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'Chatting Shit' in the Jobcentre: Navigating Workfare Policy at the Street-Level

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Abstract

Since the mid-1980s, out-of-work benefit receipt in the UK has been increasingly governed by a 'workfarist' mesh of conditionality and activation policies. A wealth of research has found that conditionality and activation policies trigger a range of harmful outcomes for benefit claimants. However, this research largely ignores how claimants may struggle against these policies to eschew harmful outcomes. Drawing on longitudinal interviews with 15 young men, this article demonstrates how claimants can subvert policy implementation to prioritise their own needs and interests. It is concluded that claimant struggles against policy implementation most accurately reflect survival strategies and are predominantly rooted in the 'material nexus' of class-based inequalities in capitalist societies.

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, policymakers have incrementally re-designed the framing, design and delivery of the UK's social security system. The public employment service has been increasingly governed by a new 'workfarist' mesh of behavioural conditionality and labour market activation policy. Conditionality policies have ensured that eligibility for basic cash-transfer provisions is conditional on claimants agreeing to perform a range of compulsory work-related duties (Fletcher and Wright, 2018). Activation policies have been redesigned to focus less on education or (re)training and more on encouraging rapid labour market (re-)entry through negative incentives pertaining mostly to (threat of) benefit suspension/termination and mandatory work activity (Adler, 2018). This has been to

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ensure labour market discipline among Britain's claiming populations; transforming the employment service into a device for altering behaviour (Cameron, 2011).

In the last decade, there has been a wealth of research conducted on the ground – at the 'street-level' (Lipsky, 2010) – examining how the implementation of conditionality and activation policies are experienced by various out-of-work groups (Welfare Conditionality, 2018). This research has described how reforms have triggered a range of physically and/or psychologically harmful outcomes, leading some prominent academics to describe their day-to-day delivery as a form of 'social abuse' (Wright et al., 2020).

Despite this, there has been scarce examination of 'policy conflicts' and 'struggles between individual workers and citizens' (Lipsky, 2010: xii) during their public service interactions in policy implementation spaces. Rather, claimants tend to be overwhelmingly portrayed as 'passive victims' (Jordan et al., 1992: 38) in research on contemporary social security reform, with very little ability to shape policy implementation. Questioning, *Do policy conflicts and struggles occur between workers and claimants? And, if so, how do they play out?*, the present research found conflicting evidence against the prevailing literature on claimant experiences of conditionality and activation policies. Consequently, this article seeks to address an important gap in knowledge on contemporary UK social security reform and employment service delivery. Drawing upon the experiences of 15 young men (18–25), this article examines how claimants deploy a range of methods to struggle against and subvert policies and practices realised as a threat to their needs and interests.

It has long been speculated by certain intellectual traditions and politicians that exhibitions of claimant non-compliance reflect a poverty of morals, signifying the presence of a welfare dependent, workless class who pose a contagious threat to the values of the body politic and cannot be trusted to relay accurate accounts of experiences which may leave them vulnerable to rebuke or punishment (Dunn, 2014; Marsland, 1996). The present article rejects a moralistic approach to analysis, instead relying on participants' own rationales for their choices. Claimants were found to be mostly open about their experiences and tended to frame their choices as necessary 'survival strategies' (MacDonald, 1994). Survival strategies have long been recognised in academic scholarship as a form of individualised adaptation to distinctive developmental phases of capitalism featuring widening socio-economic inequalities and more intensive forms of structural violence.

Everyday weapons of the weak

Research on survival strategies of those living on the margins in capitalist societies dates back – at the very least – to passages in the works of Marx and Engels. In the years of primitive accumulation, Marx (1973: 736) noted how the expropriated agricultural peasantry were 'more inclined to become vagabonds and robbers and beggars' than work under the frequently lethal conditions of the nascent factory-wage regime. Engels (2009: 127) revealed how the rapid expansion of industrial capital had thrust the urban-dwelling fractions of the English working class into 'conditions under which they [could not] live', resulting in spates of petty utilitarian crimes against the property-owning class.

More recently, Wacquant (2008: 24, 27) has shown how classed, racialised and spatial processes of structural 'violence from above' encouraged urban marginal individuals to ensure 'survival based on a mix of casual labour, welfare support and illegal activities'. Relatedly, Jordan et al.'s (1992: 234) research found that a declining availability of stable, well-paid employment alongside social security retrenchment had encouraged poor households to make 'strategic use of the income support system' by combining out-of-work benefits with undeclared cash-in-hand work.

Scott (1985) has provided the most detailed exposition and theoretical development of survival strategies. Scott conducted ethnographic research in a rural Malaysian rice-farming village at a time of major technological development and subsequent political-economic uncertainty for the rice-farming peasantry. The farm-owning class were beginning to incorporate combine harvesters into their labour processes. This not only increased profits yielded but meant that farm-owners were relying less on peasant labour (Scott, 1985: 77). Consequently, growing numbers of the peasantry were being displaced from their livelihood, while those who remained employed experienced a loss of approximately half their wages previously received for their labour power (Scott, 1985: 76). Scott examined how the peasantry responded to these adverse changes.

Despite rising unemployment and expanding income inequality, the Malaysian peasantry remained outwardly docile. They rarely responded through acts of open insubordination to authority and they never rallied to perform openly collective acts of resistance (e.g. strike action). This was owed in large part to the peasantry's atomised geographical composition and relatively low level of collectivised class consciousness —'scattered across the countryside, often lacking the discipline and leadership that would encourage opposition of a more organised sort' (Scott, 1985: 35). However, in the absence of overt struggle, Scott unearthed an abundance of covert struggles against growing inequality and displacement from wealth. Scott (1985: 29) describes these struggles as 'everyday weapons of relatively powerless groups', which took shape in varieties of 'foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth'.

While these forms of struggle may appear on the surface as very different to collective struggles and conflicts, Scott (1985: 33) argues that everyday weapons are similar in that they are identically rooted in the 'material nexus' of class-based inequalities in capitalist societies. In other words, like collective struggles, 'everyday weapons' too constitute a response to the expropriation and unequal distribution of material resources such as land, labour, tax, rent, welfare provisions and so forth. Yet, these 'everyday weapons' possess a number of key departures from overt forms of conflict and struggle which make them significantly more attractive propositions for relatively powerless, marginalised individuals. Primarily, they 'require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms' (Scott, 1985: 29). These struggles are not trying to 'overthrow or transform a system' which seeks to dominate, exploit and impoverish marginal individuals; rather, the intention is 'to survive – today, this week, this season – within it' (Scott, 1985: 301).

Labour market restructuring

Given that Scott's analysis was situated in quite different social and cultural conditions to Britain, some may cast doubt as to the applicability of his ideas to the present context. However, the conditions confronting both the Malaysian peasantry and UK benefit claimants share two core features which make 'everyday weapons' a necessary option for individuals occupying marginal positions in the present.

First, Britain's claiming populations have become increasingly atomised since the 1980s; frequently lacking institutional representation or collective forms of class consciousness (Bagguley, 1991). A series of state-led offensives to curb trade union power during and since the Thatcher administrations have seen trade union density and influence fall to historic lows (Sewell, 2003). Meanwhile, defunding and dismantling of the cultural and organisational resources necessary for unemployed workers' movements has meant that out-of-work populations are less organised, less interested in organising and have less access to advocacy services (Bagguley, 1991). Atomisation may also be reflected in the progressive hardening of attitudes towards cash-benefit provisions for out-of-work groups (Hills, 2017), as top-down pejorative portrayals of benefit claimants have fuelled 'anti-welfare common-sense' among working and out-of-work populations (Patrick, 2017; Tyler, 2020).

Second, since the late 1970s, Britain's out-of-work groups have possessed an increasingly precarious and unequal relationship to the economy. Globalised techno-economic developments in production, distribution, consumption and exchange, in combination with state-led labour market re-regulations, have brought about a sharp increase in the number of high-paid jobs, a decline of stable middle-income jobs and a rise in low-paying, precarious employment (Goos and Manning, 2007; Kalleberg, 2018). Techno-economic developments and labour market re-regulations have also enabled employers to better attune labour supply with the vicissitudes of consumer demand by hiring more workers on flexible contracts and increasingly via temporary work agencies (Forde and Slater, 2016; Wood, 2020).

Evidence suggests that economic restructuring has benefitted the business classes and has come to the detriment of working-class populations (Umney, 2018). Employers have managed to aggregately increase the rate of exploitation over the last 40 years, with workers producing more and getting less in return. This can be seen as profits have risen upstream (Roberts, 2009) – particularly as the productivity of UK workers has increased relative to wages (Lapavitsas, 2013: 189). Meanwhile, relative and deep poverty has risen downstream – particularly as a higher percentage of the labour-force is now active in low-paid, precarious employment and/or is experiencing in-work poverty (Bourquin et al., 2019; Edmiston, 2021). Moreover, research has shown how working in the lower echelons of the contemporary labour market is frequently accompanied by abusive managerial practices; chronically vagarious shift patterns; hazardous working conditions; and an income insufficient to meet basic needs – all with deleterious effects on mental and physical health (Angry Workers, 2020; Kalleberg, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020).

Out-of-work groups are far more likely to interact with low-paid, precarious work: 53% of those leaving benefit and entering employment in 2011 entered fixed-term, temporary or part-time work, while their mean annual salary was £13,400 – well below the

'low-pay' threshold of < 60% national median wage (Adams et al., 2012). Another study interviewed 339 claimants 'two or three times' over a two-year period, finding that 71% (241) made 'recurrent movements between one short-term, low-paid, insecure job and another' (Welfare Conditionality, 2018: 18–19).

Social security reform: Surveillance, sanctions and deterrence

Out-of-work claimants' increasingly precarious and unequal relationship to the economy has also been exacerbated by the retrenchment of social security provisions and the increasing dominance of conditionality and activation policy in employment service delivery. Since the mid-1980s, UK employment services have undergone a transition from focus on job-matching and broadcasting information on labour market supply/demand to placing 'benefit control' and policing benefit claims as their core objective (Price, 2000).

Politicians have tended to justify this on paternalistic grounds (Mead, 1986), claiming that generous and permissive benefits encourage a range of anti-work behaviours – such as voluntary unemployment and an entitlement mentality – which require some form of correctional response (Cameron, 2011). However, a lack of firm evidence to support these justifications has led to a number of recent critiques. Wacquant (2009: 59) suggests that the shift towards benefit control has emerged as one part of a dual regulatory response to manage the effects of widening social inequalities and to foster more intensive engagement with the proliferation of precarious, undesirable jobs; bending poor people toward 'dependency on super-exploitative employers at the margins of the labour market'. To do this, Wacquant (2009: 43, 59, 101) argues that policymakers have borrowed 'the stock-and-trade techniques of the correctional institution' to ensure that employment services increasingly operate 'in the manner of a labour parole program' and correct non-compliant behaviours 'through rigorous protocols of surveillance, deterrence, and sanction'.

Applying Wacquant's ideas to the UK, Fletcher and Wright (2018: 338) demonstrate how post-2010 reforms transformed employment service delivery to 'deter claims, subject recipients to surveillance and punish by harsh sanctions'. First, they show how closer surveillance of claimant behaviours has been facilitated through the introduction and intensification of claimant commitments, diaries and directions. These policy tools ensure claimants undertake and provide evidence for 35 weekly hours' worth of work-related activity (usually job-searching). The introduction of Universal Credit in 2013 also saw a wider range of claimant groups subject to conditionality. To operationalise these tools in practice, frontline staff have been redefined as 'work coaches' and are required to schedule regular (usually bi-weekly) 'work-focused' interviews with a caseload of claimants, reviewing and instructing on activities taken to get back into work.

Second, Fletcher and Wright (2018) demonstrate how benefit sanctions have increasingly taken precedence over (re)training programmes and employment support – reflecting a broader 'shift from carrots to sticks' in activation policy (Wacquant, 2009: 60). While sanctions have been in operation since 1911, they have been periodically intensified in terms of severity and scope since the mid-1980s. The maximum period of

disqualification was expanded from six to 13 weeks in 1986; 26 weeks in 1988; then three years with the 'enhanced sanctioning regime' in 2012 (although this has since been reduced back to the 26-week penalty). The 'enhanced' regime also featured a built-in tiered system with longer disqualification periods for more serious non-compliance. Penalties are also differentiated 'between first violations, second violations and third violations' to upscale punishment for recidivists (Adler, 2018: 37).

Alongside intensified scope and severity, recent decades have seen huge increases in sanction referral rates, going from approximately 300,000 administered sanctions in 2001 to over a million in 2013 (Adler, 2018: 48). This increase was partially owed to changes in the performance metrics governing frontline staff. From 2010, staff were facing mounting informal pressure from ministers to make more sanction referrals (Redman and Fletcher, 2021). In 2011, a major simplification of the target regime saw worker performance become increasingly measured against their ability to secure off-benefit flows and reduce caseload numbers, irrespective of whether claimants entered employment or other unknown destinations. Redman and Fletcher (2021) found that a combination of top-down pressure to sanction and off-benefit flow targets incentivised a series of perverse frontline behaviours, such as gaming to achieve informal sanctioning targets and deploying a range of harmful practices to secure resignations from benefit receipt. Since 2013, a 'decision by ministers to ease off' on sanctions has effectuated significant decreases in overall referral rates (Webster, 2016: 10), falling back to an average roughly below their 2001 level.

Third, Fletcher and Wright (2018: 336–337) demonstrate how deterrence has been pursued by 'depriving unemployed people of necessary income'. Policymakers have made numerous efforts to reduce the real take-home value of unemployment benefits through benefit freezes, benefit caps and the more recent two-child limit. Fletcher and Wright (2018: 337) also argue 'discretionary mandatory work activity' as a form of deterrence. Introduced in 2011, this enables work coaches to mandate 'fit-to-work' claimants 'undertake a work placement of 30 hours a week lasting for a month in the not-for-profit sector . . . without pay'.

A small body of research has shown how post-2010 reforms made claiming benefits a more 'institutionally violent' process, imposing a range of physical and psychological harms on out-of-work claimants and playing an instrumental role in a number of 'avoidable' benefit deaths (Grover, 2019; Redman and Fletcher, 2021; Wright et al., 2020). Consequently, Grover (2019) concludes that post-2010 reforms not only reflect stronger efforts to force claimant groups off-benefit and into precarious employment, but they do so in a way that has 'socially murdered' some of Britain's most vulnerable citizens through penury and suicide.

Methodology

All data presented are based on interviews conducted in 2019 for a doctoral funded project examining contextualised agency in street-level interactions between frontline employment service staff ($n = 11$) in public (Jobcentre Plus) and contracted employment services (Work Programme) and young (18–25) male unemployed claimants ($n = 15$). The young men were all recruited via proximate support services (primarily supported

housing accommodation). They were selected on the basis of identifying as young male, deemed 'fit-to-work' by the state ('jobseekers') and thus subject to full conditionality/ activation. All were claiming Universal Credit or Jobseeker's Allowance[1] and most had over a year's worth of cumulative claiming experience interspersed with periods of work (for more information on the staff sample see Redman and Fletcher, 2021).

Fourteen were either living or had lived in supported housing accommodation for young people with a housing need. As Blackman (1997: 114) found, the experience of being homeless and living in supported accommodation brought a greater risk of 'being drawn into criminal subcultures'. Moreover, high rent charges and the availability of housing benefit acted as a disincentive to precarious employment, creating unemployment traps for some young men. While young men accounted for approximately 11% (129,000) of the average total UK claimant count throughout 2019 (NOMIS, 2019), these untypical circumstances mean the sample is unlikely to be representative of young male claimants or generalisable to other claimant sub-groups.

There were also several strengths to the present approach. The focus on young, marginalised men is salient as they have been perennially conceived to be a problem group in need of punitive policy tools (Cooper, 2021). Additionally, through voluntary work in supported housing accommodation, the author got to know many participants outside of interviews. This may have played some part in acquiring richer data and thicker descriptions of stigmatised and/or illicit choices/behaviours. Further, the author conducted three waves of interviews over a period of six to nine months; retaining nine out of 15 for a second wave and six for the third. This contributed to the development of stronger research relationships and facilitated closer observation of the interplay between structure and agency (Neale, 2019).

Data collection and analysis were grounded in a social justice perspective. Approaches seeking to explain criminal activity and/or 'voluntary unemployment' as the product of poor morals were rejected. Instead, emphasis was placed on empathy and an orthodox sociological approach examining the relationship between individual biographies and macro/meso-level political, economic and social processes (Neale, 2019). An abductive approach was used to facilitate this, enabling the author to incorporate pre-conceived theories into the research design while allowing space for 'unexpected or unusual' findings to emerge (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 123). This was done through a two-phase coding procedure. Codes were adapted from relevant theory in the first deductive phase, after which transcripts were revisited and coded inductively in a second phase.

The author's dual role as a qualitative longitudinal researcher and a volunteer posed some ethical challenges. For example, observations and communications with participants in the authors' voluntary role would occasionally yield rich insights relevant to the study. To address this, 'process consent' was continuously practised (Neale, 2019: 79). All housing accommodation staff and residents were continually aware of the author's dual role, while all data used are derived from interviews, with participants providing written consent prior to each interview. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. Participants received a £10.00 gift voucher as a thank you for each interview. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of all participants. Ethical approval was received by Sheffield Hallam University.

The use of everyday weapons against conditionality and activation policy implementation

The remainder of this article will demonstrate how young men used a range of 'everyday weapons' to struggle against and subvert the implementation of conditionality and activation policies in UK employment services. The structure of the analysis will mirror Fletcher and Wright's (2018) interpretation of employment service delivery, showing how claimants respond to policies conceived as forms of (1) surveillance, (2) sanction and (3) deterrence.

Subverting surveillance

Fletcher and Wright (2018) suggest that the 'claimant commitment facilitates large-scale surveillance of detailed back-to-work plans' which usually take the form of providing evidence for 35 hours of weekly searching and applying for jobs. Participants rarely conducted a 35-hour weekly job-search: 'I didn't do 35 hours. I had to condense that into a day. So I did a lot of copy and pasting' (Peter, W1). This was mostly because 35 hours a week was seen as excessive and frontline staff often used discretion with how far they enforced it. However, in some instances, claimants were actively sabotaging their applications to avoid certain jobs. Craig was enrolled on an Intensive Activity Programme (see DWP, 2016), which meant that he was under substantial pressure from the Jobcentre to visit regular workshops (inside his local office) and apply for all suitable jobs within a 90-minute radius. As Craig had limited work experience, he was encouraged to apply via temporary work agencies. Yet, Craig had no interest in working for an agency. So he made unorthodox use of the benefit stigma ordinarily associated with unemployed status as a way of avoiding undesirable work:

> Basically, with agencies, if you email 'em and say it's for your Jobcentre, most of 'em ain't interested. They won't email back. But you've still done it so there's proof that you've sent an email out. But there's no proof of a reply. Because there ain't a reply. There's ways around it.
> *Interviewer*: So why don't you think they replied?
> Because you're unemployed. (Craig, W1)

In contemporary literature on benefit stigma, the more recent orthodoxy has been to view it as emerging from above; serving business interests by inducing negative emotions among unemployed people in ways which motivate them to search for work and expand the labour supply (Tyler, 2020). Craig turns benefit stigma on its head to meet his own interests. He harnesses the disparaging connotations (lazy, feckless, etc.) associated with claimant status as a subtle 'everyday weapon' to avoid undesirable work while outwardly appearing compliant.

The covert, disguised nature of Craig's efforts drew parallels with a diverse range of actions taken by the majority of participants at different points in their claim. In the knowledge that their behaviour was under close supervision, that employment service staff wield significant power (via sanction) over their ability to meet basic essential

needs, and, consequently, that an asymmetry of power exists between themselves and their work coach, many young men were 'careful to adopt a public mask of deference and compliance' during street-level interactions (Scott, 1985: 285): 'I just tell 'em what they wanna hear' (Curtis, W2).

In subsequent interviews, the reasons why Craig was using 'everyday weapons' to avoid certain forms of work became clearer. Three aspects of his circumstances stood out. First, Craig was discouraged from seeking more attractive jobs. This was ostensibly a result of a 'territorial stigma' surrounding his residence, which previous research has found to fuel 'additional distrust and reticence among employers' to hire as soon as residents 'mention where they live' (Wacquant, 2008: 174):

> In the interviews, they judge me. I tell them where I used to live, I'm honest with them. Because they always say be honest init, so I'm honest. They ask me where I've lived and stuff and I used to live here, I go for an interview and I'll be like, 'I live in a hostel'. Straight away shut down. (Craig, W3)

Second, Craig had a pregnant partner and their financial situation was spiralling. By the second interview, Craig had moved out of supported housing and was living with his partner. Subsequent pressure from social services regarding his new living circumstances had forced them to begin a new joint claim, resulting in a sizeable cut to an already unsustainable household income. Third, Craig felt as though temporary work was the only feasible employment option and the pressure of his worsening financial situation was increasing the temptation to take a temporary position: 'I constantly sit in my head and think I want a job but then is it really worth it? . . . I don't really want a temp job, but the only jobs I can get are temporary' (W3). However, he remained reluctant to take anything impermanent for fear of losing what financial stability he had managed to locate via housing/unemployment benefit: 'I can't really go back to work because it's gonna fuck us up even more' (W3). Craig's situation reflected an unemployment trap (Centrepoint, 2019: 16–17), whereby a lack of available, stable work meant that claiming out-of-work benefits remained as the more rational option and semi-regular use of 'everyday weapons' had become a necessary method of maintaining basic subsistence. Craig concluded: 'We all get slated by the government you know. They're all lazy bastards, all this. And we're not, we just can't get the work that we need' (W3).

In other instances, claimants would evade surveillance by regulating their claimant commitment – 'I try to keep my claimant commitment vague. The vaguer it is the more you can get away' (Peter, W1) – or by finding ways of speeding up work-focused interviews. To do this, Curtis would present himself deceptively as an active (unpaid) worker:

> For the past few weeks I've been going in and saying, 'I've got unpaid work every day. I've got 15 minutes to be out, so you need to sign me on and get me out of here.' And it's been working. But I can't keep that lie up forever. So I'm gonna have to think of a new'un. (Curtis, W1)

By the second interview, Curtis was using a new deception. Reporting an encounter where he was late for an appointment: 'they were gonna sanction me but then 'cause I

said I had court . . . when I didn't . . . I just blag 'em' (W2). For some, use of various everyday weapons with and against employment service workers was diachronically consistent throughout the study, whereas for others there were periods of relative quiescence. This was likely determined by the differing nature/agency of frontline staff (see Kaufman, 2020) and/or the terms of personalised claimant commitments: 'my new work coach is sick . . . [she] actually understands, my old one was shit . . . I've not even had to lie to the Jobcentre, imagine that' (Bryan, W2).

Sometimes deception and efforts to speed up the encounter was an effort to secure claims and avoid any excessive scrutiny of job-search evidence. Yet, in another instance, speed up was reported as an effort to negate the psycho-social harms of shame/embarrassment that have long been found to hang over the claiming process: 'You're just feeling more shit about yourself the longer you're sat in there. So, the quicker you're in, the quicker you wanna get out' (Bobby, W1).

Subverting sanctions

Fletcher and Wright (2018) demonstrate how sanctions have played an increasing role in employment service delivery in recent decades, targeting a wider range of behaviours to ensure compliance and support faster labour market (re-)entry. The young men in the present study frequently reported sanctions for minor infractions such as being late for an appointment or failing to do enough job-search. Yet, getting caught out did not always lead directly to a sanction. Occasionally, 'effective "performances" of vulnerability' (Brown, 2014: 382) were used to escape punishment:

> I didn't do my job-search. But obviously I chatted shit and I was just like, 'aw, like love, I've got no money, I'm gonna be on my arse for another month and that, like what am I gonna do? What d'ya want me to do, scrape bins out in town and that? I'm not a tramp.' I went, 'can you just sort me out this one time 'cause obviously I do, do my job-search, this is the first time I've not done it'. She was like, 'ah, I'll see what I can do'. She come back and she's like, 'you're not gonna be sanctioned 'cause I've messaged the decision-makers. But anything happens like this again you will definitely be sanctioned.' I was like 'alright then'. But I were happy with that. Couldn't believe that. (James, W1)

James induced 'feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind' (Hochschild, 1983: 7) in his work coach to negate punishment and retain benefit receipt. He did this by peddling hardship to increase the likelihood of avoiding a sanction. While James was embellishing the truth, had he not done this he would have gone without eating until he could have later borrowed money from his family.

In other instances, participants were not so much trying to induce feeling in their work coach as much as they were trying 'to mask or diffuse [their own] socially unacceptable feelings of anger' (Peterie et al., 2019: 804) through 'containment of hostility' and 'suppression of resentment' (Southwood, 2011: 55). Stringent performance metrics can encourage frontline staff to find ways of dissuading claims and shifting

claimants off the register by disrespecting and antagonising their caseloads (Redman and Fletcher, 2021). Reflecting on a team of colleagues specifically designed to achieve off-benefit flows within '0–13 weeks', one worker said: 'they were pushing them until they either just cleared off because they couldn't take the pressure or they got sanctioned . . . they just let their prejudice against claimants spill out in the way they talk to them' (Jobcentre Plus work coach). Some claimants were fully aware of the efforts some staff made to antagonise them and subsequently managed their own emotions to preserve their claim:

> She'll purposely do stuff to try and like, try and get a raise out of me . . . she'll say 'aw, you smell today'. She said, 'aw, you got bad hygiene today', you know what I'm saying, saying that publicly. She'll say to me, 'imagine you had a job and you went to the interview like that . . .'.
> *Interviewer*: What did you say?
> I lowed it (let it pass without reaction) man. I said 'alright man'. You know what I'm saying 'cause I knew! 'Cause I know I'm being monitored. So I just put my pride aside init . . . I feel like she's just took the piss out of my life . . . obviously me I could easily react to it yeah, but I don't want to react. (Abshir, W1)

Despite efforts to suppress his emotions, Abshir still received a sanction later down the line for missing an appointment to attend his mother's funeral. The sanction ostensibly achieved its desired intention, leaving him destitute and encouraging him to take a job as a warehouse operative approximately 15 miles away.

In other instances, however, disrespect and sanctions were not so effective at shifting claimants off the books. Some would go further than remaining docile and suppressing feeling. Peter recalled a time where his work coach:

> was trying to imply that based on my appearance I had an odour. Which wasn't true because I'm a labourer. I have like well-worn clothes . . . I ended up taking my support worker down. And she witnessed it herself. While Leanne (pseudonym) sat down with me, she was on her best behaviour. Not Leanne, err . . .
> *Interviewer*: The work coach?
> Yeah. I was actually shocked I felt quite happy, I felt like she was being quite nice. (Peter, W1)

In their research on benefit advocacy organisation in New Zealand, Baker and Davis (2018: 535) found that 'beneficiary advocates help to actively resist the operational logic of dissuasion that defines contemporary workfare'. Not only do they 'advise beneficiaries about the benefits for which they are eligible, and assist them in demonstrating their eligibility', but they also 'provide advice and assistance for beneficiaries to avoid sanctions' (Baker and Davis, 2018: 543). Peter utilised his support worker to similar effect. Facing regular disrespect as well as constant scrutiny over job-search and regular threat of sanction, Peter used his support worker to 'obstruct and push back against the significant institutional and administrative pressures placed on beneficiaries to "roll over" and submit to' conditionality, activation and the perverse behaviours of some frontline staff (Baker and Davis, 2018: 544).

Subverting deterrence

Fletcher and Wright (2018) demonstrate how the state has long sought to deter claims by reducing the real value of cash-benefits and using material deprivation as a strategy to 'make work pay', ensuring claimants know there is 'a fate worse, and a status lower, than hard and unrewarding work' (Wacquant, 2009: 59). However, deprivation was not always passively accepted. Vaguely similar to how the Malaysian peasantry sporadically stole sacks of food from landowners, some attempted (and successfully developed) inventive ways of 'see[ing] what can be gotten away with at the margin' (Scott, 1985: 255). Speaking about his time on Jobseeker's Allowance, Kris recalled how he managed to acquire a re-issued payment by falsely reporting his benefit as lost to the police and re-claiming with an incident number:

> You could absolutely blag the life out of it like and get your payment re-issued. So you'd ring coppers yeah and be like right I've been in town, you'd go to local police station. Ours was (anonymised place). We'd go there and we'd be like, 'been on bus, been in town', say, 'I've lost my money in town blahdy-blahdy-blah'. They give you an incident number. Get the incident number, ring Jobcentre: 'Lost my money today, need another payment, got an incident number off the police'. Swoo-swoo-swoo-swoo-swoo (whistles; giddy). Another payment thank you very much. There's only so many times you can do that though like. (Kris, W2)

Kris identified 'as a hustler' (W1) who got by on a mix of agency work, out-of-work benefits and occasional engagement in the underground economy: 'I can always do sommat somewhere. Whether it be dodgy or not' (W2). Kris repeatedly framed his various choices as necessary forms of survival in response to a lack of sustainable income: 'It's not living it's surviving. Living and surviving are two different things and while you're on benefits you're surviving: 100% benefits system is survival' (W1). This drew a number of parallels with the accounts of others in this study who would engage in forms of petty entrepreneurialism (e.g. sporadic drug dealing) and 'trivial (in terms of money earned)' cash-in-hand work – 'Just putting a fence up. £60 in my hand' (Tyrone, W1) – to make 'life more liveable'; 'If I didn't do it then fuckin 'ell I'd have starved' (Curtis, W1) (MacDonald, 1994: 511, 520).

Fletcher and Wright (2018) also argue 'discretionary mandatory work activity' as a form of deterring claims, by enabling work coaches to mandate 'fit-to-work' claimants undertake an unpaid work placement in the not-for-profit sector. One reported experience of direct exploitation on an unpaid placement 'taking posters apart . . . and cleaning up the outside' (Callum, W1) 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in a nearby for-profit warehouse. Negative past experiences meant that many participants were openly suspicious and hostile towards unpaid placements; particularly those offering a 'guaranteed interview' at the end:

> Oh yeah, do this, it's a two-week course and you're guaranteed an interview at the end. I said, 'what do you think this is?' . . . I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it, it's slave labour mate, I'm not doing it . . . I said to 'em bang straight up, 'best thing you can do yeah is stop my money now (bangs table; angry). Stop it now. Rather than you booking me onto any course, yeah, you can stop my money right now. 'Cause it's not gonna happen.' And that's exactly what I tell 'em.

Interviewer: What do they say to that?

'Uh-uh-uh-uh' (feigns stuttering). They don't know what to say. Because they probably have everybody else like 'aw, alright', bowing down to 'em, d'ya know what I mean? And like, I'm not really fighting the system but I'm not gonna do something that I find degrading. And I think it's degrading mate using people for free labour and not paying 'em, d'ya know what I mean, it's fuckin' disgusting man. Give 'em some little dream and an interview in two weeks. What the fuck's an interview in two week? (Kris, W1)

Claimants would occasionally move from the 'cover of darkness' of covert struggles (Scott, 1985: 242) and react in an openly hostile fashion at the suggestion of unpaid work placements. This appeared as a 'high-risk strategy' of projecting 'a tough veneer to keep others at bay and minimise victimisation', which 'could backfire depending on work coach reactions' (cf. Wright et al., 2020: 290). The extent to which training and unpaid work experience placements are made mandatory is largely at work coach discretion. This sometimes meant that claimants could openly refuse unpaid work placements without reprimand. However, other claimants were not as fortunate: 'I said to 'em, "I'm not doing it" and they're like, "we'll sanction ya" and I was like, "alright then, do it" . . . they sanctioned me' (Craig, W1).

It has been shown how claimants can use a range of 'everyday weapons' to struggle against policies and practices understood as forms of 'surveillance', 'sanctions' and 'deterrence'. However, the present study detected struggles which did not neatly fit into this framework. These outliers point to two key limitations with the present analysis.

First, there were a small minority who responded to impoverishment and/or sanction-induced periods of destitution through forms of predatory crime. On occasion, struggles were not directed upwards against the mechanisms that frequently generate indigence, but instead manifested in lateral exploitation of other socially proximate, vulnerable individuals: 'I were selling smack and crack . . . I could get smack heads to get rentals (rented car) out' (Kris, W2). This finding points to a limitation of applying Scott's theory. Scott (1985: 35) suggests that 'when a poor man survives by taking from others in the same situation', it is no longer feasible to consider this as a struggle directly against structural inequalities. Consequently, this finding underscores the important point that responses to conditionality and activation policies do not always take shape in struggles against social structures and institutions but can instead reproduce the 'dog-eat-dog competition' typical of social relations in advanced capitalist societies (cf. Scott, 1985: 35).

Second, numerous workers reported how efforts to 'job match' and directly place claimants into work – an employment service function that has been increasingly subordinated to policing claims and benefit control in recent decades – were occasionally met with efforts to purposely sabotage job interviews:

I had one lad who, for marketing, I got him the interview attire, did loads of interview prep and then had a call back. He'd gone into reception and said, 'I'm here for the interview but I don't want the job' and didn't even wear his interview attire. He obviously didn't realise that I would call the employer or they would call me. (Welfare-to-Work advisor; Work Programme)

This indicates that struggles play out in ways beyond responses to policies conceived here as surveillance, sanctions and deterrence. These struggles tend to take shape in a plethora of creative, atypical forms (cf. Wood, 2020; Woodcock, 2017), which regularly correspond and continuously (re-)adapt to developments in the policy framework(s) that seek to govern the behaviour of working-class populations in more and more areas of their economic, social, public and private lives (e.g. workplaces, benefit offices, social housing). Consequently, the range of 'everyday weapons' presented in this article may well only scratch the surface, while individuals will likely continue to forge new weapons as policymakers continue to develop and expand punitive policy technologies.

Conclusion: Everyday weapons or scrounging skills?

This article has sought to address a gap in 'street-level' research on UK social security reform and employment service delivery. Previously, the architect of 'street-level' research in public service delivery, Lipsky (2010) has suggested that 'struggles' between workers and service-users can distort policy implementation. This occurs as the latter can 'respond angrily to real or perceived injustices, develop strategies to ingratiate themselves with workers, act grateful and elated or sullen and passive in reaction to' decisions made on the frontline (Lipsky, 2010: 9).

Curiously, however, what remains largely absent in street-level research on UK employment services is any detailed investigation of how 'policy conflicts' and 'struggles' unfold in public service interactions between frontline workers and claimants. By investigating if/how policy conflicts and struggles play out, the present article helps to address this gap. It has been shown how claimants are not always 'passive victims' but, using (mostly) covert 'everyday weapons', can bend policy implementation to eschew undesirable policy outcomes.

It is salient to note that exhibitions of non-compliance are a politically controversial subject. The dominant (neo-) Conservative intellectual tradition – which has had a major influence on contemporary social security reform – tends to interpret crime, voluntary unemployment and more general behavioural non-compliance within poor communities through a moralistic lens; frequently condemning such behaviour as symptomatic of a morally penurious, welfare-dependent workless class (Dunn, 2014). Individuals arriving from this position would likely view much of the data presented above not as evidence of 'everyday weapons' against structural inequalities, but perhaps more as reflecting a 'repertoire of scrounging skills' deployed strategically to remain voluntarily unemployed in pursuit of long-term idleness and/or short-term illicit gains (Marsland, 1996: 112).

The present study opted to reject moralistic analysis. This was considered the most effective approach to data analysis for three core reasons. First, contrary to the beliefs of some Conservative academics, the young men were found to be mostly open about their experiences and the intentions underlying their choices. This was determined as many shared experiences which may have left them vulnerable to reproach or punishment in the presence of others.

Second, struggles against conditionality and activation policies were not necessarily driven by intentional opposition to the overarching policy logic of dissuading claims and mandating work. For example, there were participants who would frequently subvert

certain policies but were also keen to take almost any paid work opportunity and later proved this by taking available work. This indicates that underlying intentions are considerably more diverse and complex than moralistic analyses typically infer (cf. Marsland, 1996); and that there is often no uniform or straightforward correlation between subversive actions and deeper intentions.

Having said this, there were instances where exhibitions of non-compliance could be viewed as evidence of voluntary unemployment. Importantly, there were a number who were not actively seeking the job opportunities that would likely serve (however temporarily) as their quickest route off-benefit – 'I really would rather be on benefits than [temporary] agency [work]' (Baz, W1) – and hence might be viewed by some as voluntarily unemployed. Yet, even in cases where participants were not availing themselves of any opportunity to work, it was difficult to see how this reflected poor morals or 'scrounging skills'. For example, when asked why he would rather stay on benefits than work via agencies, Baz responded:

> Because you're doing all the cheap labour, you think you'd get a bit more respect. But you don't, you just get treated like a slave . . . there were rats constantly dead from where they've shot 'em and they've managed to get outside . . . the managers were walking past 'em everyday. Just leaving 'em, telling us to 'go pick that up'. To me that's slavery . . . it's only for when they need you and when they don't they fuck you off. So I don't wanna work for an agency no more. I wanna work full time. (W1)

This points to the final reason why the present study rejects moralistic analysis. When intentions underlying participants' choices and actions were closely scrutinised, exhibitions of non-compliance were overwhelmingly articulated as imperative forms of survival strategy. In other words, claimants tended to frame their choices as individualised forms of self-help situated within and against a political-economic landscape of job opportunities and social security services perceived as exploitative, unfair and/or exacerbating material/psychological impoverishment – thus failing to reflect, and posing a threat to, their individual needs and interests.

Given that the framing, design and delivery of contemporary social security reforms are predominantly founded and justified on (neo-) Conservative analyses of poor people and their behaviour, these findings may have significant implications. Specifically, these findings are thought to present a unique contribution to a wealth of research which contradicts moralistic analyses and undermines justifications for the present conditionality/ activation policy mesh (see Welfare Conditionality, 2018). This contribution is unique because it is one of very few UK studies which has exposed, and presented an explanation for, exhibitions of behavioural non-compliance. In addition, this contribution undermines justifications for contemporary reforms because it found that the intentions underlying non-compliant actions did not reflect pursuits of idleness or an outright refusal to work. The young men most often articulated their choices as rational and necessary responses to structurally produced conditions which frequently posed a threat to their needs and interests. Consequently, these findings call in to question whether punitive policy tools are necessary or effective for this claimant sub-group. They also suggest that policies seeking to create a more inclusive labour market – which circulates wealth

more fairly at source through better employment support, better quality jobs and more equitable distribution of economically and socially desirable work – could more effectively encourage the sort of behavioural compliance that dominant officials continue to evangelically pursue for working-class populations.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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Note

1. Jobseeker's Allowance and Universal Credit are the primary cash-benefits available for people who are out of work or on a low income. Jobseeker's Allowance is part of the previous legacy benefits system and, since 2013, has been gradually phased out via the introduction of Universal Credit.

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