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Violent bureaucracy: a critical analysis of the British public employment service (2010-15)

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1 **Violent Bureaucracy: A Critical Analysis of the British Public**

2 **Employment Service (2010-15)**

3 ## Abstract

4 Between 2010-15, the Coalition's pursuit of a radical austerity programme saw Britain's

5 Jobcentre Plus experience some of the most punitive reforms and budget cuts in its history.

6 Focusing on the outcomes of these reforms, a growing body of research has found that

7 claiming processes became a more 'institutionally violent' and injurious experience for out-

8 of-work benefit claimants. The present article draws upon ideas, developed by Bauman

9 (1989), which focus on the processes that facilitate 'institutional violence'. We use this

10 framework to analyse ten interviews with front-line workers and managers in

11 public/contractor employment services. In doing so, we expose an array of policy tools and

12 hidden managerial methods used during the Coalition administration which encouraged

13 front-line staff to deliver services in ways that led to a range of harmful outcomes for

14 benefit claimants.

15 Keywords: Employment Services; Institutional Violence; Street-level Bureaucracy; Welfare

16 Reform

17 ## Introduction

18 In 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat ('Coalition') government outlined a 'radical'

19 austerity programme (Osborne, 2010a). This programme was designed to rescue business

20 from the throes of an enduring North American Financial Crisis by implementing a series of

21 unprecedented public expenditure cuts and social security reforms which redistributed

22 power/wealth away from working class populations (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). A central

23 feature of austerity was to galvanise political disenchantment with a comprehensive social

24 security system. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne (2010b), declared that

25 excessive spending on social security services and cash benefits under the previous New

26 Labour administration had served to undermine national economic performance by

27 'crowding out' investment. While the Prime Minister, David Cameron (2011), declared that

28 social security provision had fuelled a surge in irresponsible behaviour and (under-)class

29 cultural values including voluntary unemployment and an entitlement mentality. As such,

30 the Coalition government pursued 'social security austerity' in two broad directions (Grover,

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31 2019). On the one hand, numerous efforts were made to slash social expenditure on key

32 services/benefits and/or channel it into new investment opportunities by increasingly

33 exposing services to the (quasi-) private market (Finn, 2018). On the other hand, the

34 Coalition government also built on the foundations left by their predecessors to carve out a

35 more punitive system of employment service delivery.

36 These reforms transformed the operational logic driving the day-to-day running of Britain's

37 network of public (Jobcentre Plus) and quasi-private (Work Programme) employment

38 services. For front-line workers, reforms generally entailed delivering services with less

39 resource, more focus on moving people off benefit as quickly as possible, and minimising

40 the costs of fraud and error (Finn, 2018:226). Meanwhile, for those claiming out-of-work

41 benefits, reforms generally meant undertaking more compulsory work-related duties in

42 exchange for fiscal support far below the income necessary to meet basic needs (Fletcher

43 and Wright, 2018). Failure to perform such duties to an agreed standard would also

44 potentially result in a disqualification from benefit under the rubric of an 'enhanced

45 sanctioning regime' (Adler, 2018).

46 To legitimise these reforms, concerted efforts were made by politicians and the media to

47 cultivate an increasingly hostile socio-political climate; framing Britain's poor people as a

48 central threat to national security (Tyler, 2020). A plethora of classed and racialized groups

49 (migrant, unemployed, disabled persons) became the prime antagonists of various

50 pejorative discourses emphasising top-down processes of stigmatisation to garner public

51 support for welfare reform. Hostilities of this kind—emerging from above and manifesting

52 on the ground, relationally, in everyday social interplay (cf. Burnett, 2017:220)—promoted

53 expenditure cuts and punitive social security reforms as the only logical policy response to

54 simultaneously restore competitive economic conditions and manage the perceived

55 threat(s) of capriciously defined social 'others' (Tyler, 2020).

56 A growing body of research has found that benefit claiming processes became a more

57 physically and psychologically injurious experience for out-of-work populations under social

58 security austerity. Batty et al.'s (2015) survey of 1,013 homelessness service users in 2015

59 found the enhanced sanctioning regime disproportionately affected those with poor mental

60 health, drug/alcohol dependency issues and poor literacy; leading to rough sleeping,

61 hunger, exacerbating mental health issues and increasing foodbank usage. After conducting

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interviews with 481 benefit claimants between 2014 and 2017, the Welfare Conditionality (2018) project concluded that post-2010 reforms increased poverty/destitution, exacerbated ill health and facilitated movements into survival crime and/or off-benefit. The Department for Work and Pensions (hereafter DWP) carried out internal 'peer reviews' of 49 benefit claimant deaths between 2012 and 2014, finding 'that in ten cases the claimant had had their benefits sanctioned' (Pring, 2017:54). Between 2010-2014, statistics show that over 9,000 benefit claimants died and an additional 725,000 anti-depressant prescriptions were administered after they were declared 'fit-to-work' or their benefit was made conditional on participation in work-preparation groups—with a number of these deaths being 'publically attributed by family and friends to the removal of benefits by the DWP' (Clifford, 2020:158; Mills, 2018; DWP, 2015; Ryan, 2019).

The present article seeks to explain how ordinary people carrying out their daily duties in employment service offices were able to implement cruel and inhumane social security reforms by drawing upon Bauman's (1989) theory of 'institutional violence'. We contend that it is crucial to situate this behaviour in the context of policy and practice changes which have encouraged the production and delivery of 'institutional violence' on the front-line. Drawing upon interviews with ten front-line workers and managers in public and quasi-private employment services, the authors expose an array of policy tools and hidden managerial methods that were used during the Coalition administration (2010-2015); encouraging front-line workers to deliver service in ways which led to a range of harmful outcomes for benefit claimants.

From Outcomes to Processes of Institutional Violence: The Social Production of Moral Invisibility

'Institutional violence' originated out of Galtung's (1969) germinal efforts to broaden the narrow conception of violence. Rather than understanding violence solely as a phenomenon that occurs interpersonally and involves an exertion of force by an actor who intends to inflict harm on another; Galtung (1969) argues that violence is also impersonal, produced and distributed within the power structures and institutions that govern societies. From this perspective, violence is present in 'avoidable' situations where the monopolisation of 'insight and/or resources' by a group or class excludes another group(s) or class(es) from the resources and/or recognition necessary to realise their capabilities to the same extent

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93   (Galtung, 1969:169). Violence in this sense can be exercised even if there are no concrete

94   perpetrators directly attacking others—it occurs 'indirectly' and 'silently' (Galtung,

95   1969:171; 173). His ideas have since been applied and developed in relation to a plethora of

96   social injustices; ranging from slavery and racism, to poverty and gender inequalities

97   (Farmer, 2004).

98   Academics have drawn inspiration from Galtung's broader notion of violence in efforts to

99   make sense of 'social security austerity' in Britain. Grover (2019) conceptualises post-2010

100 social security changes as a form of 'violent proletarianisation'. He (2019:338-339)

101 concludes that reforms led to 'avoidable physical and mental diswelfares'; primarily by

102 forcing claimant groups off benefit and/or into precarious wage labour in ways that 'socially

103 murdered' some of Britain's most vulnerable individuals through penury and suicide.

104 Relatedly, Wright, Fletcher and Stewart (2020) view this as a form of 'social abuse';

105 concluding that 'Jobcentres have become more dangerous places' as reforms 'often caused

106 symbolic and material suffering' which 'sometimes had life-threatening effects'. Meanwhile,

107 Cooper and Whyte's (2017:23; 2018:5) *edited collection* conceptualises post-2010 reforms

108 as 'institutional violence'. They argue that reforms have not only 'delivered acute physical

109 and psychological harms' which 'routinely and over time deteriorate[d]…mental and

110 physical health', but they were 'organised and administered through *legitimate* means'.

111 That is, by 'smartly dressed…armies of civil servants' and 'private officials sitting behind

112 desks' in public-facing bureaucracies.

113 Whilst the concept of 'institutional violence' has received a number of critiques (cf. Grover,

114 2019; Wright, Fletcher and Stewart, 2020), for present purposes, the main shortcoming of

115 both Galtung's work and subsequent applications of 'institutional violence' is that authors

116 focus overwhelmingly on outcomes and not on processes (Gupta, 2012:20). For example,

117 while Cooper and Whyte (2017:3;2018:5) profess to 'identify precisely *how* particular public

118 and private organisations have delivered acute physical and psychological harm'; we

119 contend insufficient attention is paid to the 'how' and that their edited collection instead

120 proceeds to focus predominantly on the many violent *outcomes* fuelled by austerity driven

121 policies (e.g. 'physical', 'psychological', 'symbolic', 'epistemic'). Consequently, there is

122 insufficient focus on the specific *processes* which actively encourage 'smartly dressed armies

123 of civil servants' in public-facing bureaucracies to perpetrate institutionally mediated acts of
124 violence.

125 To address this shortcoming, we draw inspiration from Bauman's (1989) exposition of the
126 *psycho-social* processes which facilitate 'institutional violence'. While Bauman (1989)
127 focused on a very unique case study—the Nazi genocide of European Jewish people
128 between 1941 and 1945—he asserts that the 'social mechanisms' which brought about the
129 Holocaust are 'also set in motion under contemporary conditions' and hence contain 'crucial
130 information about the society of which we are members' (Bauman, 1989:95;xiv). As such,
131 though we in no way seek to draw moral or historical equivalences between the Holocaust
132 and the present analysis, we contend that Bauman's analysis possesses a number of key
133 insights that can be *excavated* and *recalibrated* towards original, critical interpretation of
134 employment service delivery under the Coalition government's reign.

135 Bauman's (1989:19-20; 184-5) analysis is founded on the proposition that 'most of the
136 perpetrators of the genocide were normal people' and that humans instinctively possess a
137 number of 'primeval moral drives'—an 'instinctive…animal pity' (Arendt, 1963:106)—
138 pertaining to 'inhibition against inflicting suffering on another human being, and the urge to
139 help those who suffer'. As such, Bauman (1989:24) identifies two relational social
140 mechanisms that were requisitely manufactured and harnessed by Nazi elites to suspend
141 moral inhibition and transform masses of normal people 'into murderers or conscious
142 collaborators in the murdering process'.

143 First, Nazi propaganda drew upon and enflamed centuries worth of anti-Semitic discourses
144 to cultivate a hostile socio-political environment, constructing Jewish people as a 'sinister
145 and destructive' political-economic threat to national security (Bauman, 1989:50). The
146 political leadership's language and rhetoric was fraught with images of the Jewry as an
147 economically degenerative 'parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over
148 wider and wider areas' and drains those who grant it hospitality (Hitler, 1925:253).
149 Propagandists also devoted huge resources to mass media portrayals of Jewish people as a
150 sub-population that rarely engaged in productive work and was 'always living off the honest
151 toil of others' (Taylor, 1998:175-6). This dehumanised Jewish people as an 'alien, hostile and
152 undesirable' *other*; worthy at least of disassociation, apathy and punishment in the eyes of
153 German citizenry (Bauman, 1989:75).

154 Second, the Nazi's mediated the action of violence against the Jewish citizenry, enabling the
155 perpetrators to injure and kill their victims at greater 'physical and/or psychic' distances
156 (Bauman, 1989:155; 24). This was not only accomplished through the promulgation of anti-
157 Semitic propaganda, but also through utilising many archetypal characteristics of the
158 modern bureaucracy (see Weber, 1948). The Holocaust relied upon a top down hierarchical
159 'system of super- and subordination' (Weber, 1948:197); whereby both scientific expertise
160 and one's immediate superior in the chain of command supplanted primeval moral drives as
161 the principle source of moral authority. This ran in tandem with a 'meticulous functional
162 dissection and separation of tasks' (Bauman, 1989:100). The practical effects of violent tasks
163 were (mostly) 'optically separated' from the perpetrators' vision via more clinical killing
164 technologies (Bauman, 1989:194; 26); while each task was scientifically managed through
165 quantitative (time and motion) monitoring and diagrammatic representation.

166 Cumulatively, when violent acts were (1) morally sanctioned by authority, (2) broken down
167 piecemeal and shielded from visceral response, then (3) numerically measured, according to
168 Bauman (1989:159), the 'moral concerns of the functionary [we]re drawn back from
169 focusing on the plight of' those human objects of task performance. Instead, moral concerns
170 were 'forcefully shifted in another direction—the job to be done and the excellence with
171 which it [was] performed' (Bauman, 1989:159). It no longer mattered how the human
172 objects fared; emotions were 'marginal or altogether irrelevant to the task' (Bauman,
173 1989:188). The perpetrators forgot their violent actions were a means to something other
174 than performing the immediate task at hand in satisfaction of quantitative criteria and a
175 moral authority. Instead, they began to 'occupy themselves with the rational task of finding
176 better means for the given—and partial—end', as opposed to the 'moral task of the
177 evaluation of the ultimate objective' (Bauman, 1989:195).

178 Bauman's analysis has been criticised (see Vetlesen, 2005). Some have disputed his
179 argument that humans have innate aversions to violence; suggesting that his understanding
180 of primeval moral drives is both 'one-sided' (e.g. neglects aggression instincts) and
181 dismissive of the sociological orthodoxy that morals are ultimately a social product of
182 cultural and historical processes (Vetlesen, 2005:47). And Bauman (1989:245) possibly
183 contradicts his own analysis by later suggesting that it is 'the civilising process'—that is, the
184 historical development of social attitudes, standards and stigma against behaviours typically

185 associated with barbarism (see Elias, 1994)—which has fostered human aversion to
186 violence. Nevertheless, his ideas on propaganda and bureaucracy remain a powerful way of
187 explaining how ordinary people, raised in (late) modern societies, may commit
188 institutionally mediated violence.

Methodology

190 All interviews were conducted in 2019 for a Vice-Chancellor PhD funded project examining
191 contextualised agency in public service interactions between front-line employment service
192 staff (n=11) and young male benefit claimants (n=15). The authors draw specifically on the
193 responses of ten public and contractor employment service staff possessing direct
194 experience of working in the employment service between 2010-15. One manager and 14
195 claimants did not have relevant experience in this time period and have thus been excluded
196 from the present analysis. A strength of the present sample was that these workers
197 cumulatively had almost 200 years' experience of working in the civil service. Some had
198 witnessed first-hand several decade's worth of social security reform: 'It was different
199 because in the '70s and '80s…It was more overall about the well-being…of a person'. The
200 present sample also comprises workers occupying a variety of different roles: with one JCP
201 manager; three JCP front-line staff; one JCP and later Work Programme front-line worker;
202 one decision-maker, and four Work Programme front-line staff.

203 All participants worked in different offices across the country (no two were the same). This
204 reflected the continued difficulty of accessing employment service workers, the data
205 protection regulations governing their experiences, and perhaps the DWP's own increasing
206 sensitivity to external scrutiny. This was most visibly revealed in its decision to rescind the
207 involvement of Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme staff in a major ESRC-funded
208 investigation of the impact of UK welfare reform (Welfare Conditionality, 2018:13). Many of
209 those approached declined to speak citing fears around confidentiality (one in the present
210 sample refused to be recorded). To overcome this, contact was established with retired civil
211 servants and adjacent service providers where individuals had migrated into new roles. This
212 reveals another possible limitation. The overwhelming majority of the sample (n=9) had left
213 civil service at the time of interview. Nevertheless, we thought that this provided sufficient
214 distance for many participants to provide thick descriptions of their experiences. This was

215 possibly reflected in the ease at which a 'structure of feeling' could be discerned across their
216 individual experiences.

217 Given some participants' clear concerns around issues of privacy and confidentiality, as well
218 as the sensitivity of some of the data revealed, we have opted to ensure all details of name,
219 place, gender, age, ethnicity, job tenure and so forth are withheld or pseudonymised.
220 Ethical approval for this research project was received by Sheffield Hallam University.

221 The Production and Delivery of Institutional Violence

222 The remainder of this article will outline the production and delivery of institutional violence
223 in Britain's network of public/contractor employment service offices. We begin by first
224 showing how political and media elites combined to intensify forms of propaganda;
225 constructing various benefit claiming groups as a drain on public resources to secure
226 consent for austere reforms. Second, we illuminate the contours of post-2010 reforms to
227 the operational logic underpinning Britain's employment service bureaucracy. Finally, we
228 draw upon primary qualitative data to reveal how core features of bureaucracy and
229 propaganda operate on the ground and, at certain points, work in alloy, to produce 'moral
230 invisibility' and encourage the delivery of institutionally violent practice(s).

231 Welfare Propaganda: Cultivating a Hostile Environment

232 The Coalition's austerity programme took, in part at least, the symbolic 'form of a massive
233 propaganda exercise' (Tyler, 2020:194). From 2008, pejorative, stigmatising portrayals of
234 out-of-work populations became increasingly prevalent in political discourse (Okoroji, Gleibs
235 and Jovchelovitch, 2020). Politicians intentionally rehashed and intensified centuries' worth
236 of 'scrounger' discourses to fortify anti-welfare common sense and manufacture consent for
237 austerity (Morrison, 2019:8; Tyler, 2020:196). Britain was repeatedly described as broken
238 under the threat of sexually excessive 'parasites' who breed 'feckless families' courtesy of
239 the taxpayer (Atkinson, 2013), fraudsters in possession of an entitlement mentality
240 (Duncan-Smith, 2012) and migrants placing increasing strain on public services and jobs
241 (Vickers, 2019).

242 Provocative political discourses tend to be widely shared in newspaper outlets and
243 particularly by those sharing similar ideological orientations (Okoroji, Gleibs and
244 Jovchelovitch, 2020:2). Consequently, this fuelled a huge surge in stigmatising terminology

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through many mainstream British newspapers; reaching crescendo in 2013 (Morrison, 2019:20-1). Not only did this bring about widespread dissemination of articles portraying migrant and out-of-work populations as a drain on public resources; but the digitalised, socially mediated methods through which these articles were disseminated enabled consumers to bolster narrative power by sharing, re-posting and adding further details or truth claims to the articles they interacted with (Morrison, 2019:201).

This resulted in outbreaks of interpersonal violence upon migrant and benefit claiming populations (Burnett, 2017:220; Ryan, 2019:29). However, the main effects were a general hardening of public attitudes towards claimants and growing support for punitive measures (Okoroji, Gleibs and Jovchelovitch, 2020). According to one survey, the percentage of people agreeing that cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives had 'fallen by 17 percentage points' from 59% in 2000 to 42% in 2010 (Taylor and Taylor-Gooby, 2014:6). Support 'for more spending on benefits for disabled people unable to work fell 63% to 53%' between 2008-11 (Park et al., 2012:ii). Meanwhile, 70% of 2,407 respondents in a 2011 poll felt that that people receiving unemployment benefits who refused job opportunities or failed to attend interviews should lose half or more of their claim (Adler, 2018:13). Consequently, Tyler (2020:197) concluded that propaganda spun around austerity 'transformed ways of seeing poverty, hardening people's feelings to the suffering of those around them', changing 'how people related to each other, eroding structures of care, corroding compassion'.

Social Security Reform: Manufacturing a Violent Bureaucracy

A series of reforms to the operational logic driving Britain's employment service bureaucracy were also implemented. Public and contractor employment service offices have operated under the archetypical logic of a modern bureaucracy since their modernised inception in the early 1900s (Price, 2000). Britain's network of employment service offices has always tended to be monocratically organised and sensitive to government control. They operate on a top-down 'hierarchical subordination' model stretching from the Secretary of State in central government filtering all the way down to front-line service (DWP, 2019:110; Weber, 1948:197). Employment services have also always tended to possess a 'rational character' (Weber, 1948:244). This means that they tend to be staffed by officials who perform formal duties within a chain of command and in line with the

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276   authority of more highly ranked officials above them (Wright, 2002:16). This also means that

277   staff perform according to a set of 'calculable rules'—customarily pertaining to policing

278   benefit claims and matching local labour supply with demand (Price, 2000)—that serve to

279   produce workers' day-to-day 'norms of conduct' (Weber, 1948:215; 220).

280   From 2010 onwards, the Coalition government radically altered this operational logic. This

281   changed workers' 'norms of conduct' and, in turn, transformed Britain's network of

282   employment offices into far more dangerous places for benefit claimants (Wright, Fletcher

283   and Stewart, 2020). We contend that this was accomplished via three key (not exclusive)

284   social security reforms.

285   First, the Coalition engaged far more seriously with emerging scientific expertise on utilising

286   policy tools to alter human behaviour (see https://www.bi.team/). In this vein, they built

287   upon the 'work-first' foundations laid by previous administrations and introduced a rapid

288   extension/intensification of existing behavioural change policy. The introduction of

289   Universal Credit saw new groups subject to behavioural conditionality, while the

290   introduction of a new Claimant Commitment also saw more claimant sub-groups subject to

291   an intensification of work-related conditionality (Fletcher and Wright, 2018). Failures to

292   comply were also punished under the rubric of an 'enhanced sanctioning regime'.

293   Introduced in 2012, the new regime featured a built-in tiered system of sanctions with

294   longer disqualification periods (up to three years) for more serious non-compliance;

295   differentiating between first, second and third violations to upscale punishment for

296   recidivists (Adler, 2018:37). The Coalition's sanctioning regime also featured a separate

297   referral and decision-making mechanism; whereby front-line workers would initially raise a

298   claimant non-compliance doubt and then refer the case with relevant evidence to an

299   Independent Decision Maker who assesses the case according to specific legislative criteria

300   in a separate office (see DWP, 2017).

301   Second, the Coalition took inspiration from preceding Labour government experimentations

302   and uprated investment in quasi-marketised employment services operating on a

303   competitive, payment-by-results funding model—titled, 'Work Programme' (Wiggan, 2015).

304   Unlike its predecessors, however, the Work Programme was targeted specifically at the

305   'hardest-to-help' claimant populations (Finn, 2018). This required service providers to

306   absorb risk and invest up-front, with profit largely dependent on their ability to secure initial

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and sustained job outcomes for long-term unemployed people and those receiving illness/disability benefits subject to work-related requirements (Finn, 2018). The Coalition also explicitly mandated Work Programme providers to operate under the rubric of its newly enhanced sanctioning regime and make sanction referrals for any breach of requirements (Webster, 2016:2). Thus, front-line workers were not only managed according to a more stringent set of performance criteria centred firmly on job outcomes, but they also had a duty to refer claimants for sanction. This brought a wider range of some of the most vulnerable and least work-ready claimants under the ambit of a more stringent work-related conditionality and sanctioning regime.

Third, from 2010 there was an 'unannounced change of policy by ministers…to pressurise DWP staff to make more referrals' for sanctions (Webster, 2016:2) and, shortly after in April 2011, a major simplification of the target regime governing front-line staff in Jobcentre Plus. Previously, worker performance was measured against a range of indicators, such as the proportion of claimants entering employment and the volume of adviser interviews (Finn, 2018:226). By contrast, the new regime was to measure performance strictly according to 'off-benefit flows'—successful outcomes were now achieved when claimants ended their benefit claim, irrespective of whether they had entered employment (Finn, 2018:226). Fletcher and Wright (2018) suggest that largely hidden managerial pressure combined with Coalition's new off-benefit flow target regime encouraged 'the prioritisation of cases and actions' that would 'most quickly and effectively result in the termination of benefit claims'. Correspondingly, Webster (2016) claims that unannounced pressures and targets, alongside breaches of requirements with Work Programme providers above-mentioned, played a major role in inducing a huge increase in sanctioning rates between 2010 and 2013—reaching over one million sanctions in 2013 and rising approximately 345% above their 2001-08 average level (Adler, 2018:48). This also tallies with the DWP's own decision to raise 'it's off-flow targets for jobcentres as part of its annual review of their performance' and increase targets for those offices who were already 'meeting them consistently' in 2013 (NAO, 2016:25).

Moral Invisibility and Violence as Technique on the Front-line

In 2013, skyrocketing sanction rates were accompanied by media concern; particularly by Guardian newspaper journalists who were openly hostile to the Coalition regime and

revealed documents that a secret regime of sanctioning targets existed within Jobcentre Plus (Couling, 2013:3). This prompted internal investigations to quickly deny the presence of sanctioning targets and/or the inflationary effects of off-flow targets on sanctioning rates (NAO, 2013). Neil Couling's (2013:9) internal investigation 'found no evidence of a secret national regime of targets or widespread secret imposition of local regimes to that effect' and also 'found no evidence people [were] being wrongly sanctioned as a consequence'. In contrast, the present research found clear evidence of secret, localised sanctioning regimes and clear indications that staff were inflating sanction referrals in at least three different Jobcentres situated across the UK. One worker reported:

> 'weekly team meetings. And s/he [team manager] used to produce a table which showed how many people you've sanctioned or how many people you'd referred to a decision-maker for a sanction.' (JCP Executive Officer [worker three])

While the DWP explicitly denied the existence of sanctioning targets, mounting *expectation* to administer sanctions *from above,* translated into the formation and execution of local target regimes *on the ground*: 'certain staff would come [in the canteen] and say "well I've got my [sanctions] target for the week"' (JCP Executive Officer [worker seven]). It became clear that sanctioning and off-flow target regimes had a 'dehumanising' effect. For instance, manager one had witnessed the harsh realities of poverty and destitution experienced by out-of-work claimants s/he had worked with. Yet, this didn't prevent them from pursuing sanctions and 'off-benefit flows'. On the contrary, achieving targets was described as 'exciting':

> 'it sounds sad doesn't it, but when the figures were coming out of what the unemployed were prior to Universal Credit, it was like exciting: "Oh God, what have we got today?" "How many have we got on the books?" "Has it gone down by hundreds?"' (JCP Higher Executive Officer [manager one])

According to Bauman (1989:102), dehumanisation 'starts at the point when…the objects at which the bureaucratic operation is aimed can, and are, reduced to a set of quantitative measures'. This makes it easier for workers to overlook the human consequences of their actions. In the present study, top-down managerial pressure—diagrammatically represented in the shape of sanctioning tables and off-flow targets legitimised by the moral authority of the democratic state—appeared to act as a 'moral sleeping pill' (Bauman, 1989:26). This frequently made invisible the interests and moral demands of claimants in

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371 the eyes of workers; sedating some from the possible outcomes of their actions and thereby

372 allowing workers to view caseloads with 'ethical indifference' (Bauman, 1989:103). This was

373 not only evidenced in competitiveness and enthusiasm around achieving targets—'you

374 always wanted your team to be the best team'—often irrespective of their harmful

375 outcomes (see later); but it was also evident in some respondents' repeated attempts to

376 'demote, ex-probate and delegitimise the ethical motivations of social action' (Bauman,

377 1989:28). In this vein, respondents would sometimes absolve themselves of moral

378 responsibility by assuring that they were 'only implementing the law which made by MP's

379 which is voted by the people' and that their actions were 'not personal', but driven by a

380 superior moral authority:

381   'yes people [managers] did pull the wool over my eyes [with sanctioning
382   targets]. I'll quite freely admit it. I don't care, that's their conscience, not mine'
383   (worker seven)

384 Moral sedation was also evident in the emphasis participants placed on remaining

385 emotionally detached in the role:

386   'I think it's like you shut down the personal stuff, you're there to do a job…we
387   can't become emotionally involved, can we?' (manager one)

388 It was also evident in the way some workers' relinquished their political and moral ideals to

389 the chain of command and the rules/procedures of the bureaucratic operation: 'The way I

390 was treated, I had to abide by these rules that went against everything I thought and

391 believed in' (Work Programme Welfare-to-Work Advisor [worker two]). When this occurs,

392 according to Bauman, personal responsibility is divorced from action and the ethical motives

393 of those carrying out the operation become superfluous. This creates a moral vacuum

394 through which institutional violence can thrive.

395 Moral sedation may also have been present in the way emotional detachment turned to

396 'disapprobation and censure' when 'resistance, or lack of co-operation' on part of a claimant

397 'slowed down the smooth flow of bureaucratic routine' (Bauman, 1989:103). Manager one

398 revealed an instance where s/he used their relationship with a local employer to set a work-

399 resistant claimant up for a sanction: 'one day, this particular man, I knew he didn't want a

400 job, so I sent them to see this employer … I presume he got his benefit disallowed because

401 he wasn't making himself available for work'. This could point to a limitation with the

402 application of Bauman's ideas to the present case. It was possible that organisational
403 conditions were not exclusively producing moral indifference. Some participants suggested
404 that a small minority of colleagues throve on their legitimised ability to inflict harm: 'you
405 had some people who it seemed enjoyed the stick…it's like a power trip' (Work Programme
406 Welfare-to-Work Advisor [worker six]).

407 Finally, moral sedation was evident in pre-occupations 'with the rational task of finding
408 better means for the given—and—partial end'; focusing 'fully on the good performance of
409 the job at hand' and deploying 'morally abject' strategies to surpass targets (Bauman,
410 1989:195; 102). In one JCP office, management had set up a team specifically to achieve
411 benefit 'off-loads' (respondent terminology) within 0-13 weeks. According to worker three,
412 because front-line staff were measured ultimately on 'off-loads', finding ways to sanction
413 claimants and/or dissuade claims had become the more rational option. When asked how
414 the 0-13 week team would achieve 'off-loads', worker three proceeded to explain how they
415 would frequently treat claimants with 'disrespect' and use psychological harm as technique:
416 'they were pushing them until they either just cleared off because they couldn't take the
417 pressure or they got sanctioned' (cf. NAO, 2016:28). This chimed with worker five (JCP
418 Executive Officer), who suggested that some staff intentionally tried to antagonise claimants
419 in efforts to dissuade claims.

420 Morally abject strategies to surpass targets were also evidenced in the case of one manager:

421 'who just thought s/he could get anybody sanctioned because they weren't
422 complying. It didn't matter that they couldn't speak English. S/he misinterpreted
423 the role to the point that s/he felt that the team would only be successful if they
424 had an average amount of sanctions' (worker seven)

425 Worker seven proceeded to detail how claimants who did not speak English were often
426 unable to evidence work searches in English but, as long as they had agreed to provide
427 evidence in English, then they were liable for a sanction under the rubric of their
428 Commitment:

429 's/he would still insist that if they hadn't written in their Claimant Commitments
430 themselves in English, that they should be sanctioned.…So they couldn't be
431 applying for jobs. They couldn't understand that.'

432 Worker seven was expected to draw up Claimant Commitments with non-English speaking
433 claimants on the stipulation that they would provide evidence of work search in English.

14

434   While this caused conflict on numerous occasions, worker seven's manager proceeded to

435   knowingly sign Commitments with claimants that s/he already knew would be highly

436   unlikely to comply:

437   s/he said to me, "you think I'm racist, don't you?" I said, "Well, I didn't say that".
438   I never said "racist", but I said, "How can you stand there and tell me that if I'm
439   speaking a different language to the person in front of me, I can penalize them
440   because I can be sure that they've understood what I've said?" S/he said s/he
441   would do that. That, that was right. S/he would do this Claimant Commitment
442   and get them to sign it. So I said, "Well, I'm not going to sign it." S/he said, "Well,
443   I'll sign it." So I said. "You're signing to say they've understood that?" "Well,
444   they've signed it, so they must understand."'

445   This case could indicate that racial bias was driving managerial behaviour; whereby non-

446   English speaking claimant lives were seen as less valuable and thus less deserving of fiscal

447   support—perhaps indicating internalisation of heightened anti-migrant, racialized political

448   and media discourse (Tyler, 2020). It could also reflect an effort to secure an 'easy

449   [sanctions] win' (see Couling, 2013:15). Sanctions have to be referred to an independent

450   decision-making process, which includes a right to appeal an adverse decision (for

451   claimants). In relation to work-search related sanctions, decision-makers are explicitly

452   mandated to legitimise sanction referrals in cases where claimants take work-search activity

453   'that does not offer them any chance of getting an offer of paid work' as it 'cannot help

454   them satisfy the work-search requirement' (DWP, 2017:64). As such, non-English speaking

455   claimants were likely viewed as low-hanging fruit because their lack of cultural resources

456   meant they could be readily penalised on this stipulation and are likely less able to

457   legitimately challenge any adverse decision. It does not strain creditability to suggest that

458   managers were actively probing for loopholes within the legislative framework to achieve

459   sanctions. On the contrary, manager one was fully aware of the importance of working with

460   the independent decision-making process in mind. Consequently:

461   'I used to send my staff to the decision-makers for training. We were particularly
462   good at getting people off the books. It was usually because they were working
463   anyway'
464
465   The 'stigma power' (Tyler, 2020) of pejorative welfare tropes often appeared in

466   complementarity with the pursuit of off-flow and sanctioning targets. As can be seen in the

467   excerpt above, by constructing out-of-work claimants as an undesirable and potentially

468   threatening 'other' (e.g. as a 'fraud', 'scrounger', 'drain'), staff could efface the humanity of

their caseloads and remove them from moral obligation. This provided some workers' with a sufficient cause to justify punitive working practices which would likely lead to harmful outcomes: 's/he took the view that claimants are lazy, dishonest, not trying to get work and the stick was important'. In this vein, worker three explained how their manager made efforts to discipline workers and achieve sanctioning rates by harnessing 'stigma power' as a way of rousing antipathy among frontline staff and establishing distance between workers and claimants:

> 'there was a point at which s/he said, "It's your money! It's your taxes that they're living off! You know, you should be sanctioning them!"'

Stigma driven behaviour is not a phenomenon unique to the 2010-15 period. Nevertheless, for worker three, this period was somewhat unique in that stigmatising language was increasingly prevalent in formal communications meetings. This was reported to have a significant bearing on the frontline; 'infecting the culture, practices and attitudes of welfare workers' (Tyler, 2020:196):

> '[it was] just work coaches sitting in the canteen at lunchtime saying how awful claimants were and how they were scroungers and liars and all the rest of it.'

Pejorative, stereotypical views of claimants were also present in the perceptions of some participants:

> Nowadays when you go a customer's house, they all have the big TV. I know it's a stereotypical thing to say, but they do. Because that's what they do all day. They sit all day and they put Jeremy Kyle on' (manager one)

Stigma driven behaviour was also detected in the behaviour of G4S security guards who, according to worker seven, would sometimes intentionally try to antagonise claimants and 'make them feel uncomfortable' through use of stigmatising language: 'she said [in response to a claimant] "yeah, but at least I have a job to go to. Unlike you two."… sometimes it's the other people that are about that will make the customer feel uncomfortable'.

Similar processes were working to manufacture violent practices in Work Programme provider offices. Welfare-to-Work advisors frequently reported facing stringent managerial pressure—mediated through job outcome targets—to "push" mentally or physically disabled claimants into work. This was reported by worker nine as resulting in near fatal outcomes:

16

'[I had] a lovely guy who I really felt for who had mental health issues and the day after I had to reluctantly mandate him to something—he attempted suicide. I also had another lady who we pushed into work and it made her that ill she had a fit in her new job and was admitted to hospital.' (Work Programme Welfare-to-Work Advisor [worker nine])

Performance targets were of pivotal importance in governing behaviour (Soss, Fording and Schram, 2013). Worker six went on to describe how, in spite of 'hav[ing] days where [s/he] would be in tears' due to 'forcing' people into employment who 'couldn't even function you know on like a normal level', a combination of job outcome targets and managerial pressure:

'made you feel competitive I think. *I don't know why because I'm not like that this in role*. It kind of made you really want to achieve, probably because you had a meeting every Wednesday with the whole team…It was very transparent on, you know, it would be highlighted the really good people…if people are getting flagged up for being great and then you don't. Like oh, you're going to know, I'm shit.' (worker six [our emphasis])

This affirms the strength of applying Bauman's ideas; revealing how moral inhibitions to violence and suffering were subordinated to competitive, target-focused behaviours that were driven by a desire to be seen as an economically productive, efficient and diligent worker in the eyes of colleagues and superiors. Worker six had recently moved into a new role working for a mental well-being, charity based employment service where achievement was not inextricably associated with job outcomes. This had transformed their behaviour; once again underscoring the crucial role performance metrics and managerial pressures play in shaping front-line practice.

The 'moral sleeping pill' effects of performance metrics and moral authority meant that resistance to managerial pressure was uncommon. Nevertheless, our research uncovered a few instances of resistance. Evidently some workers felt it necessary to use discretion; creating minor spaces of personal control and autonomy by allowing some claimants to take 'small liberties' (Dubois, 2010:151). Worker three was, for example, openly hostile to the UK's sanctioning regime which occasionally led to minor acts of subversion:

'If I don't think their job search is good enough, I might just ignore it'

However, workers often had to justify their actions and could be subjected to further managerial pressure. This sometimes led to feelings of intimidation or fear which could

533 make it more difficult to resist managerial demands: 'I allowed myself to feel intimidated by
534 this manager who criticised my lack of sanction' (worker three). Moreover, this could
535 encourage staff to deliver the service in a more disrespectful and psychologically harmful
536 way:

> 'I've got my manager sitting there and they don't come up with a good story
> about their job search…So I give them a bollocking…They [claimant] were
> exposing me as a softy…They were putting me at risk. So I was particularly angry
> about that.'(worker three)

Conclusion

542 We have demonstrated how ordinary workers have been encouraged to implement social
543 security reforms which are frequently experienced as cruel and inhumane. We have sought
544 to re-calibrate Bauman's conceptual armature in an effort to make sense of the processes
545 (or 'social mechanisms') which inform violent practice in UK employment services. In so
546 doing, we have highlighted the pivotal role played by the (re)intensification of stigmatising
547 welfare narratives and a number of social security reforms that changed the operational
548 logic of Britain's employment service under Coalition rule. These facilitated the production
549 and delivery of institutional violence on the front-line of service delivery.

550 Nevertheless, there are a number of key strengths and limitations of applying Bauman's
551 ideas to the operation of Britain's employment service bureaucracy. In terms of the former,
552 we have shown the relevance of notions such as 'moral authority' (in the shape of
553 hierarchy/chain of command) and 'quantitative measures' (in the guise of sanctioning/off-
554 flow/job outcome targets) alongside heightened stigmatisation—which often worked in
555 tandem—to produce a psychic distance between workers' moral drives and their actions.
556 This has been crucial in terms of paving the way for (institutionally) violent front-line
557 practice.

558 However, there are four key limitations to the application of Bauman's ideas. First, social
559 security reforms were not instituted to facilitate a genocidal outcome and consequently we
560 did not detect any presence of clinical killing technologies on the front-line. This is
561 important. The aim here has not been to simply transpose Bauman's analysis of the
562 Holocaust onto new conditions verbatim and we are not suggesting that the Coalition's

563　austerity programme held a genocidal intent—although 'social murder' has been an indirect

564　outcome of post-2010 reforms (Grover, 2019).

565　Second, Bauman's ideas are less relevant to contemporary employment service delivery.

566　From 2015 onwards, policy makers have once again significantly altered the logic driving the

567　employment service bureaucracy. Maximum sanctioning periods have recently been rolled

568　back to six months from three years. Meanwhile, according to one active worker, the

569　managerial message has shifted from policing claims and achieving off-flows to 'focusing on

570　Universal Credit and trying to get that to work' with reduced staffing and resources: 'it's

571　changed now. It's completely disappeared in our office. There is no manager putting any

572　pressure on us to sanction. There is no conversation in communication meetings which says

573　claimants are lying scroungers'. This underlines the importance of political control over the

574　purpose and operation of service delivery.

575　Similarly, the new Work and Health Programme (replacing Work Programme) is still driven

576　by job outcomes but with less emphasis on conditionality and sanctions and considerably

577　more focus on the well-being of claimants than its predecessor. Sanctioning rates have been

578　in significant decline and have fallen back to an average below their 2001 level. Some (not

579　all) of the longer-term claimants spoken to in the present study even reported a change in

580　service delivery: 'it seems like they've actually learnt a thing or two…it seems they've gone,

581　we do actually need to take care of these people'. This not only points to the importance of

582　conceiving of the employment service as a monocratically organised bureaucracy sensitive

583　to government control; but, perhaps most crucially, that institutional violence is socially

584　produced from above and is thus an 'avoidable' phenomenon (Grover, 2019:339).

585　Third, Bauman's theory as applied to the present case downplays the agency of employment

586　service workers and the role of discretion in front-line practice (Lipsky, 2010). Although

587　uncommon, we encountered staff that resisted managerial authority and refused to carry

588　out their duties in a socially harmful way. However, resistance to sanctioning/off-flow

589　targets was exceedingly difficult for workers, especially given that instruction through the

590　chain of command was reported to firmly assert that sanctions 'should be applied and are

591　not a matter for individual discretion' (Couling, 2013:9).

592 Finally, it is difficult to see how Bauman's idea of optically separating the practical effects of

593 violent tasks from the perpetrators vision is relevant to the present case; particularly as

594 front-line staff are frequently confronted with the human consequences of their actions at

595 subsequent face-to-face encounters with benefit claimants. It is salient to note that

596 employment service staff were subjected to increased levels of verbal and physical

597 intimidation from some claimants over 2010-15 (ES, 2013).

598 However, the potential for institutional violence mediated through optical separation may

599 become a more prominent feature of front-line service delivery. This is because the

600 employment service bureaucracy is at a critical techno-economic juncture in its historical

601 development. On the one hand, the roll-out of Universal Credit alongside persistent budget

602 cuts in the last decade have fuelled a shift from inter-personal services towards more cost-

603 effective forms of digitalised service provision (Finn, 2018). By the time of full roll-out (now

604 2024) over 80% of claimants will be expected to manage their interactions with the DWP

605 online (Finn, 2018:225). Online service provision also features a 'digitalised advisory

606 function' that allows Jobcentre staff to monitor individual job search activity and make

607 sanction referrals for non-compliance (Finn, 2018:225).

608 On the other hand, the employment service will soon have to reduce a persistently high

609 claimant count resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, it has recently been

610 announced that a major recruitment drive for new staff will take place but this will also

611 intensify the shift toward more digitalised, socially distanced forms of service provision.

612 Historical evidence has shown how institutional violence tends to thrive in periods of crisis

613 management so as to dissuade claims and shift large numbers off the register (cf. Fox-Piven

614 and Cloward, 1972). This was evident in reforms made during the Great Depression in the

615 1930s (Fletcher, 2015) and again in response to the North American Financial Crisis (see

616 above). Consequently, it is possible that the employment service will revert to reducing

617 claims facilitated via more impersonal, digitalised forms of socially distanced service

618 provision. Together, this may create a somewhat unique situation on the front-line. One in

619 which workers are not only encouraged to dissuade claims via (institutionally) violent

620 practice, but, for the first time ever, they are to do so online. Consequently, workers will be

621 more optically separated from the human consequences of their actions than ever before

622 and are thus increasingly shielded from the moral inhibitions that the consequences of any

20

623 violent action might ordinary evoke. It will therefore become more important than ever that

624 research exposes the employment service bureaucracy to scrutiny in order to demystify

625 front-line practices and uncover the human consequences of crisis management reforms.

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