditionality buttressed by sanctions. This mode of governing unemployment attempts a restructuring of the caseworker–claimant relationship through increased engagement, claimant adherence to mandatory conditions, and surveillance underpinned by potential reduction, suspension or loss of benefit. The paper provides a qualitative investigation of the lived experience of this impact through a thematic analysis of forty-two interviews with jobseekers in a county in the east of Ireland. The focus on the agency of jobseekers illustrates a system based on superficial engagement in which conditionality primarily operates as bureaucratic formality. This is reflective of a systemic indifference to claimants' needs and circumstances, producing a performance of feigned compliance in response.

Keywords: Welfare conditionality, sanctions, lived experience, welfare, dramaturgy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experience of welfare conditionality within Ireland's nascent activation regime through a thematic analysis of forty-two qualitative interviews with jobseekers. Since the early 1990s, labour market policies have increasingly turned toward activation, understood as a mix of measures across fiscal policy, education and training, welfare benefit rules and public services to facilitate, compel and/or encourage jobseekers into formal paid employment (Lødemel & Moreria, 2014). The use of work-related conditionality buttressed by sanctions occupies an increasingly prominent role within this 'activation turn' across welfare states (Knotz, 2018). Prior to the 2008 financial crash the Irish welfare state was considered a laggard in relation to activation due to a light articulation and implementation of conditionality and sanctions (Grubb et al., 2009). With international reviews recommending 'a more *coercive* approach' (Grubb et al., 2009, p. 130; emphasis in the original), there has been a refashioning of the system to overcome its previous passivity. Significant institutional reform has occurred with the creation of Intreo as a 'one-stop shop' amalgamating income protection and Public Employment Services, including referrals to other services. The introduction of JobPath has also initiated the marketisation of employment services in Ireland for the first time based on a Payment-by-Results model operated by two contractors, Seetec and Turas Nua. These contractors and Intreo operate alongside the already existing non-profit Local Employment Services.

At the heart of these reforms is an attempt to align Ireland with international trends in relation to welfare conditionality and sanctions. Welfare conditionality ties eligibility for welfare benefits to the ongoing fulfilment of specific patterns of behaviour (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019). Given Ireland is a relative latecomer to intensified conditionality, the limited research on the subject has provided alternative interpretations, with some suggesting it is relatively benign (National Economic and Social Council (NES), 2018; Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), 2018) and others identifying a more punitive streak reflective of regimes such as that of the UK (Boland & Griffin, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Whelan, 2020). In tackling this ambiguity, the paper characterises the Irish system as based on superficial engagement reflective of an indifference toward claimants' needs and desires. This in turn is generative of a constrained form of agency where claimants

perform feigned compliance to protect their interests. In laying out this analysis, the paper first discusses welfare conditionality within the Irish context. From here it lays out the methodological framework for the research, leading into a discussion of its findings. A short conclusion then reflects on the implications in our current conjuncture and future post-Covid world.

Welfare conditionality in the Irish context

Practices of conditionality

The above reforms provide the institutional context for an intensification of conditionality underpinned by sanctions within the Irish system, as well as its extension to lone parent jobseekers whose youngest child is aged seven or above. Conditionality has always existed in relation to unemployment, whether as categories of eligibility (e.g. that you are unemployed), circumstance (e.g. means-testing) or behaviour (e.g. actively seeking work) (Clasen & Clegg, 2007). The 'activation turn' has brought with it a greater focus on welfare agencies' bureaucratic orchestration and enforcement of the 'correct' behaviour among jobseekers. Through the government policy strategy *Pathways to Work* (DEASP, 2012, 2014, 2016), Irish jobseekers are now governed by a rationality of 'active job-seeking' with an emphasis on 'rights and responsibilities' (DEASP, 2012, 2014, 2016). It necessitates commitment to job-searching and/or enhancing employability (DEASP, 2012, p. 10) through training for those on working-age payments or considered 'economically inactive' as a means of reducing welfare dependency (DEASP, 2016, p. 14). While not reaching the level or vigour of anti-welfare discourse in the UK, Irish political discourse has nonetheless sought to situate conditionality and sanctions as the remedial measures necessary for work-shy jobseekers. Underpinning this is a heightening suspicion of welfare claimants as 'skivers' defrauding the system (Gaffney & Millar, 2020), evidenced in the 2017 campaign 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All' (Devereux & Power, 2019), which encouraged the general public's reporting of suspected fraud.

Within this governing rationality claimants are subject to an array of ongoing conditions, beyond the preconditions of initial access such as eligibility and circumstance, which must be continually satisfied in order to maintain payments. All jobseekers must sign a new 'social contract' (DEASP, 2012), the Record of Mutual Commitments, outlining the obligations of welfare agencies and claimants. In this

sense the document is a precondition to access benefits while also enforcing ongoing engagement and interaction which is concretised in individualised personal progression plans. Worked out in cooperation with caseworkers, this document sets out the individual claimant's road map to paid employment, which can include mandatory training or education. For those not referred to training or education, there is the necessity of periodically providing evidence of job-search activity to demonstrate availability and their search for paid employment. Claimants are also required to register online and submit a CV to the JobsIreland website. These are allied to monitoring of claimants by requiring permission for vacations, the weekly 'signing' for one's payment, and a monthly 'signing on' at a specified time and place to reaffirm eligibility, and circumstantial and behavioural conditionalities. There is also ongoing engagement with caseworkers, with the policy preference for meetings once a month (DEASP, 2016) alongside emails, phone calls and text messages. Contravening these conditions opens the jobseeker up to potential sanction for non-compliance whereby standard payments (€203) may be reduced by €44, suspended for nine months or disqualified altogether. Previous to the reforms the only sanction was the nuclear option of complete disqualification, which arguably dissuaded caseworkers from its application. The more subtle options now available arguably embed sanctions within the welfare architecture (Boland & Griffin, 2016). This situates sanctions as not only a penalty but an additional technique of conditionality which by its nature attempts to coerce forms of conduct by dissuading non-compliance.

Impact and experience of conditionality

The evidence from quantitative studies on the effectiveness of intensified conditionality and sanctions is mixed. On the one hand, some suggest that the use of strict conditions and sanctioning does reduce 'job choosiness' of claimants and increase welfare exits into employment (Lalive et al., 2005; Svarer, 2011). On the other hand, evidence suggests that their use induces economic hardship, deepens inactivity and leads to low-quality work, limited financial earnings and poor job sustainability (Taulbut et al., 2018; van den Berg et al., 2014). While many of the studies are country specific, Knotz's (2020) comparative analysis suggests that strict conditionality does increase exits to employment when allied to the provision of relatively generous financial supports and resources necessary for looking for work. The use of harsh sanctions appears counterproductive as they reduce

claimants' means and thus undermine their ability to job-search effectively (Knotz, 2020). Similarly, while suggesting that strict conditionality and sanctions work for some claimants, Card et al. (2018) argue that sustained human capital building is more effective for long-term unemployed people.

Qualitative research portrays a more negative picture of claimants' experience of strict conditionality and sanctions, although it does point toward the importance of income provision, genuine engagement and supports identified in the quantitative literature. Research from the UK, for example, situates punishment as a guiding principle of the social security system (Wright et al., 2020). For some this means the rewriting of the social contract and an undoing of Marshallian social citizenship as rights become conditional and based on the fulfilment of responsibilities and obligations (Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Patrick, 2017). Conditionality and sanctions are also understood as social murder implementing knowable and avoidable harms (Grover, 2018) or as part of a criminalisation of the poor (Fletcher & Wright, 2018). In their aggregation of two longitudinal qualitative studies, Wright & Patrick (2019) identify patterns of a 'typical' lived experience, including poverty, the absence of genuine job-search supports, and the role of sanctions in exacerbating threats of destitution and worsening mental health. What emerges is a picture of a brutalising regime in which the lived experience is one of material struggle, intensive surveillance and intervention (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019; Wright & Patrick, 2019).

The evidence base is not as well established in Ireland although research is beginning to emerge (see Boland & Griffin, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2018; Millar & Crosse, 2018; Murphy, 2016, 2019; Whelan, 2020). Much of this qualitative research identifies similarities with the UK such that conditionality and sanctions exacerbate the negative experience of unemployment while contributing to mistrust toward welfare agencies (Boland & Griffin, 2016). In particular, longitudinal research including jobseekers before and after reforms suggests increased conditionality has led to a worsening experience (Boland & Griffin, 2016). For Whelan (2020), the experience amounts to suffering 'punishment beatings by public demand' (Jayanetti, 2018, cited in Whelan, 2020, p. 14), involving a degrading loss of privacy and confidentiality and guilt provoked by pervasive suspicion. On the other hand, a recent review by NESC (2018) describes a benign system in which sanctions are favoured as a tool for prompting engagement rather than punishment. The review identified a lack of trust regarding

interactions with Intreo, low levels of claimant knowledge, and a lack of claimant choice about training, education and activation options. It nonetheless suggested an overall positive picture regarding Public Employment Services' proactive interactions with unemployed people (NESC, 2018). There does then appear to be some ambiguity around jobseeker claimants' experiences of work-related conditionality and the ways in which they interact with welfare services.

Experiences of conditionality and sanctions bear heavily upon understandings of agency within the literature. Hoggett (2001) argues that individuals can operate as 'self-as-agent' or 'self-as-object' with varying degrees of awareness of their own motivations, actions and choices in each role. Lister's (2004) typology of agency captures the ways in which claimants 'get by' on and 'get out' of welfare, as well as how they might individually 'get back at' or collectively 'get organised' in relation to welfare experiences. This permits a recognition of claimants' ability to act, with varying degrees of intention or awareness, within a multiplicity of economic, social, political and institutional constraints. The lived experience of brutalising conditionality and sanctions, however, often indicates a collapse of agency or 'self-as-object' due to the emotional and mental distress it produces (Wright, 2016). Where agency is identified, it is usually limited to coping mechanisms to 'get by' or employment and educational pursuits to 'get out' of welfare (Lister, 2004; Patrick, 2017). In exploring Irish jobseekers' experiences, this paper identifies a constrained form of agency related to the individualised tactics against welfare agencies often absent from the literature (although see Peterie et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2020).

This agency takes the form of repeated dramaturgical performances of the good jobseeker. For Goffman (1990), everyday life is filled with dramaturgical performances of various roles to manage how we are interpreted against expectations across social contexts. Individuals present themselves in particular ways, often unconsciously, and attempt to manage impressions in order to avoid negative interpretations. Here it involves a form of dramaturgical trickery whereby participants perform the role of the good jobseeker expected of them. These guileful ruses operate within the inventive possibilities allowed by the contours of dominant power and the constraints on agency it imposes. Often immediate, individualist and contingent, requiring constant renewal, they nonetheless constitute 'manoeuvres within the enemy's field of vision' (van Billow, quoted in de Certeau, 1984, p. 54). This trickery points to a space between mere

acceptance and open revolt in which individuals can engage in struggles over control and autonomy in spaces where agency is tightly constrained. This is particularly useful in relation to welfare where reliance on income provision necessitates feeling out the acceptable boundaries of agency and resistance, as well as their limitations.

Methodological framework

The data drawn on in this paper are derived from a wider PhD study on the lived experience of welfare conditionality in Ireland. The data were collected from semi-structured interviews with forty-two long-term unemployed jobseekers in a county in the east of Ireland, conducted between January 2017 and April 2018. All interviews lasted between one hour and two and a half hours. The research utilised purposive sampling to identify jobseekers in order to explore life on welfare, interactions with welfare agencies and caseworkers, stigma and relationships to, and perceptions of, work. Recruitment through personal contacts distributing information sheets about the research and my contact details resulted in nine interviews while another five occurred through snowballing, with interviewees passing on information sheets. Twelve interviews were obtained through distribution of information sheets via a gatekeeper within an education and training institution. Posters inviting participation placed in post offices, community centres and charity shops resulted in six interviews. Recruitment also occurred via a local mental health support group for jobseekers (five), a Traveller advocacy organisation (four) and a single-parent action group (one). The characteristics of the participants are detailed in Table 1.

The project utilised Foucault's (2008) governmentality approach to situate Irish reforms encapsulated within *Pathways to Work* (DEASP, 2012, 2014, 2016) as a new mode of governing unemployment in Ireland through a dominant rationality of 'active job-seeking'. It attempts to co-govern the conduct (Foucault, 2008) of individuals with their consent and participation through the socio-historical reverberations of the work ethic reinforced by work-related conditionality and sanctions. Governing power is not a unidirectional possession claimed by a singular group but rather something which saturates the social body by structuring the possible field of actions. It is productive of subjectivity but not in a totalising manner since action implies agency with the possibility of negotiation and resistance of dominant rationalities (Foucault, 1982). The dominant rationality constructs the 'good jobseeker' (Rogers, 2004) as one actively engaging with agencies

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

| <i>Gender</i> | <i>Numerical breakdown of participants</i> | |
|--------------------------|--|---------------|
| Male | 22 | |
| Female | 20 | |
| <i>Age</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
| 20–29 | 4 | 4 |
| 30–39 | 4 | 1 |
| 40–49 | 7 | 9 |
| 50–59 | 4 | 5 |
| 60–65 | 3 | 1 |
| <i>Ethnicity</i> | | |
| Irish | 21 | 15 |
| Irish Traveller | 0 | 4 |
| English | 1 | 0 |
| German | 0 | 1 |
| <i>Education*</i> | | |
| Secondary | 5 | 5 |
| Further education | 10 | 8 |
| Third level | 2 | 3 |
| <i>Welfare payment</i> | | |
| Jobseekers | 20 | 17 |
| Disability | 2 | 0 |
| Illness | 0 | 2 |
| One Parent Single Family | 0 | 1 |

* 9 participants did not provide information on education.

and conditionality, including a positive, enthusiastic and motivated outlook (Boland & Griffin, 2015a). Data analysis drew on Lister's (2004) typology of agency to capture the ways in which jobseekers experience and navigate the governmental rationality as they 'get by', 'get out', 'get back at' or 'get organised' in relation to welfare experiences. I carried out a thematic analysis of the data to elaborate multiple forms of agency within the categories as well as the ways in which the categories intersect. The dramaturgical performances of the good jobseeker outlined here emerge as an individualised tactic of 'getting back at' enmeshed in other forms of agency (e.g. the necessity of getting by) and framed by the necessity of maintaining income support. The research was approved by the host university's Social Research Ethics Subcommittee and conducted in accordance with the funding body.

Findings

Superficial conditionality

In more long-standing regimes of conditionality and sanctions, such as that in the UK, there is significant evidence of regulatory and punitive interventions worsening material hardship, diminishing agency, and provoking emotional and psychological distress (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019; Wright & Patrick, 2019). With a more limited evidence base than those of these countries, the interpretation of conditionality and how it shapes jobseekers' experience in Ireland is split. NESC's (2018) broadly positive description of a benign system aligns with internal departmental data of positive user experiences (DEASP, 2018) while other qualitative research situates the Irish system in relation to the aforementioned regimes as marked by tight regulation, punishment and negative experiences (Boland & Griffin, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2018; Whelan, 2020). There is then a tangled ambiguity at the heart of our understanding (Cousins, 2019). What emerges in my own interviews with jobseekers is a description of superficial engagements whereby welfare agencies are overly concerned with bureaucratic procedure, engendering an uncaring, sterile and cold process. The system lacks the punitive characteristics of other jurisdictions as conditionality and sanctions operate at a distance from claimants during their interactions but they simultaneously structure these encounters.

Many of the participants, while acknowledging that their caseworkers were 'decent', also stated that their interactions were superficial exercises in 'box-ticking' or 'pen-pushing'. In a discussion about job-search activity, for example, Chris told me how he would blithely apply for 'two or three' jobs rather than the ten his Intreo caseworker initially suggested as part of the personal progression plan:

They want a list of places ya looked, if you applied for it, and if you got a response or not, and that's about it, and if ya have any evidence, bring them with ya ... they couldn't care, they still get paid at the end of the day anyway so. (Chris)

Bob's Intreo caseworker never sought job-search evidence from him despite being on a jobseeker payment for two years:

Dolores [caseworker] did say to me to keep a list and a record, which I do, of jobs I applied for just in case. She said, 'It mightn't be me, it might be somebody else I work with [who] might want to see' – ya know, legitimise you have been looking for work. (Bob)

The recommendation to maintain a record of jobs for which he applied appears only as a friendly suggestion for ‘self-protection’ against possible future caseworkers. This friendly suggestion nonetheless illustrates how conditionality and the threat of sanctions are not entirely absent despite the apparent superficiality here. Kaufman (2020, p. 216) highlights the ways in which intensified conditionality and sanctions reconfigure the decision-making of caseworkers by linking discretion to the ‘coercive potential of conditionality’. Its use is mediated by speculative judgements of who is likely to respond to it, as well as who ought to be targets. In a similar vein, NESCC’s (2018) report highlights Irish caseworkers’ use of the threat of sanction as a tool for engagement. It underlines the need for future research in Ireland regarding the role played by caseworkers in managing their engagements with clients and how these are shaped by the organisational rules and culture they find themselves in.

During the interviews I presented participants with copies of the Record of Mutual Commitments and personal progression plan in order to explore their views of state-mandated obligations and their personal concretisation. In almost all of the interviews the Record of Mutual Commitments was not specifically recollected, nor did any participant acknowledge reading it. It was simply one document among many that required signing in order to access payments. This points to an innate imbalance of power within this new ‘social contract’ since it is a contract which the state designs, implements and oversees while retaining the ability to change it at any point (Goodin, 2001). Claimants have not explicitly consented to the erasure of the prior status quo, nor to this new ‘contractualisation’ of mutual obligations. Considering welfare payments are often an essential buffer between claimants and destitution (Patrick, 2017; Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019), this new social contract could be understood as enforced under economic duress. A similar ambiguity was reported in relation to the personal progression plans that participants carried out with caseworkers. These plans are championed by *Pathways to Work* (DEASP, 2012, 2014, 2016) as a co-created process of tailoring welfare services to the personal needs and interests of individuals. By outlining concrete steps toward paid employment that jobseekers must undertake, Grover (2012) suggests that they amount to a form of ‘personalised conditionality’. Yet for the participants, there was little recollection of them beyond a recognition that they had been carried out sometime in the past. Where recalled, they seemed primarily guided by the caseworker with little input from participants:

Because I was unemployed for so long, she [caseworker] kind of came up with a bit of a plan herself, maybe what was her plan, er, now it's changed, it was, erm, looking after childcare I think it was? (Jessica)

There appears to be a lack of engagement and co-construction of progression plans similar to that found in the UK context (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019). More broadly the lack of recollection regarding the Record of Mutual Commitments and personal progression plans, as well as the criteria for sanctioning, suggests a lack of claimant knowledge and agency, identified by NESC (2018) and in UK studies (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019).

A similar superficiality is also evident when we consider the experience of sanctions. Only two of the participants had been sanctioned. Emily, a lone parent, was sanctioned after arriving a few minutes late to an appointment with her caseworker, while Patrick was sanctioned after a year-long refusal to engage with Seetec due to data privacy concerns. Both had their penalised monies reinstated after engaging with the agencies. Sanctions have increased since the introduction of *Pathways to Work*, rising from 359 in 2011 (the year prior to its implementation) to 1,519 in 2012 and to 16,022 in 2018 (Dáil Éireann, 2019c). Cousins (2019) suggests a potential modesty in the use of sanctions, which is given credence when we place the 16,022 sanctions from 2018 in relation to the 189,322 jobseeker claims for the same year. While international comparisons in relation to sanctions are difficult to make, Boland & Griffin's (2016) analysis suggests Irish figures are relatively low. Further, as of 2019, 95,880 claimants have been identified as not engaging with JobPath, but this has resulted in only 14,000 sanctions (Dáil Éireann, 2019a, 2019b). It must be noted, however, that the effectiveness of sanctions does not primarily lie in their application but as a coercive threat hanging over all jobseekers to shape their behaviour (Boland & Griffin, 2015b). This was acutely felt by participants in this research:

Ya panic and think ... I have to go, because if I don't I'm not gonna get paid, and if I don't get paid how am I going to feed my kids and pay for the roof over my head. They automatically put the fear into ya. (Louise)

For participants, explicit reminders of sanctions were rare from caseworkers but they nonetheless were vaguely aware of the dangers they posed. This corresponds to NESC's (2018) findings regarding caseworkers' positivity toward sanctions as a means to engage

jobseekers. As the evidence above suggests, and which is argued further below, this engagement is superficial and builds a bureaucratic carousel around jobseekers, onto which they must sometimes climb to provide a minimum participation to ensure its continuation. It underscores how, despite the superficiality of encounters, the process itself is structured by the necessities which conditionality and sanctions impose. Indeed, participants did not experience this superficiality as a positive.

Indifference

In their interactions with Intreo and the JobPath providers, participants spoke of feeling like a ‘statistic’, with the agencies showing little genuine interest in them. Participants’ expectations of assistance addressing their interests and needs was ultimately not forthcoming. Sinead, like Bob, had never been prompted to provide job-search evidence and in our interview became visibly irritated by her lack of interaction with welfare agencies:

The woman [caseworker] looked at my CV. She went, ‘Have you ever thought about using your degrees to get a job?’ I went, ‘Yes ... no. That never occurred to me, Jesus, I’m glad you mentioned it.’ ... I said, ‘That hasn’t worked, do you have a suggestion? Is there anything you can do? Will you take a look at my CV? Can you suggest how I might make it more attractive?’ She went, ‘No, no. That’s not my job.’ ‘Okay, what is your job?’ ‘I want to make sure you’re looking for work.’ (Sinead)

The last sentence in this recounted conversation might ostensibly imply the enforcing of work-related conditionality but, given the lack of requirements placed on Sinead, the wording better captures the concern with satisfying bureaucratic procedures devoid of genuine engagement or assistance to achieve goals. The language about tailoring and personalising services to the needs of individuals invoked by *Pathways to Work* (DEASP, 2012, 2014, 2016) again seems lacking as Sinead was left to rely on her own initiative to find suitable work.

Similarly, this ‘personalised conditionality’ (Grover, 2018) was absent for most participants, who felt that their individual circumstances, such as financial situations, mental health or caring responsibilities, were not taken into account. Emily, a lone parent, articulates this in relation to mothers:

It doesn’t seem manageable ... [to] get a job and you need to get somebody to mind your child, you need to get travel, like the payments don’t match as in for the cost of living and the payment ya get – it just doesn’t match and it’s hard to cope with. (Emily)

This highlights a form of 'careless activation' (Murphy, 2012) in which the realities of gendered patterns of caring and domestic work are ignored. The superficiality of engagement orientated around the satisfaction of bureaucratic procedure produces a misalignment of interests between claimants and caseworkers. Although, as we have seen, caseworkers can act to protect claimants, these appear as tactics limiting an 'institutional indifference' (Sennett, 2006, p. 124) characterised by little personal attention or recognition of individual needs. While the system is marked by indifference rather than penalty, it is an indifference which hurts as claimant agency is frustrated by a system lacking genuine engagement and supports. As Alexia makes clear, it is ultimately a negative and frustrating experience:

People in social welfare who think they know better than you, who don't have your life experience, who don't get the lack of control, the lack of management that you have over your own stuff. It's like a power trip for them and you come away and you're shorter in stature and you're more stooped ... it's the impossibility of the situation. (Alexia)

Dramaturgical performances

I do apply for things randomly. I applied for a job as a beauty consultant ... an eyebrow threader ... I've no idea what that is ... but you have to because then the boxes are ticked. (Nick)

Oh there was a few I made up ... oh yeah, I'd put some of them on that [form] – I think that was my second sheet to fill up anyway ... and they never checked to see if I did put these CVs in. It's paper work for them I suppose. (Rachel)

The superficiality outlined above suggests a system which compels engagement but with enough space to permit its subversion. With conditionality operating as a form of bureaucratic procedure, participants were able to utilise the inventive possibilities this provided for pursuing their own interests, needs and desires. In doing so they invoked a dramaturgical trickery (de Certeau, 1984; Goffman, 1990) by performing the role of the motivated, eager and engaged 'good' jobseeker. The quotes above highlight a common form of this feigned compliance whereby participants subverted the compulsory job-search activity. For Nick, a 52-year-old male, with no experience, qualifications or interest in beauty therapy, it was a mocking rejection of his obligations which pushed the boundaries of what was

considerable reasonable job-search activity. Rachel's fabrication of job applications involved greater risk, predicated as it was on her caseworker's tendency toward 'box-ticking' rather than investigating the veracity of her evidence.

This dramaturgical performance also extended to 'impression management' (Goffman, 1990), with participants consciously presenting behaviours in order to manage their relationships with caseworkers. For Goffman (1990), this kind of impression management is a key repertoire drawn on by subordinate groups to navigate societal relationships. In this context it involves a deferential performance of gratitude from jobseekers to caseworkers to reinforce the authority of the latter. In doing so it provides a veneer that the process, and the performance of the caseworker, is worthwhile and beneficial:

I'm very compliant and I'm very measured when I'm with him. When I heard him saying things to me like, 'Is there anything else I can do for you?' I'd say, 'No, I don't think so, but if I think of anything...' (Alexia)

For Alexia, this dramaturgical performance was borne of frustration at her Seetec caseworker continually suggesting unfeasible and low-paying work. It was for her a deliberate performance required to remain calm immediately prior to, during and after their meetings. This allowed her to manage their relationship and satisfy her caseworker's expectations regarding her commitment, while she simultaneously circumvented welfare rules by pursuing postgraduate education.

A specious reading of such activities might find in them evidence of the welfare-dependent scrounger requiring tighter delineation and enforcement of conditionality and sanctions. Evidence of the effectiveness of strict conditionality and sanctioning is mixed but Knotz's (2020) recent study suggests that strict conditions do work when they are tied to financial provision and job-search supports. Card et al. (2018) similarly point to the importance of sustained engagement and skill development for long-term unemployed people. Stricter use of conditionality and sanctions would appear the wrong response to such accounts since most of the claimants here are acutely aware of conditionality and potential sanctions since these are what generates the dramaturgical performance. What is precisely lacking is a feeling of genuine engagement that attends to their own circumstances and needs (NESC, 2018). The trickery of the good jobseeker is not a

resistance to work per se but rather such tactics were always embedded in the wider context of life on welfare and entwined with other forms of agency to 'get by' and 'get off' welfare (Lister, 2004). Participants were acutely cognisant of their own situations and performed such tactics to avoid what they saw as the financial infeasibility of low-pay work, as well as the loss of the limited security provided by the welfare system. Much of the literature on conditionality paints claimants as passive recipients of brutal regimes, overlooking how agency can operate within tightly constrained spaces as policy filters to the welfare interactions. Resistance, in particular, is marginalised (although see Peterie et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2020) but, as evidence presented here suggests, jobseekers in Ireland do perform hidden refusals of power to pursue their own interests. The superficiality of the system permits this space for subversion. Yet it cannot fully hide the underlying threat of sanction which compels feigned compliance of conditionality in the first place. This agency was always contingent, necessitating repeat performances whilst remaining within acceptable boundaries.

Conclusion

The emerging research on conditionality and sanctions within Ireland's nascent activation is broadly split regarding its impact on jobseekers. On the one hand, there is a view of the system as being relatively benign with some positives regarding proactive interaction (DEASP, 2018; NESC, 2018). An alternative view suggests the system mirrors the brutalising punitive tendencies of conditional regimes in other jurisdictions, particularly the UK (Boland & Griffin, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Whelan, 2020). The argument presented here suggests that the truth lies somewhere in the middle since while a strong rhetoric exists within policy documents and beyond, the system is characterised by superficiality. This superficiality emerges in two ways. Firstly, conditionality primarily operates as bureaucratic procedure requiring satisfaction, manifesting as 'box-ticking' within welfare encounters. Secondly, it emerges through inability or unwillingness on the part of caseworkers to provide the required resources to claimants. The lack of genuine engagement and supports which address claimant circumstances and needs is productive of an 'institutional indifference' (Sennett, 2006, p. 124) disempowering claimants and trapping them upon a bureaucratic carousel. This indifference hurts due to claimants'

misrecognition of welfare agencies as caring services offering them assistance (Peillon, 1998), which is then largely missing in their interactions. Permeating this is the implicit recognition of control as conditionality, and the threat of sanctions structures interactions. While the system is indifferent to claimants' needs and circumstances, agencies and caseworkers do take an interest in claimants themselves. Sometimes this comes in the form of protection, sometimes it is through the imposition of conditions, but more often it is to satisfy their own objectives of bureaucratic 'box-ticking'. If this produces a sense of powerlessness reminiscent of Hoggett's (2001) 'self-as-object', it is one which can provoke engagement as a reflexive 'self-as-agent' as claimants recognise their limited choices with the constraints facing them. The misalignment of interests is generative of dramaturgical performances of the good jobseeker by claimants as they meet superficial engagement on its own terms through feigned compliance. It is ultimately a measure buffering them against institutional indifference and the wrong forms of attention welfare agencies take in them so that they can protect their needs and interests.

One pressing concern is what the analysis presented here means for the operation of welfare services and for jobseekers during and after the coronavirus pandemic. The crisis placed untold pressure on the system through widescale job losses, which required the introduction of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Given the superficiality of engagement outlined here, it is unlikely the system is suited to retraining and returning these individuals to employment. One recent review of Intreo (Kelly et al., 2019) adds weight to the analysis here by identifying little effect on progression rates to employment, education or training. The Labour Market Advisory Council (2020) has recently recognised that many of these individuals will be unused to interactions with welfare services and will have complex and differentiated needs requiring new knowledges and labour activation approaches. With this in mind, the argument presented here is not suggestive of more conditionality or tighter enforcement. Indeed, its core claim regarding the frustration of agency chimes with evidence from the more punitive UK system (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2019). In both cases a negative experience is produced, albeit in a different way and taking a different form. In the midst of this pandemic the system will one way or another have to change. The evidence here suggests it should focus on working with claimants to understand their circumstances and address their needs and interests.

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