

‘One Fundamental Value’: Work for the Dole
participants’ views about mutual obligation

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of tables	vii
List of appendices	ix
Summary	1
Introduction	4
1 From rations to reciprocal obligations: Income support for the unemployed in Australia	8
<i>What kind of welfare state?</i>	8
<i>From 'susso' to social security</i>	11
<i>The return of high unemployment and the rise of the New Right</i>	15
<i>'Work for the Dole' for indigenous Australians</i>	17
<i>Reciprocal obligation</i>	18
2 From entitlement to contract: Theories of conditional income support	23
<i>Citizenship and welfare rights</i>	24
<i>Market liberalism</i>	27
<i>New paternalism</i>	29
<i>Communitarianism</i>	33
<i>'The Third Way'</i>	35
<i>Policy change</i>	37
3 The debate over mutual obligation and Work for the Dole	41
<i>The Job Network</i>	41
<i>Mutual obligation and Work for the Dole</i>	44
<i>Rationales for mutual obligation</i>	47
<i>Critiques of mutual obligation</i>	53
<i>Community views about unemployment</i>	62
<i>Community views about mutual obligation</i>	70

4	Methodology	77
	<i>Methodological approach</i>	77
	<i>Stage one</i>	80
	<i>Stage two</i>	85
	<i>Data analysis</i>	88
	<i>Participant characteristics</i>	90
5	‘In control of your own life’: Experience and expectations of work	94
	<i>Previous employment</i>	94
	<i>The value of work</i>	98
	<i>What type of work?</i>	104
	<i>What kind of job?</i>	106
	<i>Selectivity</i>	123
6	‘A big void’: Being unemployed	129
	<i>Previous research</i>	129
	<i>Experience of unemployment</i>	133
	<i>Looking for work</i>	144
	<i>Barriers to gaining work</i>	147
7	‘Playing the game’: Job search requirements and ‘breaching’	157
	<i>Job search requirements</i>	157
	<i>Assistance provided by agencies</i>	175
	<i>The breaching regime</i>	179
	<i>Experience of breaching</i>	181
8	Activity, company and compulsion: The experience of ‘working for the dole’	191
	<i>Previous research</i>	191
	<i>‘Volunteers’ and ‘conscripts’</i>	195
	<i>The benefits of participating</i>	200
	<i>Dislikes about participating</i>	205
	<i>Supplement level</i>	210
	<i>Differences between groups of participants</i>	211

9	‘After I’ve done this, it’ll be just the same as before’: Employment outcomes from Work for the Dole	214
	<i>Relevance to work goals</i>	214
	<i>Training: One size fits all?</i>	217
	<i>Perceived effect on job prospects</i>	226
	<i>Findings of follow-up survey</i>	229
	<i>Other outcomes research</i>	230
10	‘It’s important for everybody to work’: Rights and obligations to work and income support	236
	<i>The right to work</i>	236
	<i>The obligation to work</i>	243
	<i>Who is responsible for preventing unemployment?</i>	250
	<i>The right to income support</i>	262
11	‘They tell us to jump, we say “how high?”’: Perspectives on mutual obligation	275
	<i>Views on compulsion</i>	275
	<i>Autonomy orientation</i>	283
	<i>Disciplinary orientation</i>	291
	<i>Outcomes orientation</i>	296
	Conclusion	302
	Appendices	306
	References	338

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1:	Stages of fieldwork	79
Table 5.1:	Months survey participants had paid work in last three years	95
Table 5.2:	Months survey participants held last paid job	95
Table 5.3:	Main reason survey participants left last job	96
Table 5.4:	Reasons interviewees left previous jobs	97
Table 5.5:	Benefits of work for interviewees by sex, skill level and age	99
Table 5.6:	Work sought by survey participants	105
Table 5.7:	Work held in last three years and work sought by interviewees	106
Table 5.8:	Characteristics interviewees sought in jobs by sex, skill level and age	108
Table 5.9:	The most important factors making work a positive experience	111
Table 5.10:	Factor most contributing to job satisfaction	111
Table 5.11:	Characteristics interviewees would not tolerate in jobs by sex, skill level and age	113
Table 6.1:	Survey participants' time unemployed in last three years	134
Table 6.2:	Perceived impact of unemployment on interviewees by sex and skill level	135
Table 7.1:	Views of interviewees about job search requirements by sex, skill level and age	161
Table 8.1:	Mean scores on attitude to WfD scale by sex and whether voluntary/coerced	193
Table 8.2:	Proportion of mutual obligation participants agreeing with statements about mutual obligation activities	194
Table 8.3:	Reasons survey participants who 'volunteered' wanted to take part in their WfD project	196
Table 8.4:	Reasons survey participants who were 'conscripted' did not want to take part in their WfD project	198
Table 8.5:	Overall feelings of survey participants about doing WfD project	201
Table 8.6:	Aspects survey participants liked about their WfD project	202

Table 8.7:	Perceived benefits for survey participants of undertaking WfD	203
Table 8.8:	Aspects survey participants disliked about their WfD project	206
Table 9.1:	Association between perceived relevance of WfD project and perceived benefits of the project	216
Table 9.2:	Aspects of WfD training survey participants found useful	219
Table 9.3:	Perceived effect of WfD on job prospects (survey participants)	226
Table 10.1:	Attributions of responsibility for preventing unemployment by sex, skill level and age (interviewees)	252
Table 11.1:	Survey participants' views on the obligations of the unemployed	276
Table 11.2:	Survey participants' views on the negative effects of compulsion	279
Table 11.3:	Survey participants' views on government-funded employment and training	279
Table 11.4:	Survey participants' views on work motivation	279
Table 11.5:	Association between support for compulsion and participant attitudes and characteristics	280
Table 11.6:	Survey participants' orientations towards compulsion	283
Table 11.7:	Views on the obligation to work of interviewees with different orientations to mutual obligation	295
Table 11.8:	Views on responsibility for preventing unemployment of interviewees with different orientations to mutual obligation	295

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A:	Additional tables	
	Table A.1: Explanations for high unemployment (%)	307
	Table A.2: Views on the responsibility for solving unemployment (%)	308
	Table A.3: The role of government in solving unemployment	309
	Table A.4: Support for activity test requirements (% agreeing with each requirement)	310
	Table A.5: Support for mutual obligation requirements by respondent characteristics and unemployed group	311
	Table A.6: Attitudes towards social security and the unemployed	312
	Table A.7: Support for Work for the Dole	313
Appendix B:	Stage 1: Work for the Dole participants' questionnaire	314
Appendix C:	Stage 1: Focus groups: Main issues for discussion	326
Appendix D:	Stage 1: Differences in the characteristics of the initial survey sample and follow-up telephone survey sample	327
Appendix E:	Stage 2: Research questions	329
Appendix F:	Stage 2: Work for the Dole participants' questionnaire	330
Appendix G:	Stage 2: Interview questions	333

SUMMARY

This thesis contributes to the literature on the Howard Government's mutual obligation policy by investigating the perspectives of those who are subject to it: specifically, those required to undertake Work for the Dole. To date, research on participants' perspectives has been limited to a few predominantly quantitative studies, most of which have been commissioned or conducted by government departments. This study provides a more qualitative and independent perspective on participants' experiences and their views about their rights and obligations as unemployed people. It considers the extent to which these experiences and views are consistent with or conflict with the rationales for mutual obligation.

The study included a survey of 87 participants in nine Melbourne and Geelong-based Work for the Dole projects conducted in 1999, eight focus groups conducted with 59 of these participants, and 37 in-depth interviews conducted with a new sample of Work for the Dole participants in 2002. Unemployed participants in the study had a strongly positive orientation towards work and many had substantial experience of employment. They viewed work as necessary to fulfil human capacities and needs, and often believed that they should work for their own well-being, as much as to contribute to society. Far from expressing any distinctive values of a 'dependency culture', participants appeared to share many of the work values of the wider community. However, many also had substantial experience of unemployment and faced significant barriers to gaining ongoing work.

This thesis provides evidence that Work for the Dole provides short-term benefits for many such unemployed people: most study participants enjoyed taking part in the program and felt that they gained benefits from participating. They clearly endorsed some kind of work placement and skill development programs for the unemployed. Given the Howard Government's abolition of a range of previous programs of this type, Work for the Dole is now the only such program available for many participants and was often preferred to doing no program at all.

However, more than four in ten survey participants did not enjoy doing the program overall, and a fifth actively disliked taking part. Further, the program's impact on employment prospects appeared to be either negligible or negative—which was not surprising given the scheme's focus on the unemployed discharging their 'obligations to the community' and

overcoming a ‘psychology of dependency’, rather than on job outcomes for participants. However, this thesis argues that there is very limited value in a program which provides benefits at the time of participation but does not help in achieving the main aim of the unemployed: gaining work.

The study analyses the Howard Government’s three central rationales for the mutual obligation policy: that it ensures that participants fulfil the requirements of the ‘social contract’ by requiring them to ‘contribute to the community’ (the contractualist claim), that it deters the unemployed from being ‘too selective’ about jobs (the ‘job snob’ claim), and that it benefits participants by developing their capacity for autonomy and self-reliance (the new paternalist claim). These three rationales are assessed in the light of participants’ responses.

With regard to the contractualist claim, the study finds that most participants shared the widespread community belief that only ‘genuine’ jobseekers deserve unemployment payments, but many did not share the community’s support for the requirement to work for payments. While a third of survey participants supported this requirement, almost half opposed it. Most believed the government was not fulfilling its obligations to the unemployed to provide appropriate employment and training opportunities which were relevant to the jobs they were seeking. Many viewed the mutual obligation ‘contract’ as a one-way set of directives imposed on them and believed that the breaching regime which enforced these directives was unreasonably punitive and unfairly administered.

With regard to the ‘job snob’ claim, study participants largely rejected an expectation that they should be required to accept any job, and most had substantial concerns about the specific form of the job search regime. They did not agree that ‘any job is better than no job’ and objected to the pressure under mutual obligation arrangements to apply for jobs which they considered inappropriate. They were not willing to be forced into jobs in which they feared they would be unhappy and which they were likely to soon leave; rather, they wanted assistance to help them to find sustainable work.

Finally, with regard to the ‘new paternalist’ claim, many participants believed that compelling recipients to undertake certain activities or to apply for unsuitable jobs unreasonably restricted their freedom of choice, undermining rather than increasing their autonomy. As argued by Yeatman (2000b), recipients may benefit from a program, or from a case manager who assists

them to develop their capacities, but compulsion to undertake activities that are not related to individual needs and goals is likely to undermine capacity-building. The evidence of poor employment outcomes from Work for the Dole adds further weight to this view. The provision of a greater range of program types in place of Work for the Dole—including those which combine work with accredited training and those providing subsidised placement in mainstream jobs—would address many concerns held by participants in this study. However, compulsion to participate in a labour market program would remain problematic in a society which generates far fewer jobs than are needed for full employment.

The thesis concludes that the mutual obligation principle privileges the obligations of the unemployed over their rights to autonomy and to work. Its associated requirements have further added to the already considerable constraints faced by unemployed people who are attempting to identify and meet their own work-related goals. Ironically, a policy which is portrayed by the Government as promoting active participation in society, in reality requires many payment recipients to passively obey government directives—instead of actively participating in shaping their own future.

INTRODUCTION

People treat you differently...because I'm unemployed they see me as if I'm a bad person, as if I'm uneducated. (John, aged under 21)

I feel like, you know, people are looking down on me...and it makes me feel very uncomfortable and...criticised. (Steve, early 20s)

...there's always a sense of guilt when you're fully able to work, to be employed full-time and you just can't find any...It's just the stigma that people are subject to...the expectation that you're a bludger, you're not trying hard enough, and you're wasting your time. (Stefano, early 20s)

Unemployed Australians are accustomed to having their character and abilities questioned; the suspicion that they are 'work shy' has a long history. But in 1997 a new way of addressing these suspicions was introduced—or rather, an old way was re-introduced—Work for the Dole and its associated policy principle, mutual obligation. During the Depression, 'sustenance doles', or food rations, had been introduced for out-of-work people employed on public works. Under the new program, the 'dole' would again be conditional upon work on community projects; although the unemployed had no actual job, they could still be required to work for payments. The term 'mutual obligation' was used to describe the principle that unemployment payment recipients should 'contribute to the community' in return for payments. According to Dr Kemp (1998b), the then Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Work for the Dole was 'all about one basic fundamental social value—that welfare is a two-way street'. Mutual obligation was designed to address public concerns about 'bludging' or 'cruising' on 'welfare'. Its supporters also argued that it would 'restore self-respect' and improve 'work readiness' by providing the unemployed with a valued social role: contributing to a community project. Many also claimed that Work for the Dole participants would have a better chance of obtaining paid employment, although—tellingly—this was not an objective of the scheme.

Eight years later, Work for the Dole attracts far less publicity and is apparently entrenched in the income support system. In July 2004, the Minister for Employment Services, Mal Brough, announced that 'almost 300,000 unemployed Australians have taken part in...Work for the Dole' (Brough 2004). Mutual obligation is being further extended into indigenous

communities through Shared Responsibility Agreements, and the Howard Government's imminent Senate majority has brought increased work requirements for people with disabilities and sole parents back onto the government's agenda. Public opinion polls indicate that there is widespread community support for mutual obligation requirements, and studies have reported that most participants enjoy taking part. But questions about the fairness and utility of Work for the Dole remain. Independent research has found that participation has no or even *negative* effects on job outcomes for the unemployed—once the key indicator of effectiveness for unemployment programs. Critics continue to decry the program as 'a flawed and cynical program. A piece of populism masked as policy' (Castles 2005: 13). Yet there is limited research available on Work for the Dole other than government-sponsored studies.

This thesis sets out to examine mutual obligation from the perspective of those who are subject to it. Their experience and views are rarely heard, except in government-organised media events; yet they are important to analysing mutual obligation. As Marston and Watts (2004: 43) argue, 'Hearing the *voice* of the users of welfare needs to be asserted as an important principle in rethinking the ethical basis of social policy'. Participants' perspectives can shed light on such issues as whether they experience mutual obligation requirements as helpful or punitive, as morale-building or stigmatising, and as supporting or inhibiting their achievement of personal goals. They can also shed light on complex questions concerning how the unemployed view their rights and obligations as unemployed people. This study aims to assess the Howard Government's rationales for mutual obligation by investigating the extent to which they are consistent with or conflict with Work for the Dole participants' perspectives and experiences. It is not an evaluation—in the sense of an assessment of Work for the Dole against its specific program objectives—although evidence on the outcomes of the program is considered. Rather, it examines Work for the Dole more broadly in the context of the debate over mutual obligation.

The thesis begins by discussing the historical background to the introduction of Work for the Dole in Australia, from 'the susso' in the 1930s to the establishment of a limited entitlement to unemployment payments in 1945 and the increasing importance and contentiousness of this entitlement since the 1970s. It is argued that the income-tested, residual and conditional character of unemployment payments in Australia laid the groundwork for the increasing conditionality of payments from the 1980s. Chapter 2 discusses theoretical developments in the English-speaking countries which have influenced the move to greater conditionality in

Australia and other countries, including the ideas of market liberals, new paternalists, communitarians and Third Way theorists.

Chapter 3 examines the debate over the mutual obligation policy in Australia. The chapter discusses the government's rationale for introducing the policy, and critical responses to it in principle and practice. Public opinion about unemployment and mutual obligation is also considered. The subsequent chapters compare the views of the government, critics and the community with the views of those who are subject to mutual obligation requirements. The methodology employed to do this is discussed in Chapter 4. Fieldwork included a survey of 87 participants in nine Work for the Dole projects conducted in 1999, eight focus groups conducted with 59 of these participants, and 37 in-depth interviews conducted with a new sample of Work for the Dole participants in 2002. All fieldwork was undertaken in Melbourne and Geelong.

Participants' experience of work and unemployment are important in understanding their views about Work for the Dole. Chapter 5 focuses on Work for the Dole participants' experience of and motivations regarding work, while Chapter 6 looks at their experience of being out of work and on the job search 'treadmill'. For unemployment payment recipients, a central part of this experience is the work-like activity of meeting payment conditions and attempting to avoid sanctions for 'breaches'—as is discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the Work for the Dole program itself. Chapter 8 discusses participants' experience of undertaking the program and the benefits and drawbacks they perceive in taking part, while Chapter 9 examines their views about the training provided by the program and its likely effect on their job prospects. Chapter 9 also considers research on the actual employment outcomes from the scheme.

The final two chapters focus on ethical questions about mutual obligation and Work for the Dole. Chapter 10 looks broadly at participants' views about their rights and obligations to work and to income support, while the final chapter looks directly at their views about the mutual obligation principle itself. These chapters ask what participants think of their rights and responsibilities as unemployed people, and what they think are the responsibilities of the government and employers towards them. The government's rationales for mutual obligation are assessed in the light of these views.

Work for the Dole has marked a substantial shift in the conditions placed on the unemployed. From the 1940s to the 1970s they were required to seek work and from the 1980s to also undertake activities intended to improve their job prospects. In contrast, they are now required to take part in activities to ‘repay’ the income support they receive from the community. The rationale for this requirement is focussed on the present, not the future—even if Work for the Dole has no impact on future job prospects, it enables the unemployed to ‘contribute to the community’. In other words, Work for the Dole is a substitute for employment. We begin with a discussion of these historical shifts in income support for the unemployed in Australia.

CHAPTER 1

FROM RATIONS TO RECIPROCAL OBLIGATIONS: INCOME SUPPORT FOR THE UNEMPLOYED IN AUSTRALIA

Introduction

The Australian welfare state is notable for its historic focus on ensuring adequate wages for the delivery of welfare, and its high level of targeting of income support through means-testing. Following the relatively late introduction of social security provisions for the unemployed in Australia in 1945, there was little change in the system for almost 30 years—low unemployment meant that social security for the unemployed played a marginal role. The return of high unemployment in the 1970s resulted in pressures for change, and increased conditions began to be attached to the receipt of payments. This chapter briefly discusses the historically distinctive character of the Australian welfare state and the history of income support provision for the unemployed in Australia.

What kind of welfare state?

The Australian social security system is distinctive among OECD countries in its sole reliance on taxation-funded income support for all social security provisions except retirement income.¹ In contrast, other OECD countries generally combine contribution-based social insurance schemes—which are tied to earnings and usually not means-tested—with taxation-funded income support for those who have not built up an entitlement to social insurance or have exhausted their entitlements. As a result of its reliance on means-tested benefits, Australia's income support system has always been strongly targeted by international standards, and targeting has increased since 1977 (Mitchell, Harding & Gruen 1994). Based on data from the Luxembourg Income Study, Mitchell, Harding and Gruen found that during the 1980s the Australian welfare system was the most highly targeted to those on low incomes of all nine countries included in the study.

Partly in recognition of this high level of targeting, Esping-Andersen (1990) categorised Australia—along with the United States and Canada—as having a *liberal* rather than a

¹ New Zealand also relies on taxation-funded income support (Castles & Shirley 1995).

corporatist or *social democratic* welfare state.² According to this classification, *corporatist* states such as France, Germany and Italy are conservative and designed to preserve historical differences of class and status through highly differentiated welfare entitlements for different social groups. Such regimes are commonly shaped by the Church and emphasise the traditional family as the primary provider of welfare, with the state playing a subsidiary role by providing support only ‘when the family’s capacity to service its members is exhausted’ (Esping-Andersen 1990: 27). *Social democratic* states, developed in Scandinavian countries, are characterised by a commitment to universal provision and to ensuring that citizens are able to maintain a reasonable standard of living when not working. Social democratic states ‘promote an equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs as was pursued elsewhere’ (Esping-Andersen 1990: 27). In contrast, *liberal* welfare states are residualist in character and public provision is subordinate to the private provision of welfare. In these systems, concerns about income support undermining work incentives keep benefit levels low and eligibility restricted:

In this model, the progress of social reform has been severely circumscribed by traditional, liberal work-ethic norms...the limits of welfare equal the marginal propensity to opt for welfare instead of work. Entitlement rules are therefore strict and often associated with stigma; benefits are typically modest (1990: 26–7).

However, Australian welfare state theorist Frank Castles had earlier argued in *The Working Class and Welfare* (1985) that although the Australian welfare system shared with the United States a reliance on means-tested benefits, it differed in character from the US system and could be described as a *wage-earners’ welfare state*. This model was unique to Australia and New Zealand and emphasised support for the welfare of ordinary citizens through ensuring adequate wage levels rather than through social security. In contrast, the *residual* model exemplified by the US involved ‘the provision of relief to those unable for a range of socially legitimated reasons to obtain a bare minimum of subsistence from the labour market’ and the state did not attempt to set adequate wage levels (1985: 77).³ Castles argued that the *wage-earners’ welfare state*:

² According to Esping-Anderson, the United Kingdom, Ireland and New Zealand displayed *some* of the characteristics of the liberal welfare state.

³ This residual model was originally described by Richard Titmuss—see Chapter 3 for discussion of his categorisation of welfare states.

is to be distinguished from the residual conception of welfare precisely by a strategy of creating a national minimum and from the institutional conception by the fact that the criterion of inclusion was status as a wage-earner, rather than status as a citizen (1985: 103).⁴

Australia instituted a wages arbitration system which ensured that minimum adult male wages were set at levels judged adequate to support a wife and children, along with measures to protect industry from imports from low-wage countries and strict immigration controls until after World War II (which partially aimed to prevent the oversupply of labour). The strategy was initially pursued by the trade unions, the ALP and Liberal-Protectionists (Macintyre 1985; Castles 1985), and was institutionalised with respect to wage arbitration in the Harvester Judgement of 1907. In this judgement, the President of the Australian Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, Justice Higgins, introduced the formulation of ‘a fair and reasonable wage’ as measured by ‘the normal needs of the average employee, regarded as a human being living in a civilised community’ (cited in Castles 1985: 84).

Castles argued that the wage-earners’ welfare state minimised the importance of social security measures in protecting the welfare of citizens: the system provided ‘wage security for the worker rather than social security for the citizen’ (1985: 87). He commented:

If wages were fair and reasonable, it would only be the improvident and those unusually circumstanced who would require help...The logic which follows from such a strategy of social amelioration, premised on the regulation of income from employment, is one which highlights individual rather than community responsibility for poverty and leads to the marginalisation of the poor as a separate and largely forgotten ‘welfare class’ (Castles 1985: 99).

Both Macintyre and Castles highlight the historic importance placed by the Australian labour movement on ensuring an adequate income could be earned from work, rather than through the provision of ‘welfare’ to those without work or with inadequate wages. Labourism, the dominant tradition in the ALP until the 1960s (Jupp 1982: 140), emphasised the role of trade unionism in advancing the conditions of workers. According to this tradition, the role of the state is to ensure that unions can freely operate, to protect the poor, and ‘to protect workers and consumers’ through industry regulation or state ownership of enterprises in instances of

⁴ Marian Sawer has pointed out, however, that not all benefits of the Australian welfare state were historically tied to being a wage-earner: women were granted entitlements to education, maternity allowances and age

market failure (Jupp 1982: 138–9). The labourist emphasis on protecting jobs and wages was arguably a major factor in the relatively late introduction of social security provisions for the unemployed in Australia, and the use of means-testing and work tests to determine eligibility when such provisions were introduced. The reliance on employment rather than income support to provide security for workers was further bolstered under the Keynesian policy approach adopted in Australia from the 1940s: the maintenance of full employment was adopted as the primary goal of the welfare state in the decade after World War II, while income support for the unemployed played a marginal role (Macintyre 1985; Watts 1987; Smyth 1994). However, the deregulation of the economy from the 1980s has led to the dismantling of many measures designed to protect wages and employment, leaving Australia with a ‘residual welfare state in the liberal mould’ (Shaver 2002: 339; see also Castles 2001).

From ‘susso’ to social security

‘Work for the dole’ is not a new concept in Australia, having formed a major component of assistance for the unemployed up to and during the Great Depression. Harris notes that before the depression, ‘governments mainly confined themselves to the provision of relief works, providing subsidies to charitable organizations and, in some cases, granting subsistence to families in need’. The depression necessitated ‘a greater involvement of government in unemployment relief’, but brought ‘no significant change in direction’ (Harris 2001: 7): state governments introduced ‘sustenance doles’ or the ‘susso’—food coupons which allocated ‘doles’ of food to recipients and their dependents—for those in demonstrated need. Relief applicants were interviewed and visited by local council dole officers, charities or police ‘to ensure that they were “genuine”’ (Garton 1990: 127). Alternatively, food or wages were provided in exchange for public relief work. Such work sometimes involved public infrastructure development but at other times was primarily intended as a ‘work test’, such as stone breaking or clearing police paddocks of weeds (Cass 1988: 11–12; Mendelsohn 1979: 104).

These arrangements were intended to discourage requests for relief and, as the Labour Commission of NSW noted in 1900, to ensure that ‘the idle and dissolute [could] be sifted from among the unfortunate’ (cited in Macintyre 1985: 62). The market liberal principle of ‘less eligibility’—deriving from the nineteenth century English Poor Laws—was applied: to

pensions as citizens, regardless of whether they had participated in the paid workforce (Sawer 2003: 77-81).

maintain incentives to work, the living standards of welfare recipients should be kept below those of the poorest worker (Macintyre 1985). Further, a distinction was drawn between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor—only those of good character were to receive relief (Golding & Middleton 1982; Beder 2000). Cass describes the relief system as ‘discretionary, harshly administered, parsimonious and piecemeal’ (1988: 11), and Garton (1990: 127) notes that:

In the peak year of 1932, 600 000 received sustenance doles. But many applicants resented the long queues and humiliating interviews they were subjected to and others complained about the punitive attitudes of officials.

Harris has characterised the ‘welfare rationality’ of the period as one of ‘relief’: poverty ‘was seen to arise from “natural” forces rather than politico-economic decisions’ and relief ‘alleviat[ed] pain or distress which ha[d] already occurred. Unemployment, in other words, was to be relieved rather than prevented’ (Harris 2001: 10–11). In contrast, trade unionists and the unemployed themselves generally called for public employment when demand for labour was low, and organised to demand public works at award rates of pay rather than ‘charity’ (Macintyre 1985). Many trade unionists favoured unemployment insurance to finance such public works, but were generally opposed to ‘doles’—Ted Holloway, secretary of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council, commented to a Commonwealth Royal Commission in the 1920s:

We hate the idea of a system of money doles...[there is] nothing more objectionable to the average man than to offer him something for nothing...[for] a man loses his manliness under such a system’ (cited in Macintyre 1985: 65).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s various forms of contribution-based and general-revenue based unemployment insurance schemes were debated, but the only state to introduce such a scheme was Queensland from 1923 (Watts 1987; Cass 1988). Under the Australian Constitution the Commonwealth Government’s only social policy powers were in the areas of invalid and old-age pensions—providing ‘a major institutional impediment to welfare reform’ (Castles 1985: 23). It was not until 1945 that a national system of unemployment assistance was introduced as part of the Labor Party’s program for post-war reconstruction—supported by Labor’s 1946 constitutional amendment empowering the Commonwealth to enact a much broader range of welfare legislation.

The Chifley Government's 1945 White Paper *Full Employment in Australia* set out a Keynesian policy of economic management to maintain full employment by regulating cyclical market tendencies through compensatory public sector spending and monetary adjustments. This was supplemented by a social security 'safety net' for those temporarily unable to find work—a national system of taxation-funded payments for the unemployed for those who met both an income test and work test (Watts 1987; Smyth 1994). In 1946 the government established the Commonwealth Employment Service to provide employment placement services to jobseekers and employers. This was to be the primary means of directly assisting the unemployed into work for the next three decades.

The new Unemployment Benefit was a residualist payment which 'for a married couple with three children...amounted to a third of average weekly earnings in 1948-49' (Macintyre 1985: 89). This low rate of payment was considered sufficient given the expected temporary nature of unemployment in a 'full employment' economy:

The government's primary goal was not social security 'but rather the much higher aim of full employment of manpower and resources in raising living standards. In other words, the main function of Reconstruction will be positive—to create conditions in which palliatives will become less and less necessary' (Macintyre 1985: 83, citing Chifley).

However, full employment was largely conceived of as male, with Australian-born women being 'encouraged in all manner of ways to return home after their war effort', although migrant women were employed as factory workers. In addition, married women were 'excluded from receiving benefit unless they could show that it was not "reasonably possible" for their husbands to "maintain" them' (Harris 2001: 14).

The new Unemployment Benefit was not unconditional, as from its inception recipients were required to show that they were seeking work and were prepared to take up 'suitable' job offers (this was the new 'work test'):

The Department of Social Services (later Social Security) had the discretion to determine what was suitable work. Benefit could be postponed, suspended or cancelled if a person became voluntarily unemployed, unemployed due to misconduct at work or refused an offer of suitable employment (Cass 1988: 17).

However, in the context of low unemployment, ‘governing the behaviour of the unemployed tended to take second place to achieving the new partnership between economic and social policy’ (Harris 2001: 14).

The Menzies Government maintained Unemployment Benefit with little change. Menzies emphasised the importance of self-reliance and the primary role of the family in welfare provision, but conceded a necessary role for the state when confronting ‘unavoidable crises and hardships which with all the will in the world we cannot meet unaided’. He commented:

Traditionally and naturally, it is to our families and friends that we turn in such misfortunes. These are still our first lines of defence; but in the complexities of the modern world the extent to which families and friends can help is limited. Because of this, every advanced country has accepted the view that assistance to people in needy circumstances and with particular financial burdens must be regarded as a community responsibility (cited in Murphy 2000: 83).

There were few changes to eligibility for Unemployment Benefit between 1945 and 1973, apart from amendments to the income test and clarification of the eligibility of those who were unemployed due to strikes (Kewley 1973). Weatherley (1994: 155) notes that ‘prior to the 1970s, social security was limited in scope and administration. There was little outreach to inform citizens about available programs and uptake was relatively low.’ Rates were not regularly indexed but were occasionally increased, usually when increased unemployment brought Unemployment Benefit levels to political attention. The most notable rises were in 1952, when rates were doubled during a period of recession, and in 1972—again when unemployment was rising—when the adult rate was raised by \$7 to \$17 a week (Kewley 1973).

The election of the Whitlam Government in December 1972 ushered in a period of major policy change to the Australian welfare state. Whitlam combined elements of social liberal and social democratic thinking in his focus on the government’s role in countering market inequalities and enabling the full citizenship of community members through expanded government provision of services. This was in marked contrast to the previous focus of post-war governments (both Coalition and Labor) on the provision of social services to assist the ‘needy’, rather than all citizens (Beilharz, Considine & Watts 1992: 46–9). Whitlam later commented:

Increasingly, a citizen's real standard of living, the health of himself and his family, his children's opportunity for education and self-improvement, his access to employment opportunities...his scope to participate in the decisions and actions of the community, are determined not so much by his income but by the availability and accessibility of the services which the community alone can provide and ensure (cited in Beilharz, Considine & Watts: 46–7).

In 1973 the Whitlam Government liberalised Unemployment Benefit eligibility rules and 'moved to standardize pensions and benefits at 25 per cent of average weekly earnings' (Harris 2001: 15). However, in the context of booming employment and labour shortages, the changes were criticised for encouraging people to remain unemployed and be too 'choosy' about work. Liberal MP Bert Kelly (a pioneer of New Right ideas in parliament) coined the term 'dole bludger' to describe those Unemployment Benefit recipients who he claimed were avoiding work, and Labor Minister for Social Security Clyde Cameron also expressed concerns about the impact on work incentives (Windschuttle 1980: 156–8; Kemp 1988: 346; Beder 2000: 158–9). In the lead-up to the 1974 election, the Labor Government announced a tightened work test for Unemployment Benefit. The unemployed were now required to accept job offers anywhere in Australia, and those leaving a job voluntarily or moving to an area of high unemployment could be deemed to have failed the work test (Beder 2000: 159).

The return of high unemployment and the rise of the New Right

The onset of high unemployment levels from 1974 led to increasing pressures on established income support arrangements and the establishment of an array of labour market programs for unemployed jobseekers. Between June 1974 and June 1975 the number of Unemployment Benefit recipients increased five-fold, from 32,000 to 160,800, and recipient numbers continued to rise over subsequent years (Graycar 1979: 55). The Whitlam Government was the first to introduce labour market programs in Australia.⁵ Such programs generally provided wage subsidies to employers to take on the unemployed, skills training or direct public or community sector employment, and became a major new component of Australian government responses to unemployment (Stretton & Chapman 1990; Webster 1997).

Shortly after gaining office in 1975 the Fraser Government moved to further tighten the application of the work test. In 1976 new departmental guidelines required that claimants

⁵ Aside from some previous Commonwealth grants to the states to create jobs for rural people unemployed due to drought and rural recession (Kewley 1973: 457).

demonstrate after six to twelve weeks of seeking work in their former occupations/s that they were willing to accept any work of which they were capable ‘regardless of any change in status and wages’ (cited in Carney & Hanks 1994: 169). The waiting period for payments was extended in January 1976 from one week to six weeks for people who became ‘voluntarily unemployed’ by leaving a job, and in March 1976 a waiting period of six weeks was introduced for school leavers before they could receive payments (Graycar 1979: 56–7).

These changes were introduced at a time when media stories criticising undeserving ‘bludgers’ and depicting alleged ‘dole cheats’ had gained widespread currency (Windschuttle 1980). Members of the government supported the theme: for example, the Minister of Employment and Youth Affairs, Ian Viner, was reported to have told a Liberal Party convention in January 1979 that ‘to make work and work-generating initiative fashionable for the youth of Australia in 1979, a real impact will have to be made on the cool young to whom dole-bludging is a bit of a joke’ (cited in Graycar 1979: 57). The influence on public opinion of such media and government representations of the unemployed will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Market liberals, described as the ‘New Right’, gained increasing policy influence in Australia from the mid-1970s (Kemp 1988; Kelly 1994)—the next chapter discusses the critique of welfare mounted by major market liberal thinkers including Hayek, Friedman, Nozick and Murray. The market liberal agenda included cuts in spending on Unemployment Benefit to ‘increase work incentives’ and enable cuts in tax levels, along with deregulation of wages to create more low-wage jobs. A number of New Right ‘think tanks’ were established in the late 1970s, including the Centre for Independent Studies in 1976 in Sydney, and the Centre for Policy Studies in 1979 at Monash University. Mendes (1997; 2003) argues that such organisations have been effective in ‘conditioning’ public opinion on the unemployed through their influence on the media. For example, the Institute of Public Affairs publishes regular opinion pieces in major newspapers and many of the CIS’ visiting speakers and publications attract prominent media coverage (Mendes 2003: 37). New Right ‘think tanks’ sponsored tours from leading international New Right thinkers—Milton Friedman made two successful visits to Australia in 1975 and 1981, Hayek toured Australia in 1976 (both met with Malcolm Fraser—Kelly 1994: 35), and Charles Murray visited in 1987. Market liberal influence on Australian politics was further strengthened by the election of Margaret Thatcher as British Prime Minister in 1979 and Ronald Reagan as US President in 1980 (Sawer 1982).

Malcolm Fraser was influenced by Hayek as well as the libertarian novelist Ayn Rand, and appointed the market liberals David Kemp (a political scientist) as his speech-writer and Warren Hogan (a Professor of Economics) as his economic adviser (Sawer 1982: 10). Market liberal proponents of small government had always been present in the Liberal Party, in opposition to social liberal proponents of social welfare and other government action to 'ameliorate' the effects of the market, but became more organised and vocal from this time (Jaensch 1994). A group of Liberal Party backbenchers formed a Liberal free market group in 1980 to pressure for market liberal policies, including welfare cuts (Mendes 2003: 33). However, while Fraser reduced the growth of state spending, his caution and pragmatism limited the extent to which his government implemented market liberal ideas (Kelly 1994; Kemp 1988).

'Work for the dole' for indigenous Australians

Perhaps the Fraser Government's most substantial change to income support for the unemployed was the introduction of a form of 'work for the dole' for indigenous Australians. The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme was introduced in 1977 as an alternative to Unemployment Benefit (UB) for rural and remote Aboriginal communities. CDEP has shown remarkable longevity (Altman 1997), operating for over 25 years while most other labour market programs have only survived for relatively short periods.

When CDEP was initially developed few Aborigines were receiving UB. However, the Department of Social Security's former practice of regarding Aborigines in remote areas as outside the labour force or unwilling to accept suitable work and therefore ineligible for UB had been 'gradually challenged and broken down' and 'eligibility for UB among Aboriginal people in remote areas was becoming slightly more widespread' (Sanders 1998: 142). The Fraser Government was concerned that receipt of unemployment payments would become common in indigenous communities and create social problems, and sought an alternative with minimal budgetary implications (Sanders 1988: 35). Under CDEP, indigenous communities in rural and remote areas could choose to forgo their individual entitlements to UB and instead receive a combined amount roughly equivalent to these entitlements for community projects, plus an additional percentage for administrative and capital costs.

Community councils used this funding to pay community members' wages for part-time work (Altman 1997: 2).

Supporters of CDEP argued that 'the scheme was a progressive exercise in Aboriginal self-management and an appropriate response to the marginal economic position of remote aboriginal communities' (Sanders 1988: 38). Sanders argues that it was popular among Aboriginal community councils because it provided them with associated grants for materials and equipment and 'because of its potential to enhance their position of authority in their community and...the increased room for manoeuvre and initiative which it allowed them in relation to DAA [the Department of Aboriginal Affairs]' (1988: 40). Its popularity also often reflected 'a Hobson's choice—the CDEP scheme, [unemployment payments] or not much else' (Altman 1997: 3). These rationales were unique to rural and remote indigenous communities, suggesting that the CDEP model was not readily applicable to the general Australian community. While the scheme was expanded to indigenous projects in urban areas from the late 1980s, unlike in discrete rural and remote communities, non-participants in urban CDEP projects remained eligible for unemployment payments (Altman 1997: 2).

In 1986 Martin Mowbray noted that the CDEP scheme had 'attracted surprisingly little publicity' in the general community (Mowbray 1986: 40). However, it gained attention in that year when the high-rating *60 Minutes* program broadcast a story about CDEP entitled *Showing Us How*, which was highly positive about the program and described it as 'one of Australia's best kept secrets' (Sanders 1988: 45). By this time, the impact of New Right ideas and concerns about 'dole bludging' had set the scene for the government to consider a non-indigenous form of working for welfare.

Reciprocal obligation

Like the Fraser Government, the Hawke Government elected in 1983 was influenced by market liberal ideas, particularly through the influence of the Treasury—headed by market liberal John Stone since 1979—on Treasurer Paul Keating (Kelly 1994). Kelly comments that when Labor came to office:

It wanted to follow the experts and the experts were a new generation of Canberra-based economists commanding the senior posts in the major policy departments who believed in the efficiency of markets and deregulation (1994: 24).

The Hawke Government sought to constrain social security spending by ‘tighter targeting, a stronger focus on administrative efficiency and increased emphasis on client compliance and anti-fraud measures’ (Eardley 1997: 5). In addition, the government began to publicly canvass ‘workfare’ ideas in the context of public perceptions about ‘undeserving’ unemployment payment recipients.

Following strong job growth and a slow decline in the unemployment rate from over 10 per cent to below 8 per cent by 1985, media stories about welfare fraud and ‘dole bludging’ became common (Pixley 1993: 212). In 1986, the unemployed were newly required to list two job search contacts a fortnight on their fortnightly claim form (OECD 2001: 164). In the same year, Prime Minister Hawke suggested that the unemployed had ‘a responsibility to undertake some community work’ in return for income support, and proposed that a community work scheme be established which might become compulsory. Following union pressure the scheme was introduced on a voluntary basis (Pixley 1993: 213–15).

Although the Hawke Government shelved the concept of ‘Work for the Dole’, it did establish a Social Security Review to examine, among other issues, the appropriate obligations of unemployed clients and government in the context of persistent long-term unemployment. The Review was conducted between 1986 and 1989 and chaired by social policy academic Bettina Cass. It supported higher income support payments for particularly disadvantaged groups—especially low-income families—while also stressing the need for increased ‘integration’ of income support with labour market programs, as was being advocated by the OECD (Eardley 1997: 5; Cass 1988). The first step in the latter direction was taken in 1987, when an ‘activity test’ was introduced for 16 and 17 year-old recipients after six months on income support, and for 18 to 24 year-olds after twelve months. This test expanded the work test and required recipients to accept a ‘reasonable and appropriate’ offer of a labour market program placement (Cass 1988: 26).

The Newstart strategy implemented from 1989 introduced intensive interviews for the long-term unemployed, expanded job placement activity by the CES and increased job search requirements. As part of the strategy, the term ‘reciprocal obligation’ was introduced to

describe the joint obligations of the income support recipient and the state in improving job prospects (Eardley 1997: 5–6). Payments became increasingly conditional upon jobseekers complying with individual ‘agreements’ which specified activities intended to improve job prospects (Kalisch 1991).

In 1991 Unemployment Benefit was replaced with Job Search Allowance (JSA) for those registered as unemployed for less than one year, and Newstart Allowance for those unemployed for longer periods. In addition to meeting the work test, JSA recipients could now also be required to undertake a labour market program, vocational training or other course which was ‘likely to improve the person’s prospects of obtaining work’ (cited in Carney & Hanks 1994: 171). Newstart recipients, in addition to meeting the standard work test, had to sign a ‘Newstart activity agreement’ which required them to undertake an activity such as job search, a labour market program, paid work experience or unpaid voluntary work. Recipients could not however be required to work in exchange for unemployment payments (Carney & Hanks 1994: 174).

This approach culminated in the Keating Government’s 1994 *Working Nation* package, which substantially increased spending on labour market programs and guaranteed a six-month job placement to those unemployed for at least 18 months (this was called the Job Compact).⁶ ‘In return’, they were obliged to accept ‘any reasonable offer’ or lose their income support for a specified period (DEETYA 1996a; Eardley 1997: 8). Clients who had been unemployed for twelve months were referred for ‘case management’ to either a new CES service called Employment Assistance Australia or to newly contracted non-government providers. Case managers could recommend to the Department of Social Security that clients have their payments reduced, suspended or stopped if they failed to attend interviews or seek work (Considine 2001).

As Harris (2001: 20) comments, ‘Working Nation used the language of entitlement and government support as well as responsibility’:

Australia says to those who are out of work we believe that you are entitled to the benefits of recovery...if you do not have the right skills to find work, we will help you acquire them...If you

⁶ Jobs were provided through wage subsidy programs, including JobStart and traineeships, and ‘brokered programs’ which combined work experience and training, including JobSkills, New Work Opportunities and the Landcare Environment Action Program (LEAP) (DEETYA 1996a: 40).

have been a long time out of work, we will offer you employment and, if necessary, train you for it. (*Working Nation*, p. 2, cited in Harris 2001: 20).

Importantly, the kind of responsibility required of payment recipients was ‘to take advantage of support and assistance that would improve their situation’, not to contribute to the community in exchange for payments (McClelland 2002: 216). Under *Working Nation*, unemployment payment recipients could be required to take up a temporary job or to undertake agreed activities to improve their job prospects, but they were not yet required to work for income support.

Conclusion

Australia’s income support provision for the unemployed has always been residualist in character, targeting subsistence-level payments to those meeting means and work tests. The focus of Australian employment policies since Federation was on the maintenance of adequate wages, and from World War II to the early 1970s on the maintenance of full employment, rather than the adequacy of provision for those out of work. However, with the onset of persistent high unemployment in the mid-1970s—and consequent growth in long-term dependence on income support—came an increased focus on the appropriateness of income support provisions and labour market assistance for the unemployed. The Whitlam Government initially introduced large-scale labour market programs and responded to media stories about ‘dole bludging’ with some tightening of access to payments. Influenced by market liberal ideas that the availability of unemployment payments contributed to high unemployment levels and that government expenditure had to be reduced, the Fraser Government introduced new waiting periods for payments and reduced the ability of recipients to choose the type of work which they would accept.

Under the Hawke and Keating Governments, the influence of market liberal ideas was moderated by European ‘active society’ concepts, according to which individual unemployed people and the state had joint responsibility for overcoming long-term unemployment. Thus, while conditions placed on unemployment payments were considerably expanded—with an emphasis on the need for jobseekers to increase their skills—the state was presented as responsible for enabling such activities through substantial funding of labour market programs. The explicit goal of unemployment assistance had expanded from temporary

income support and employment placement services to ‘activating’ recipients to undertake activities in addition to job search, and providing temporary job placements. In contrast, from 1996 the Howard Government was to dramatically reduce the funding available for labour market programs, and put primary emphasis on the importance of jobseekers contributing to the community in return for payments.

The following chapter looks at the theoretical shift from ideas of entitlement to those of conditional income support among British, North American and Australian theorists. This shift had influenced developments under the Hawke and Keating Governments, and set the scene for the Howard Government’s mutual obligation policy—to be considered in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 2

FROM ENTITLEMENT TO CONTRACT: THEORIES OF CONDITIONAL INCOME SUPPORT

Introduction

Conditionality has been a central feature of the income support systems of developed countries during their post-war expansion; instead of guaranteeing citizens a basic minimum income, eligibility for payments has been confined to a limited number of circumstances such as unemployment, disability and illness. However, the extent of conditionality has varied markedly between countries and over time, and since the 1970s there has been ‘a general move towards more narrowly defined and more rigorously policed conditionality’ (Saunders 1995: 12). These policies have taken on the metaphor of a contract under which income support recipients agree to perform an increasing number of activities ‘in exchange’ for payments. As Weatherley (1994) has argued, this has involved a conceptual shift from ‘from entitlement to contract’.

With the dramatic rise in unemployment across developed countries during the 1970s and its persistence over time, a number of theorists began to attribute a large part of the blame to the existing income support systems. Market liberals argued that unemployment payments were too easy to access—undermining incentives to work and placing morally unjustifiable burdens on taxpayers—and called for more restrictions on eligibility and time limits on payments. New paternalists argued that, instead of simply limiting the number eligible for payments, greater ‘supervision’ of the unemployed was required to ensure that they met their obligations to work. Communitarians and ‘Third Way’ theorists argued for an increased focus on individual obligations alongside rights, and for a greater role for local communities—rather than impersonal welfare state bureaucracies—in assisting the unemployed.

This chapter initially discusses the concepts of citizenship and welfare rights which have been used to support entitlements to income support, before turning to the theoretical perspectives which have supported a move away from entitlement approaches and towards the increased imposition of behavioural conditions on recipients of unemployment payments. The chapter

provides an overview of theories which have been influential across developed countries, and in particular English-speaking countries. Chapter 3 will discuss critiques of these ideas in the context of the debate in Australia over the introduction of the mutual obligation principle and Work for the Dole.

Citizenship and welfare rights

Before examining the ideas driving the trend to conditionality, we will consider two of the leading welfare state theorists against which such ideas were framed—T.H. Marshall, a British sociologist, and Richard Titmuss, Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics from 1950 to 1973. A brief discussion of their arguments for welfare entitlements sets the scene for the debate about conditionality which gathered strength from the 1970s. Marshall provided an account of welfare rights as citizenship rights, while Titmuss argued that universalism in welfare provision was necessary to reduce inequality and to promote social integration. Both provided influential frameworks for supporters of the expansion of welfare states, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States. While—as Castles (1985) has argued—in Australia the focus of the welfare state was on workers', not citizens', rights and on targeting, not universalism, the debate across English-speaking countries over entitlements and conditionality has nevertheless had a significant impact on Australian policy debates.

T.H. Marshall argued in his 1950 essay 'Citizenship and social class' that citizenship comprised three elements achieved in stages over 250 years—civil, political and social rights. Social rights aimed to ensure:

a general enrichment of the concrete substance of civilized life, a general reduction of risk and insecurity, an equalization between the more and the less fortunate at all levels (Marshall 1963: 107).

The goal was to achieve an 'equality of status' between citizens and reduce the impact of inequalities in money incomes through the provision of common social services, price controls and other government interventions in the capitalist economy. A social liberal, Marshall argued that social rights represented a compromise in which the market was permitted to function within limits—'the inequality of the social class system may be acceptable provided the equality of citizenship is recognized' (Marshall 1963: 72). In

Marshall's framework, social assistance payments were a social right which ameliorated poverty and assisted in reducing inequality (Ferris 1982).

Marshall supported an element of discretion in social service provision, arguing that 'the assessment of needs in an individual case, and of the measures best suited to meet [them]' was preferable to a system purely based on regulation, if that discretion was provided positively 'to achieve welfare, not only to relieve destitution' (Marshall 1981: 87–8). He also advocated duties of citizenship, including 'the duty to work' (Marshall 1963: 123), and argued that 'the obligation of the community to relieve destitution must somehow be matched by a duty of the individual not to become destitute, if he can help it' (1981: 90). However, he believed that in contemporary economic conditions the incidence of 'voluntary penury' was insignificant:

In conditions of full employment and a rising standard of living the temptation to indulge in voluntary penury has lost any force it ever had, and, though difficult cases may sometimes still arise, the problem is not one of real importance (Marshall 1981: 90).

To Marshall, welfare was a right won by the working class which strengthened citizenship against the workings of the market (Turner 1986). Like Marshall, Richard Titmuss argued that a primary role of social service provision was to reduce inequalities between citizens. He advocated a social democratic 'institutional-redistributive model of welfare' (Titmuss 1987: 264) in which the welfare state had two primary objectives: to reduce inequalities and to promote social integration and fellowship. Titmuss was himself influenced by economic historian and Christian Socialist Richard Tawney, who argued that all members of the community were entitled to equal respect. This could be achieved through the principle of fellowship and the provision of resources and opportunities to enable all to fully develop their potential (Deacon 2002: 16).

Titmuss argued that conditions should not be attached to welfare, commenting: 'If all services are provided...on a discriminatory, means-test basis, do we not foster both the sense of personal failure and the stigma of a public burden?' (Titmuss 1987: 152). A universal system prevented stigma and promoted support for adequate welfare provisions throughout the community, because all community members could potentially benefit from the system. He contrasted this model with the 'residual model of social welfare' which defined welfare as 'wholly or mainly for poor people and certain dependent groups'. Under the latter model, targeted groups came to be seen as "problems" to be solved or neglected or categorized as

social pathology' (1987: 261–2). He also contrasted it with the 'achievement-performance model of social policy' in which social welfare is viewed as serving a 'functional, technocratic-servant role' to meet the needs of the economy. He argued that:

given the values underlying this model of achievement, productivity, savings and so forth, the consequences in the long run are likely to be more inequality in the distribution of resources (Titmuss 1987: 262–3).

Titmuss viewed assistance for the unemployed and other social services as providing 'partial compensation for disservices, for social costs and social insecurities which...are part of the price we pay to some people for bearing the costs of other people's progress' (Titmuss 1968: 133). In addition to a compensatory role, the welfare state:

also accepts a positive role through the development of social manpower policies, corrective regional and area economic policies, retraining and further education services and other instrumentalities designed to bring about an improvement in the standard and quality of life of the individuals concerned (Titmuss 1987: 264).

However, Titmuss did not believe that the unemployed should be *required* to take part in such programs as a condition of benefit, believing that this would inappropriately turn welfare 'into an instrument of economic policy' (Deacon 2002: 22).

Deacon argues that later writers influenced by Titmuss and by Marxist political economy further developed his rejection of 'individualist explanations of social problems' by focussing on the centrality of structural causes of inequality rather than individual attitudes and behaviour. The subsequent rise in unemployment from the mid-1970s 'seemed to exemplify the futility of trying to solve social problems by changing people. Why worry about the motivation of the unemployed when there were not enough jobs for them anyway?' (Deacon 2002: 23–4).

Titmuss' conception of the welfare state bore little relation to the residualist model in operation in the United States and the 'wage earners' welfare state' in Australia (Deacon 2002: 45)⁷. Similarly, the 'equality of status' of which Marshall spoke was far removed from

⁷ Or, indeed, the British welfare state—which attached means tests to the benefits available for those who had not built up an entitlement to national insurance or had used all of their entitlements.

the stigma felt by many welfare recipients. However, the concepts of welfare rights which Titmuss and Marshall espoused provide theoretical exemplars of unconditional welfare, against which proponents of increased conditionality began to argue.

Market liberalism

The global economic malaise of the 1970s led to a resurgence of market liberal or ‘New Right’ approaches to welfare issues. The economists F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, who had long opposed the rise of the welfare state but with little apparent influence, began to gain increasing attention:

The failure of Keynesian economists to provide answers to the combined problems of inflation and unemployment caused a turn towards a simple solution—an end to big government and intervention in the economy. Those who offered such solutions, and had for years been beyond the pale of mainstream economics, emerged into the full glare of public recognition (Sawer 1982: 1).

Market liberals argued that modern welfare state systems were economically and morally unsustainable, as they provided incentives for non-working members of the community to ‘free ride’ on the efforts of others (Saunders 2000: 7–10). ‘The right to welfare’ was enabling individuals to avoid their responsibilities to support themselves and their families.

The Austrian-American F.A. Hayek was a foundational influence on what later became known as the New Right (Midgley 1991: 3; Gamble 1996). In his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom* he argued that the provision of anything more than ‘adequate security against severe privation’ meant providing ‘security at the expense of freedom’, and that ‘as individuals we must be prepared to make severe material sacrifices to preserve our liberty’ (1994: 146–7). In *The Constitution of Liberty* he further claimed that the compulsory redistribution of income through tax-transfer systems was both unjust and inefficient. While it was defensible for a community to institute a compulsory insurance system to prevent ‘destitution’ and to provide a minimum level of welfare, it was not defensible for a community to ‘assume...the power to determine the “just” position of everybody and allocate...to each what he thinks he deserves’ (1960: 289). Hayek claimed that injustice could only result from an intentional act to affect someone in a certain way; market outcomes were by contrast unintended:

These [market] shares are the outcome of a process the effect of which on particular people was neither intended nor foreseen. To demand justice from such a process is clearly absurd, and to single out some people in such a society as entitled to a particular share evidently unjust (Hayek 1976, cited in Plant 1985: 10).

Hayek portrayed the modern welfare state as a system whereby political majorities undermined individual rights and the ability of entrepreneurs to drive economic progress. Social security systems involved the extensive redistribution of incomes, requiring that ‘it is not a majority of givers who determine what should be given to the unfortunate few, but a majority of takers who decide what they will take from a wealthier minority’ (1960: 289). His position that welfare systems undermined individual liberty became highly influential during the 1970s and the 1980s, as market liberal ideas regained currency (Gamble 1996).

The American libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick advocated an even more radical position than Hayek. In his major work *Anarchy, State and Utopia* he claimed that ‘taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor’ (Nozick 1974: 169) and that ‘the minimal state is the most extensive state that can be justified’ (Nozick 1974: 149). Nozick’s position was one of atomistic individualism taken to its logical extreme—members of a society had no claims upon or obligations towards each other. He followed Locke in arguing that individuals’ rewards in the marketplace derived purely from their own talents and efforts, and that they had an absolute natural right to keep all of their assets and earnings, unless acquired by force (Held 1996: 255). Nozick’s argument involved a return to early liberal thinking, rejecting the social liberal argument developed in the late nineteenth century that individual wealth was generated by social structures (Sawer 1982: 20). He provided a philosophical justification of the position that taxation (except to fund minimal state functions) and redistribution were not morally justified.

Other influential New Right thinkers argued that the welfare state had a corrosive effect on social morality. In 1980, Milton and Rose Friedman’s ‘personal statement’ *Free to Choose* decried welfare programs for being paternalistic and wasteful, and especially for undermining society’s ‘moral fabric’:

Their major evil is their effect on the fabric of our society. They weaken the family; reduce the incentive to work, save and innovate; reduce the accumulation of capital; and limit our freedom (Friedman & Friedman 1980: 127).

The American market liberal Charles Murray argued that as well as undermining morality, the welfare state acted against the interests of income support recipients themselves. Murray assumed that individuals were rational, self-interested calculators of relative costs and benefits who would only work if they gained sufficient financial rewards. He claimed in his 1984 book *Losing Ground* that welfare rights had led to the position of black Americans dramatically worsening between 1950 and 1980, by rewarding the ‘least industrious, least responsible poor’ and making it ‘rational for adolescents to behave in ways that destroyed their future’ (1984: 219). Murray advocated radical measures—the abolition of all federal welfare and income support provisions except time-limited unemployment insurance. He predicted that once denied income support, the great majority of unemployed people would quickly obtain work. Critics countered that the data did not consistently support his claim that growth in lone parenthood was associated with increased take-up of welfare, and that as few unemployed young men were eligible for welfare assistance, such assistance could not have fuelled growing unemployment. However, Murray’s focus on ‘how welfare affects behaviour’ had a major impact on welfare debates in the USA and Britain (Deacon 2002: 41–2). O’Connor comments that *Losing Ground* and the 1981 book *Wealth and Poverty* by George Gilder, which advocated similar ideas, were ‘regularly described as Reaganite Bibles’. He notes that in interviews he conducted in 1997 ‘Republican congresspersons and their assistants regularly repeated stock phrases and arguments from Murray’s writings’ (O’Connor 2001: 224, 227).

Market liberal ideas have been particularly influential among English-speaking governments, being initially championed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and subsequently influencing the US Democrats and the British Labour Party. In Australia, they have strongly influenced both the Liberal Party and the ALP (Kemp 1988; Kelly 1994; Mendes 2003).

New paternalism

In contrast to market liberals, the American conservative Lawrence Mead argued in his 1986 book *Beyond Entitlement: The social obligations of citizenship*, and subsequent writings, for a change in the *nature* of the welfare state rather than a reduction in its role (Mead 1986: 13–14, 1997a: 11). According to Mead, providing welfare payments without attaching behavioural conditions had created ‘a psychology of dependency’, and excluded recipients from equal citizenship by exempting them from the common obligation of citizens to work (1986: 12–

13). To enable the unemployed to meet their social obligations, the state must become more paternalist. Mead described his approach as ‘new paternalist’, defining paternalism in the context of income support policy as ‘social policies aimed at the poor that attempt to reduce poverty and other social problems by directive and supervisory means’ (1997a: 2).

Mead’s argument revived the concerns of earlier moralists that unemployment resulted from poor moral character (Golding & Middleton 1982)—although he couched his discussion in predominantly psychological rather than moral terms. As Fraser and Gordon (1997: 136–8) argue, by the 1980s ‘welfare dependency’ had become pathologised through its association with new terms such as ‘drug dependency’, and through the American Psychiatric Association’s codification in 1980 of ‘Dependent Personality Disorder’ as a mental disorder. This had directed attention from socio-economic conditions to ‘the personality of the dependent’ and replaced ‘overt moralism’ with the apparently neutral language of science. While conceding that the history of discrimination against African Americans had affected their position in the labour market, Mead claimed that this no longer had a major effect on their levels of joblessness; ‘welfare dependency’ was not caused by a lack of available jobs, but rather ‘an inability to get organised for work and then to sustain that commitment over time, overcoming problems as they arise’ (2000: 49). Unemployed people could not get and retain work because they lacked personal ‘competency’ and did not ‘function’ adequately. The origin of this lack of competency was primarily ‘weak and abusive parenting’ (Mead 2000: 51), but it was then reinforced by ‘unconditional welfare’.

Mead characterised the unemployed as ‘dutiful but defeated’: ‘They want to work, maintain their families, and so on. But they feel unable to do so in practice’ (Mead 2000: 48). He argued that people who have become subject to the psychology of dependency need paternalist intervention by the state to escape from it, and moreover, that such paternalism contributes to individual freedom. People must be forced to be free:

people who live without limits soon sacrifice their own interests to immediate gratifications. To live effectively, people need personal restraint to achieve their own long-run goals. In this sense, obligation is the precondition of freedom. Those who would be free must first be bound. And if people have not been effectively bound by functioning families and neighbourhoods in their formative years, government must attempt to provide the limits later...(Mead 1997a: 23).

Mead's conservatism was clear in the value he placed on social order, obedience to authority, the primacy of family and on obligations rather than rights. He argued that social order was a pre-condition of freedom, as:

a 'free' society is possible only when the conditions for order have substantially been realized. People are not interested in 'freedom' from government if they are victimized by crime, cannot support themselves, or are in any fundamental way insecure (1986: 6).

He defined order very broadly—in a well-ordered society, people would not only pay taxes, obey the law, and serve in the military when required, but would also fulfil a set of 'social obligations' which included having the 'capacities to learn, work, support one's family, and respect the rights of others'. Thus, 'order requires not only self-discipline but *activity* and *competence*' (1986: 6).

Social policy should be seen as one of government's means of achieving order. Social programs define much of what society expects of people in the social realm, just as other laws and the Constitution do in the political realm...The structure of benefits and requirements in the programs, then, constitutes an *operational definition of citizenship*. One of the things a government must do to improve social order is to use these programs to require better functioning of recipients who have difficulty coping (1986: 6–7, emphasis in original).

'Workfare' programs—which required welfare recipients to work or train—were necessary not only to uphold order, but to ensure equal citizenship: if the unemployed were not required to work as other citizens were, they could not truly be citizens. Mead claimed that most Americans viewed citizenship in this way: 'equality to Americans tends [to mean] the enjoyment of equal citizenship, meaning the same rights *and* obligations as others' (1986: 12). Thus, a government which did not require work for welfare payments was actually excluding some members of society from equal citizenship:

To obligate the dependent as others are obligated is essential to equality, not opposed to it. An effective welfare [*sic*] must include recipients in the common obligations of citizens rather than exclude them (1986: 12–13).

Some social democrats have also argued that citizens have the obligation (as well as the right) to work (for example, Langmore & Quiggin 1994). However, they have argued that

unemployment primarily results from insufficient work being available, and that the state is responsible for ensuring the availability of sufficient jobs with adequate wages and conditions. Mead instead argued that the state's responsibility was confined to ensuring that the unemployed could 'function' adequately. Government need not supply actual jobs, but rather workfare—which simulated work but without wages, and would serve as a stepping stone to actual work. He readily acknowledged that 'workfare promotes social order rather than justice. It requires that the dependent work while leaving the wider structures of the economy and society unquestioned' (Mead 1997c: 128).

Mead claimed that too little was required of welfare recipients, thus perpetuating their dependency: 'Far from helping the poor, exaggerated fears of victim-blaming have themselves become a leading cause of dependency' (1986: 10). It was productive if unemployed people blamed themselves for not fulfilling their responsibilities, as this meant that they had accepted the legitimacy of government requirements: 'Only then can compliance be widespread. Far from blaming people if they deviate, governments must persuade them to *blame themselves*' (1986: 10, emphasis in original). The dependent must accept and internalise their obligations: 'For...only those who bear obligations can truly appropriate their rights' (1986: 257).

Rather than advocating education and training programs as a route to employment, Mead supported mandatory work programs on the grounds that the latter programs encouraged immediate employment: 'While education and training can help people get better jobs later, it is best in the short-run if the non-workers simply accumulate a work history in jobs they can already get' (Mead 2000: 52). He argued that:

effective programs...use case managers to resist the tendency of clients to avoid programs or withdraw from them. When recipients assigned to work programs fail to show for orientation or drop out after entering, case managers pursue them to find out what the problem is...In leading programs this follow-up is relentless...At its best, like good parenting, case management combines *help* and *hassle* (1997: 61–2) [emphasis added].

Mead's prescriptions were intended to address entrenched unemployment by directly changing the jobless themselves, not economic policies or structures. In the US context, in which means-tested income support is primarily provided to single (mainly non-white) mothers, his focus was on unmarried mothers and absent, largely unemployed fathers in

ghetto communities. However, his ideas have also had influence in countries with quite different profiles of income support recipients, such as Australia and the UK (Deacon 1997; Saunders 2000). In Australia, Peter Saunders (2000, 2004)—the Social Research Director at the Centre for Independent Studies—has been a prominent proponent of Mead’s ideas and, as argued in the next chapter, Tony Abbott has been their leading political proponent. But new paternalists were not the only theorists advocating a renewed emphasis on the obligations of citizens—communitarians were also calling for such a change.

Communitarianism

From the early 1980s, another theoretical perspective critical of unconditional social rights—communitarianism—began to emerge. Communitarian theorists such as Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Amitai Etzioni had diverse political leanings but shared ‘the belief that political philosophy must pay more attention to the shared practices and understandings within each society’ (Kymlicka 1993: 367). Communitarians rejected the liberal priority given to individuals before community and the liberal appeal to universal rather than community-specific values (Kymlicka 1993; Driver & Martell 1997). They were critical of rights-based positions on both the political left, with its emphasis on social rights, and the political right, with its emphasis on individual rights (Etzioni 1993; Stier 1998; Osborne 1995). However, many communitarians shared market liberal concerns about the ‘moral erosion’ resulting from ‘unconditional social rights’.

Driver and Martell highlight the various strands of communitarianism and the diversity of political opinion among communitarian thinkers. The *sociological* strand of communitarianism is descriptive, with a focus on the social context of human development, the *ethical* strand emphasises the value of community, while the *meta-ethical* strand tends to support ethical relativism, arguing that ethical systems are ‘relative to the communities in which they arise’ and do not have a universal foundation (Driver & Martell 1997: 29). Communitarians cross a broad spectrum of political opinion, from conservative to reformist and conformist to pluralist. For example, Michael Walzer, a democratic socialist, argued for an expanded welfare state on the grounds of community solidarity:

Community is important because of what the members of a political community owe to one another and to no one else...And the first thing that they owe is the communal provision of security and welfare (Walzer 1984: 1).

In contrast, the conservative communitarian Amitai Etzioni argued that state provision of welfare should be a last resort. He echoed Menzies' views, quoted in the previous chapter, about citizens' moral duty to rely on themselves, their family and their friends before the state:

First, people have a moral responsibility to help themselves as best they can...The second line of responsibility lies with those closest to the person, including kin, friends, neighbours and other community members...Last but not least, societies...must help those communities whose ability to help their members is severely limited (1993: 142).

Another communitarian, Isabel Sawhill, supported 'earned welfare' using a combination of political pragmatism and appeals to the primacy of community values. She argued that even if workfare programs were ineffective, effectiveness was not the only rationale for workfare:

Morality, or conformity with social norms, also matters. The public wants to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor and to set conditions on the use of its 'hard-earned' money.

Sawhill asserted that 'conditioning assistance on behaviour may be the political price [that social liberals] have to pay for continued support of the welfare system'; the community had a right, subject to the [US] Constitution, 'to express its values through the political system' (1995: 133-4). In this argument Sawhill demonstrated a characteristic communitarian concern with the justifying power of community values in opposition to liberal appeals to universal rights.

Many communitarians argued that while there was an important role for the state in welfare provision, 'large bureaucratic social welfare programs undermine the responsibility of both the recipients of government aid and of the citizenry at large'. They advocated government funding of intermediate associations, which they believed were more capable of providing individualised assistance 'while resisting the demands of those who are unwilling to do what they can for themselves' (Stier 1998: 51).

Despite their diversity, communitarians share with new paternalists a focus on the primacy of social responsibility over individual rights, and on the value of non-government provision of

social welfare. In turn, communitarians have proved influential on political discourse through their impact on a subsequent policy perspective—‘The Third Way’.

‘The Third Way’

During the 1990s another theoretical grouping joined market liberals, new paternalists and communitarians in attacking the ‘traditional’ welfare state. Self-described adherents to the ‘Third Way’, such as Anthony Giddens, Labour leader Tony Blair and Australian Labor MP Mark Latham formulated a political approach intended as an alternative to both ‘old style social democracy’ and market liberalism (Latham 1996, 1998, 2003; Giddens 1998, 2000). Another Labor MP, Lindsay Tanner (1999, 2003), has advocated similar ideas—although he rejected the label Third Way as a description of such views (1999: 51–2).

As Alan Ryan has argued (cited in Giddens 2000), the Third Way can be characterised as an updated version of late nineteenth century social liberalism: it advocates a market economy combined with an important role for government in promoting education, regulating the market, and protecting those most disadvantaged by market forces. However, Third Way adherents are also concerned about the impact of a bureaucratic welfare state, arguing that:

The advent of new global markets, and the knowledge economy...have affected the capability of national governments to manage economic life and provide an ever-expanding range of social benefits...The cornerstones of the [Third Way] are said to be equal opportunity, personal responsibility and the mobilization of citizens and communities (Giddens 2000: 2).

Third Way theorists have been strongly influenced by the communitarian stress on the importance of obligations. For example, Giddens argued:

One might suggest as a prime motto for the new politics, *no rights without responsibilities*...Old-style [social] democracy...was inclined to treat rights as unconditional claims. With expanding individualism should come an extension of individual obligations (1998: 65).

Tanner has also advocated the importance of obligations—the government’s obligation to provide education, training and employment opportunities, and the obligation of individuals to contribute to the community:

Society has an obligation to ensure that all its members are able to belong...This capacity to participate entails a mutual obligation to contribute to the community in some way. Individuals as well as governments have some obligation to help build community (Tanner 1999: 53–4).

Echoing Mead's concerns about a psychology of dependency, Latham emphasised the deleterious effect that long-term and intergenerational unemployment had on capacities for 'active citizenship':

Individuals affected by long term intergenerational unemployment often lack the lifestyle skills to make effective use of services. Their capacity for active citizenship has been depleted by joblessness and other social problems. This has become a sad feature of our society: the distortion of social norms through extended poverty, where families have had the habits and memory of regular work displaced by a cycle of personal crisis and despair (1996: 4).

Latham advocated skills development through a partnership between service providers and recipients as the way to address these problems:

Skill formation...replaces passive welfarism with an active partnership. It makes the welfare state a two way rather than a one way street. It seeks to strengthen social capital and capability by putting as much emphasis on responsibilities as rights (1996: 5).

Like other critics of 'unconditional welfare rights', Latham focused on the skills and capacities of unemployed people. However, he also acknowledged demand problems, arguing that 'high structural unemployment in Australia reflects a large gap between the supply of labour force skills and the demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers'. He proposed that unemployed people be made responsible for initiating 'civil sector' job creation funded by government (1996: 17).

In his most recent book, *From the Suburbs: Building a nation from our neighbourhoods*, Latham argued that 'one of the basic principles of disadvantaged areas' is that 'socially responsible behaviour is more important than social rights'. The leading priority of such communities is to 'normalise the neighbourhood' by developing an increased sense of community. By contrast, 'abstract left wing politics' had 'dished out a plethora of rights without demanding a corresponding set of social responsibilities'. He asserted that the poor supported the agenda of 'mutual responsibility', but that the authority to operate programs

should be devolved to local ‘social entrepreneurs’, in consultation with residents, instead of being imposed ‘in an authoritarian fashion’ like Work for the Dole. He referred approvingly to United States schemes in which eligibility for public housing depended on tenants undertaking education or training (Latham 2003: 90–1, 100).

Third Way ideas have been explicitly adopted by the American Democrats and the British Labour Party. The American Democrats originally referred to Third Way ideas as ‘the new progressivism’, and adopted such ideas in *The New Progressive Declaration* published by the Democratic Leadership Council in 1996. In Britain, ‘Blair started to refer to New Labour as developing a third way, eventually putting his name to a pamphlet of the same title’ (Giddens 2000: 3). New Labour has combined a commitment to increased assistance for the unemployed with a communitarian focus on the obligations of the unemployed, with welfare rights being presented as conditional on recipients fulfilling stipulated obligations such as undertaking training (Driver & Martell 1997: 37). In Australia, the Labor Party’s support for an increased focus on the obligations of the unemployed pre-dated Third Way theorising; as was discussed in the previous chapter, the Hawke Government introduced the concept of ‘reciprocal responsibility’ in the late 1980s. However, the Third Way provided a framework for some of Labor’s leading intellectuals, such as Latham and Tanner, to attempt to influence party policy.

Policy change

At the same time as these theories of conditional income support were being developed, many OECD countries were substantially changing their income support provisions for jobseekers. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the extent to which such theories have influenced income support policies in countries other than Australia, there are clear recent parallels between theoretical developments and policy change in income support for the unemployed. The previous emphasis on the provision of income support to provide an adequate standard of living for the unemployed has been supplemented, and in some cases supplanted, by a new focus on encouraging and/or compelling recipients to undertake activities intended to increase their job prospects.

From the late 1980s the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) strongly promoted the concept of the ‘active society’ (OECD 1987, 1988, 1989). In common

with the theorists discussed above, the OECD stressed the centrality of employment or other social participation to full community membership and called for income support to be conditional on such activity. It argued that while OECD countries had previously emphasised ‘active’ policies which improved the quality of labour supply, high unemployment had led to governments targeting more resources to ‘passive’ income support programs aimed at preventing poverty. There was a need to move back to more active policies to address ‘the structural rigidities which result in long-term unemployment’ (OECD 1987: 14).

The OECD argued that ‘welfare policies should contribute to combating the exclusion of some groups from economic and social opportunities’ by ‘providing as many citizens as possible with an active role in society, both as a means of income and of self-identity’ (OECD 1987: 7). While this was described as an ‘enabling’ policy (OECD 1989: 9), it would involve *compelling* income support recipients to undertake specified activities ‘to improve their readiness for the labour market’ (OECD 1989: 10). Simply making income support conditional on job search had proved difficult to control in times of persistent high unemployment—by improving ‘controls’ on income support schemes, active labour market programs could also save governments money.

In 1989 the OECD noted that Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and Sweden had already introduced measures along ‘active society’ lines, by increasing the conditions placed on income support recipients (1989: 10). In a 1997 review, the OECD found that many other countries had also tightened income support eligibility and ‘availability-to-work’ requirements and that there was increased emphasis on job search assistance in English-speaking countries, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland. However, increased caseloads had made it difficult for some Scandinavian countries to maintain their ‘traditionally high ambitions’ in assisting unemployed people into work (OECD 1997: 9–10).

The United States had its own form of the new conditionality: ‘workfare’. This term referred to new requirements—introduced in various US states during the 1980s and 1990s—that welfare recipients participate in work or job training programs (Hardina 1997: 131). Workfare became federal law with the passage of the 1996 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*, which limited individuals to a total of five years of federal cash assistance over their lifetime—although states were permitted to exempt a fifth of their clients from this limit. Adult recipients who were capable of working were required to work

or take part in an approved activity after two years of receipt of federal income support. The aim was to reduce federal welfare expenditure by US\$54 billion over six years (Breuer 1998: 133; Mead 1997b: 45).

Conditional welfare ideas have been implemented differently in countries with diverse social policy traditions and by governments with different political agendas. As Shaver (2002: 339) comments, workfare programs ‘vary in the extent to which they confer rights on claimants to assistance through active measures, and in the relative weight of responsibility they assign to the individual and the state’. Some governments, paradigmatically in Scandinavia, have favoured more resource-intensive programs to increase the accredited skills of the unemployed. Others, paradigmatically in the US, have pursued a ‘work first’ policy which favours early employment over training with the rationale that ‘any job is a good job’ (Peck & Theodore 2000: 124–5). OECD data shows that government resourcing of labour market programs as a proportion of GDP has varied greatly between countries—in 1998/99 public employment assistance expenditure for jobless people ranged from 0.08 per cent of GDP in Japan to 1.83 per cent in Sweden, with the US, the UK and Australia all spending relatively little at 0.18 per cent, 0.24 per cent and 0.35 per cent respectively (Raper 2000: 4).⁸ So, while conditional welfare ideas appear to have been influential across OECD countries, their impact in specific countries has been highly variable.

Conclusion

Since the early 1980s theorists from various philosophical perspectives—including market liberals, new paternalists, communitarians and Third Way theorists—have called on governments to impose more extensive behavioural conditions on recipients of unemployment payments. These theorists differ markedly in terms of their general political perspectives, ranging from conservative advocates of social order, the primacy of family and community values (Mead and some communitarians), market liberal supporters of a minimal welfare state, and Third Way theorists calling for the mobilisation of citizens and communities to address the challenges of globalisation and reduce the inequities generated by markets. However, all share the view that individuals must become less ‘dependent’ on income support and that this should be enforced by attaching increased behavioural conditions to payments.

⁸ Employment assistance for ‘jobless people’ includes unemployed people, people with disabilities, sole parents and indigenous people.

They argue, contrary to the social liberal and social democratic ideas exemplified by Marshall and Titmuss, that rights to social security may entrench rather than reduce inequality by contributing to long-term unemployment. In place of the social liberal/social democratic focus on the role of income support in compensating citizens for market-generated inequalities, they focus on the obligations of recipients of income support. They believe that rights have been elevated over the responsibilities of citizenship and agree that the obligations of citizenship must be enforced.

All express concerns about a ‘dependency culture’ which perpetuates joblessness, although—as Saunders and Stone (2000: 115–16) note—two quite different versions of the dependency culture thesis can be distinguished. The first, ‘dependency culture as cause’, is mainly advocated by conservatives such as Mead and some market liberals, and ‘holds that there is a distinct culture among many of those who are long-term welfare dependent, and that this is a major cause of their initial and continuing welfare dependency’. The second version, ‘dependency culture as outcome’, is advocated by Field (2000) and Latham (1998) among others, and holds that ‘the initial causes of joblessness will often lie in the collapse of local labour markets rather than in any self-perpetuating culture of dependency’. According to the latter view, a fatalistic dependency culture is generated by—rather than being the original cause of—long-term reliance on income support. However, the development of such a culture in communities facing high unemployment then helps to entrench joblessness (Saunders & Stone 2000: 115–16).

Concerns about ‘unconditional welfare’ have led to substantial changes in income support arrangements in many OECD countries. The problem of unemployment has increasingly been formulated by governments as a problem of inadequate skills or job search efforts on the part of the unemployed, and ‘contracts’ between jobseekers and employment agencies have been regarded as necessary to promote jobseeker efforts. In Australia, such changes commenced in the late 1980s under Labor governments and have continued since 1996 under the Coalition. The next chapter considers the specific form of conditional welfare introduced by the Howard Government and the debate in Australia over its introduction.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEBATE OVER MUTUAL OBLIGATION AND WORK FOR THE DOLE

Introduction

As we saw in Chapter 1, Work for the Dole can be viewed as the next stage in the escalation of conditions placed on income support recipients which started in the 1970s and gathered pace in the late 1980s. However the program differs from previous measures—except the CDEP scheme for the indigenous unemployed—in its focus on the idea that jobseekers should work in exchange for unemployment payments. Under the reciprocal obligation principle unemployed people had been required to undertake activities which ‘explicitly and directly related to improving their employment prospects’. By contrast, they would now be required to undertake Work for the Dole in order to ‘earn’ their income support, regardless of its relevance to their training or work experience needs (ACOSS 1999: 10; see also McClelland 2002).

Work for the Dole has been introduced in Australia by a government which combines market liberal economic principles with a paternalist social conservatism which sees a strong role for the government in upholding ‘traditional family and community values’ (Howard 1999). The program reflects both of these theoretical approaches. Market liberal objectives of reducing the number of income support recipients and extending private sector contractualist principles into almost all government activities have been combined with a paternalist objective of directing unemployed people to undertake certain activities ‘for their own good’. This chapter initially discusses the major new employment services system introduced by the Howard Government—the Job Network—and its impact on the unemployed. The Work for the Dole program and its rationale are then discussed, followed by critiques of the program. Finally, the chapter considers community opinion about mutual obligation. Previous research on the views of program participants themselves will be discussed in Chapter 8.

The Job Network

Work for the Dole and mutual obligation were introduced in the context of dramatic changes to employment services and labour market programs for the unemployed. Following its election in March 1996, the Coalition government announced a major change in direction for

employment services. Funding was dramatically reduced—Commonwealth expenditure on employment services (including labour market programs) fell from \$2 billion in 1995/96 to \$881 million in 1998/99 (Official Committee Hansard 2000). The government achieved this funding cut by abolishing most labour market programs and radically reorganising services for unemployed people.

In July 1997 a new agency, Centrelink, was established to administer income support payments, assess eligibility for different levels of employment assistance and provide referral to employment services known as the Job Network. The Commonwealth Employment Service was abolished and a new public employment agency, Employment National, was established (Vanstone 1996, DEWRSB 2000c). The Job Network, which commenced operation in 1998, comprised public, private and community organisations which had successfully tendered to provide three levels of employment assistance. The most basic level was Job Matching, which involved canvassing employers for vacancies and matching jobseekers to vacancies. The second level was Job Search Training, a three-week program for jobseekers who had been unemployed for at least three months and were assessed as job ready but requiring additional help in applying for jobs. The final level, Intensive Assistance, was provided to jobseekers scoring above a specified minimum on the Jobseeker Classification Instrument (JSCI)—an indicator of labour market disadvantage. Intensive Assistance providers received up-front and outcome payments for each jobseeker, and placements lasted for at least twelve months (DEWRSB 2000c).⁹

A major study which investigated case management of the long-term unemployed—through surveys and interviews with case managers before and after the start of the Job Network—highlighted some of the impacts of the new system on disadvantaged clients (Considine 2001, 2003). Considine found that between 1996 and 1999 average case loads increased dramatically from 133 clients to 184 clients per ‘front-line staff member’. This had a major impact on client assistance, as a large proportion of clients were ‘parked’ and had little contact with their provider. In addition, the payment structure meant that providers often focussed on assisting the most ‘job ready’ clients, as these clients had the strongest chance of gaining a payable outcome for their provider by getting a job:

⁹ Changes to the Job Network since the fieldwork was undertaken are discussed in Chapter 7.

staff were selecting the most job-ready in their case load and moving them quickly into job search activity. Since no training programs were available there was little need to spend time assessing the jobseeker's skill development needs and the pressures for a fast throughput of clients appeared to make health and welfare interventions too expensive to warrant an investment of time by front-line staff (Considine 2001: 135).

Job Network staff placed greater priority on the need to 'shift the maximum number of clients off benefits' than had case managers pre-Job Network: 'only 46 per cent saw this as the objective of their work in 1996, but three years later some 72 per cent agreed that this was a prime motivation' (Considine 2001: 140). The referral of clients for sanctioning had also increased dramatically—while in 1996 the average number of clients which case managers recommended for sanctioning was 1.2 a fortnight, by 1999 this had grown to 2.9 a fortnight (Considine 2003: 74).

Considine's research suggests that the initial Job Network payment structure encouraged agencies to provide only a basic level of assistance to 'job ready' clients, and even less to more disadvantaged jobseekers. The Job Network also focussed staff on a system goal of shifting clients off benefits as soon as possible, rather than a more client-centred goal of assisting clients to meet their aims (which may have entailed, for example, undertaking training while on income support). Other research into the initial years of the Job Network also highlighted the prevalence of 'parking' more disadvantaged clients and the limited vocational training provided under the Job Network (Eardley, Abello & Macdonald 2001; ACOSS 2000). The *Job Network Evaluation Stage One* (DEWRSB 2000c: 79–80) found that only 18 per cent of Intensive Assistance clients reported receiving any vocational training (with a further 8 per cent receiving training in English, literacy or numeracy). The second stage of the evaluation also showed that many of the long-term unemployed had not gained access to Intensive Assistance: about one-quarter of long-term unemployed jobseekers assessed for Intensive Assistance in September 2000 were classified as ineligible for such assistance (DEWRSB 2001: 29–33).

Overall, assistance available to jobseekers under the initial design of the Job Network featured many of the new paternalist characteristics advocated by Mead. Incentive structures for providers encouraged them to quickly move clients into work, there was little use of education or vocational training for jobseekers and there was a focus on 'client compliance'. However,

contrary to Mead's prescriptions, the restricted access to Intensive Assistance and high case loads meant that many particularly disadvantaged clients received little or no assistance.

In addition to these dramatic changes to employment services for the unemployed, in November 1997 the government began piloting Work for the Dole—the main focus of this thesis. The following section describes the objectives and operation of this program.

Mutual obligation and Work for the Dole

The Howard Government introduced Work for the Dole to give effect to its newly coined mutual obligation principle—indeed, the responsible Department described the program as 'embody[ing] the principle of mutual obligation between unemployed people and their communities' (DEETYA 1997: 5). The then Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr David Kemp, described the mutual obligation principle in January 1998 in terms of a contractual exchange:

In return for financial support from the community, it is fair to expect individuals to improve their job prospects, their competitiveness in the labour market or contribute to their local community (Kemp 1998a).

More broadly, the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Jocelyn Newman, described mutual obligation as 'a broad set of policy initiatives established on the simple yet compelling premise that responsibility between the community and the individual flows both ways' (Newman 1999a: 3).

The specific objectives of the Work for the Dole program, as stated in the Pilot Project Handbook (DEETYA 1997), were to 'foster appropriate work habits in young people', 'involve the local community in quality projects that provide for young people, and in helping unemployed young people at the end of projects', and 'provide communities with quality projects that are considered to be of value to the community'.¹⁰ Assisting the unemployed to gain work was not one of Work for the Dole's official objectives, reflecting the program's focus on the responsibilities of the unemployed and local communities, not the government.

¹⁰ Program objectives have changed only in wording: by 2004, they were to 'develop work habits', 'involve local communities in activities that provide for the unemployed and help the unemployed at the end of

Work for the Dole participants work for up to six months on community projects run by councils, charities and community organisations, and receive a \$20.80 a fortnight supplement to their unemployment payments. They work part-time—a minimum 24 hours a fortnight for 18 to 20 year-olds, 30 hours for those aged 21 to 39, and 12 hours for those aged 40 or over; these hours were initially set so that their payments equated to average National Training Wage Award rates (DEWRSB 1999; Australian Government 2004b).

When piloted in November 1997, the program was targeted to 18 to 24 year-olds who had been receiving unemployment payments for at least six months. Jobseekers in this age group were required to participate in Work for the Dole if they were not already undertaking another approved ‘mutual obligation activity’, which are outlined below. The full program was introduced in 1998 and further expanded in 1999; 25 to 34 year-olds who had been receiving unemployment payments for twelve months or more now also had to undertake Work for the Dole or another mutual obligation activity (DEWRSB 1999a, 1999b).

In the 2001/02 Budget the government announced that from July 2002, mutual obligation requirements would again be expanded. Jobseekers who were aged 18 to 40 years and had been receiving unemployment payments for more than six months were now required to undertake Work for the Dole or another mutual obligation activity for at least six months of every twelve months they received payments. Jobseekers aged between 40 and 49 years who had received unemployment payments for more than six months were required to undertake community work, but if they did not take up such work could be required to do Work for the Dole (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 12–13).¹¹

Access to mutual obligation activities other than Work for the Dole is limited, especially if jobseekers are aged over 21. These alternatives include: Language, Literacy and Numeracy Training, the Jobs Pathways Program for young people aged up to 19 who have recently left school, the Job Placement, Employment and Training Program for 15 to 21 year-olds, Green Corps training and volunteer program for young people aged 17 to 20, the New Apprenticeships Access Program for the long-term unemployed and other jobseekers assessed as disadvantaged, and the Defence Force Reserve. Payment recipients can also do part-time or voluntary work or part-time study, but these activities must be arranged by the jobseeker.

activities’, and ‘provide communities with quality projects which are of value to those communities’ (DEWR 2004: 6-7).

¹¹ Changes to Work for the Dole since the fieldwork was undertaken are discussed in Chapter 8.

They may also relocate to an area in which Centrelink assesses them to have more chance of finding a job, and then undertake fourteen weeks of intensive job search (Centrelink 2004a).

In addition to introducing Work for the Dole, the government implemented a range of other changes intended to increase the monitoring of unemployment payment recipients. These included requirements to provide more details about job search on fortnightly forms and the introduction of the Jobseeker Diary and Mutual Obligation Diary, which require jobseekers to record activities undertaken to gain work over a twelve-week period. Employer Contact Certificates, which require jobseekers to obtain signatures from employers from whom they have sought work, were also issued more widely (Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000: 3). In addition, the government increased the number of jobs a jobseeker had to apply for each fortnight to up to ten, depending on the region in which they lived, age, educational qualifications, transport and language barriers (ACOSS 2000; Tann & Sawyers 2001). Job search requirements will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

In 1999, the government established a Welfare Reform Reference Group headed by Patrick McClure—the head of Mission Australia—which in 2000 provided a ‘green paper’ on welfare reform (Reference Group on Welfare Reform 2000). The Report expressed concerns about the ‘growing reliance’ on income support, and advocated the extension of requirements to engage in ‘economic or social participation’ to sole parents, people with disabilities and the mature-age unemployed—along with systemic changes to income support and labour market assistance to support such requirements. Government legislation to extend mutual obligation requirements (in a less onerous form than applies for the unemployed) to sole parents with teenage children and mature-age workers were initially blocked by the Senate, but then passed after a deal with the Democrats in which the government agreed to soften penalties for breaches of Centrelink rules (Cherry 2003—see Chapter 7 on ‘breaching’).

The government is now further extending mutual obligation requirements into indigenous communities, and with its Senate majority, may reintroduce plans to further extend mutual obligation to sole parents and those with disabilities. It proposes that Community Development Employment Projects in indigenous communities be linked to the new ‘Shared Responsibility Agreements’ (SRAs), a new form of mutual obligation for such communities.¹²

¹² SRAs ‘set out clearly what the family, community or government are responsible for contributing to a particular activity’ (DEWR 2005: 5)—in the first example of an SRA, the Mulan community agreed to specified

The government is also considering restricting the Disability Support Pension (DSP) to people who are only able to work less than fifteen hours a week on ordinary wages (Grattan 2005).¹³ It further plans to increase mutual obligation requirements for sole parents with high school-age children (Grattan 2004).

The introduction of Work for the Dole and mutual obligation requirements more generally have dramatically increased the conditions which unemployed people must meet simply to maintain a minimal income. The government has argued that these changes are justified on contractualist and paternalist grounds, and because some unemployed people are ‘too selective’ about work. These rationales are discussed in the following section.

Rationales for mutual obligation

The government advocates the mutual obligation principle using three main rationales: that unemployed people ‘owe’ something to the community in exchange for unemployment payments (the contractualist argument), that it deters the unemployed from being ‘too selective’ about the jobs they will accept (the ‘job snob’ argument), and that it helps the unemployed to gain work by developing their capacity for autonomy and self-reliance (the new paternalist argument). These arguments will be discussed in turn.

The first rationale can be described as contractual—‘in exchange’ for income support, unemployed people are said to be morally obliged to provide something in return (Kinnear 2000; Moss 2001). This rationale models income support provision on market transactions in which both parties benefit: in the ‘contract’ between unemployed people and the community, the unemployed person gains from receiving income support, while the community gains from the unemployed person doing community work. Such a model addresses market liberal concerns, discussed in the previous chapter, about the compulsory redistribution of income through taxation—according to this rationale, if taxpayers are required to support the unemployed they should receive something in return.

hygiene standards, including washing children’s faces twice daily, in exchange for funding for a petrol bowser and health checks (Shaw 2004).

¹³ At present, eligibility for the DSP is restricted to those with a medical condition which prevents them from working for 30 hours a week on ordinary wages. A 2002 budget proposal to restrict eligibility for the DSP was rejected by the Senate (Grattan 2005).

In 1998 the contractualist claim was expressed by Dr Kemp, the then Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, as follows:

Work for the Dole is all about one basic fundamental social value—that welfare is a two-way street. The Government is willing to provide financial support to people looking for work. But in return, it is fair and reasonable to ask those people to put something back into their community (Kemp 1998b).

Similarly, in an (undated) Centrelink booklet called *Options for your Future: Mutual obligation*, unemployment payment recipients were told that mutual obligation was ‘all based on putting something back into the community in return for your payments’. The subsequent Minister for Employment, Tony Abbott, referred explicitly to contractual ideas when he reportedly told sponsors and participants at a program launch that Work for the Dole was ‘an important part of renewing the social contract...telling people there’s a place for them and reminding them that there are skills and abilities they’ve got’ (James 2000). While the social contract offered support for the unemployed, it also compelled their work ‘in return’, as was subtly implied: ‘telling people there’s a place for them’ and ‘reminding them’ about their abilities was code for telling the unemployed that they were *required* to take up a place.

The government asserts that such contractual ideas are widely shared in the community and are based on ‘common sense’; as Shaver (2002: 340) comments, ‘they are presented to the electorate as the public policy expression of a natural morality’. For example, Prime Minister Howard (2000: 3) has said that Work for the Dole:

gives common sense expression to a very basic Australian value and that is that people who need help ought to get it, but it’s not unreasonable if they’re able to do so to put something back in return. And that has been a very common sense Australian value for much longer than any of us in this room have been on this earth.

Senator Jocelyn Newman, the then Minister for Social Security, also appealed to ‘community values’ when she claimed in 1996 that: ‘Australians [are] sick and tired of being taken for mugs by dole bludgers’ (cited in Bessant 2000: 20). In 2002 the current Minister for Employment Services, Mal Brough, pursued this theme when he released commissioned research claiming to show that 16 per cent of jobseekers were ‘cruisers’ who were ‘relaxed’

about being unemployed and did not want to work full-time (Brough 2002).¹⁴ Brough went on the attack:

These people...give genuine job seekers a bad name and deserve to be labelled dole bludgers...If these so-called ‘cruisers’ think the Howard Government is going to allow them to take advantage of the generosity of the Australian taxpayer to fund their lifestyle choice, they have another thing coming...I intend to make them feel a lot less comfortable and far more active (Brough 2002: 1–2).

Some mutual obligation supporters claimed that the unemployed themselves felt that they did not ‘deserve’ payments unless they provided something ‘in return’: in an article on the Liberal Party’s website entitled ‘A chance to give something back’, a Work for the Dole coordinator reportedly said:

Our whole way of life is based on the premise that you take something and you give something back for it. If you take something without giving something back you feel bad, you feel like a thief—and we were letting generations of people grow up feeling that way about themselves. Work for the Dole makes you feel worthwhile as a human being for taking something (Liberal Party of Australia 2000).

In the contractualist view, Work for the Dole realigned the income support system with the social contract and ensured that the unemployed no longer need feel like ‘thieves’.

Associated with the contractualist argument is a second claim, as expressed by the then Minister for Employment Services, Tony Abbott, that many unemployed people are too selective about the jobs that they will accept. He warned that:

Telling young Australians that all work has to be well paid and personally satisfying risks breeding a generation of job snobs—people who are prepared to work but only on their own terms (Abbott 1999).

Unlike the ‘dole bludger’, who does not want to work at all, Abbott’s newly defined ‘job snob’ wants to work but has overly high expectations. In August 2000 Abbott announced a four-month trial in the Riverland area of South Australia requiring the unemployed to seek at

¹⁴ The research categorised jobseekers into eight ‘attitudinal segments’ based on 50 interviews, and then

least five jobs a fortnight in seasonal fruit picking or related jobs or face the loss of their benefits (Gordon 2000). He asserted that jobseekers were not entitled to refuse a job that they were capable of doing:

For too long, too many jobseekers have been too fussy...people are not entitled to say 'no' to a job that they can reasonably do...These jobs are hard work but they are good work. If you believe in the dignity of labor then you believe in doing even hard jobs and doing them well (cited in Gordon 2000).

Abbott also reportedly claimed that 'almost any job, providing it is not illegal or immoral, is better than long-term life on welfare' (cited in Foley 2000) and implied in unscripted comments during a speech to an industrial relations conference that workers should tolerate 'bad employers':

If we're honest, most of us would accept that a bad boss is a little like a bad father or a bad husband...Notwithstanding all of his faults you find he tends to do more good than harm. He might be a bad boss but at least he's employing someone (cited in Douez & Taylor 2002).

In a restatement of the principle of 'less eligibility' (discussed in Chapter 1), Abbott argued that unemployment payment levels were too close to minimum wages and that Work for the Dole increased work incentives. In a speech announcing the expansion of Work for the Dole to Year 12 school leavers, he asserted that mutual obligation made work 'comparatively more attractive without either cutting welfare or increasing entry level wages'(1999: 2). Similarly, in a speech to the market liberal Centre for Independent Studies he claimed:

In the absence of rigorous work tests, welfare benefits pitched close to the level of minimum wages eventually create a glass floor below which unemployment cannot fall. Why do some people not work? Because they don't have to...Because for many people working has become more trouble than it's worth (2000b: 39).

Abbott's argument overlooked the potential to increase work incentives by reducing the high Effective Marginal Tax Rates faced by payment recipients—the combined result of the tax system and high payment withdrawal rates with each additional dollar earned (ACOSS

2004b).¹⁵ His position was market liberal in character in its depiction of individuals as self-interested calculators of personal utility and its claim that unemployment payments are an attractive alternative to low-paid jobs—as argued, for example, by Murray (1984). According to this rationale, Work for the Dole demonstrates to the unemployed that they have no choice but to work, whether in a job or while unemployed.

The third rationale used to support mutual obligation is new paternalist: unemployed people are said to benefit from being compelled to undertake Work for the Dole and other mutual obligation activities because participation increases their self-esteem and ‘work readiness’. This argument reflects the ideas of Lawrence Mead and the ‘active society’ framework developed by the OECD and previously drawn on by the Hawke and Keating Governments. As was discussed in the previous chapter, these ideas predicate full community membership on employment or other social participation; individual unemployed people and the state are said to have joint responsibility for enabling such participation. Further, jobseekers are claimed to benefit from being *compelled* to gain work experience and appropriate ‘work values’, as this enables them to fully participate in the community. Minister Newman illustrated such an approach in her Second Reading Speech introducing the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Work for the Dole) Bill:

The value of the Work for the Dole initiative lies in bringing young unemployed people back into a work culture to help instil a positive attitude to work. It will give young people a chance to engage with the community rather than being alienated from it (cited in Bessant 2000: 22).

According to this view, the young unemployed are alienated from society and have negative attitudes towards work, and compulsory participation in Work for the Dole will enable them to regain full community membership. The new paternalist rationale is based on the premise that the unemployed will not act in their best interests if left to make their own decisions; the government must act like a parent by requiring clearly specified behaviour. Abbott exemplified this treatment of the relationship between the state and the unemployed as like that of a parent and child when he commented:

¹⁵ The government’s introduction in September 2003 of the Working Credit initiative was a step towards addressing this issue. The scheme enables payment recipients who earn under \$48 a fortnight to build up a bank of ‘working credits’ of up to \$1,000, which can be used when they get a job to offset against the standard reductions in social security payments (ACOSS 2004c). The Howard Government abolished a similar Labor Government scheme in 1996 (Shaver 2002: 338).

[Mutual obligation requirements] are designed to make it harder for demoralised jobseekers to give up...Passive welfare...is a symptom of the kindness that kills—a misguided philanthropy that leaves jobseekers dependent on the state like perennial adolescents...As every parent knows, really caring often means rejecting soft options (Abbott 2000a).

In his speech to the Centre for Independent Studies in 2000, Abbott quoted approvingly the following comments from Lawrence Mead:

In the US we find that the labour market is no longer the main constraint on moving people into work. Rather, it is the need to organise people's own lives so that they are ready and able to work. That means that you have to give jobseekers more help than you used to and you also have to be more directive. You have to be what I call paternalistic (cited in Abbott 2000b: 39).

In this argument, individual behavioural failings cause unemployment and require 'paternalistic' action by the state.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the concept of 'dependency' is central to new paternalist arguments. Yeatman comments:

The rhetoric of mutual obligation begins with a *rejection of dependency*. Dependency is associated with both passivity and a long-term, self-destructive reliance on unearned economic support, or 'welfare'...Employment, part-time or full-time, is seen as the primary means by which individuals acquire self-esteem, confidence in handling problems, skills, and the regard of others (2000a: 161, emphasis in original).

'Dependency' and 'self-reliance' were key concepts employed in a Discussion Paper entitled *The Challenge of Welfare Dependency* released in 1999 by the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Newman (1999b), and in a consultation paper on simplifying social security payments released in 2002 by Amanda Vanstone, the subsequent Minister for Family and Community Services, and Tony Abbott, the then Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. The latter paper asserted that 'self-reliance means doing what you can to look after yourself and your family and to contribute to society in other ways' (Commonwealth of Australia 2002: preface) and that:

The most effective strategies to increase employment and reduce reliance on income support combine assistance and good work incentives with clear and fair expectations that people on

income support who can work should seek to become more self-reliant (Commonwealth of Australia 2002: 18).

While acknowledging that ‘no-one is fully self-reliant’, the paper implied that dependence on social security could be equated with not ‘doing what you can to look after yourself and your family’. Like Abbott’s comments quoted above, the focus on ‘dependency’ equated social security recipients with dependent children or adolescents who needed ‘clear expectations’ and discipline to develop into the ‘self-reliant’, autonomous individuals of market liberal thought. Prime Minister Howard has also claimed that a culture of welfare dependency must be addressed, describing Labor’s welfare policies as creating ‘citizens...conditioned to long-term dependence’ (cited in Wilson & Turnbull 2001: 396).

In defending its mutual obligation policy, the Howard Government has drawn on both market liberal and new paternalist ideas. It has asserted that those in genuine need deserve support, but only if they contribute to the community in lieu of being able to gain paid employment: the metaphor of the contract implies that jobseekers should provide something ‘in return’ for payments. The government has attributed unemployment to passive welfare, poor work ethic, low motivation and excessive jobseeker expectations, and claimed that mutual obligation requirements will address these ills by changing jobseeker attitudes. The market liberal focus on the value of self-reliance has combined with a new paternalist focus on enforcing citizenship obligations. In addition, the government has argued that these arrangements reflect community values—as will be discussed later in this chapter. But first, the next section discusses the kinds of arguments which have been levelled against mutual obligation in principle and in practice.

Critiques of mutual obligation

Many community service providers and trade unions have been highly critical of Work for the Dole. Critics of the scheme have included the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the Victorian Trades Hall Council, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, the Salvation Army and Anglicare (ACOSS 1999; ACTU 1997; Mitchell 1997; McClelland 1997; Sykes 1997). A number of Australian academics have also published critiques of mutual obligation and Work for the Dole (for example, Burgess, Mitchell, O’Brien & Watts 1999;

Bessant 2000; Yeatman 2000b; Moss 2001; Shaver 2002; McClelland 2002; Braithwaite, Gatens & Mitchell 2002).

The ALP's response to Work for the Dole was also critical, but after initial opposition Labor allowed its passage through the Senate (Australian Senate Hansard 1997; Willox & Milburn 1997)—probably due to its popularity in the electorate (as will be discussed later in this chapter). Labor announced in 1998 that it would retain Work for the Dole but substantially modify it and change its name to Training for Jobs (Mitchell 1998). The 2004 ALP National Platform reflected the Labor position that the scheme lacked effective training:

Labor rejects one-sided 'mutual' obligation policies and believes that mutual obligation activities should not become another obstacle to job-seeking activity. Labor will ensure that all labour market programs deliver accredited effective training, skills development and/or experience in a mainstream workplace (ALP 2004: 26).

However, in its 2004 'Learn or Earn' policy announcing a 'Youth Guarantee' of education, training or subsidised work for 15 to 18 year-olds, Labor stated that Work for the Dole would be retained for those aged 19 or over (ALP 2004).

Arguments against mutual obligation can be characterised as falling into four broad types: that it is based on a flawed contractual rationale, that it undermines personal autonomy, that it individualises a structural problem, and that it is being ineffectively and unfairly implemented. The first three arguments reject the concept of mutual obligation outright, while the fourth rejects the way the principle is being implemented. These various arguments are discussed below.

The critique of the contractual analogy used to justify mutual obligation directly attacks the principle's foundation. As Kinnear (2000: 10) comments:

The ideas that rights have corresponding duties and that we are bound to each other by a social contract sound quite plausible; we are used to them whether we have studied them at university or not. Indeed, such ideas *are* foundational to Western liberal democratic traditions...[However] the invocation of philosophical heritage to support policies of Mutual Obligation is often done rather loosely in public debates, and the relationship between mutual obligation-based social welfare policies and political-philosophical thought is rarely analysed rigorously.

The concept of the social contract developed from the ideas of leading contract theorists Hobbes (1588–1679), Locke (1632–1704) and Rousseau (1712–1778). Contract theorists envisaged ‘men’ originally living in a ‘state of nature’ without government, and argued that they freely consented to limit their freedoms and obey a newly formed state in exchange for the protection offered by law. This idea reconciled the liberal attachment to the autonomy of the person with obedience to government:

The appealing aspect of contract theory, especially for philosophers of the liberal tradition, is that political obedience is construed as an expression of free, uncoerced individual choice, rather than collective coercion (Kinnear 2000: 12).

However, such theories do not explain how citizens consent to a political system they were born into, nor whether just by remaining in their country of birth and accepting its benefits they have expressed consent (Hampton 1993: 380). As a way around this difficulty, the most influential modern contract theorist, John Rawls, imagined a *hypothetical* contract. If agreed to under conditions which conformed to ‘fair process’, this contract would result in a morally defensible political and legal system. Rawls argued that:

a person is required to do his part as defined by the rules of an institution when two conditions are met; first, the institution is just (or fair)...and second, one has voluntarily accepted the benefits of the arrangement...(Rawls 1972: 111–12).

Kinnear (2000) and Moss (2001) argue that in the case of unemployed income support recipients neither of these conditions apply. Unemployed people cannot be said to have voluntarily accepted a contract, as many lack other sources of basic support and have little option but to accept conditional benefits. Goodin argues that it is objectionable to stipulate conditions in circumstances when ‘the other party has “no reasonable choice” but to comply’, as the person’s ‘vulnerability to and dependence upon us for the needed resource’ gives rise to an obligation on our part to provide it without setting conditions (1988: 196).

Critics of mutual obligation also argue that, given the prevalence of structural unemployment, income support should not be viewed as ‘charity’ but instead as “‘just compensation” paid to the victims of our economic system’ (Goodin 1998: 188–9). Kinnear argues that since the 1970s unemployment has been used strategically as a mean to control inflation, meaning that

work has not been available to all. As the unemployed serve the function of supporting economic stability, they are already being required to contribute to the community:

any contract that the government makes with unemployed people requiring them to search for work when work is, by deliberate policy design, not available to all, is questionable...Unemployed people are making a contribution to economic stability in Australia by the very fact of their unemployment. When viewed from this perspective, the obligations are completely reversed—it is the community [which] should feel gratefully obliged to the unemployed person for their considerable and involuntary contribution to the well-being of their more advantaged fellow Australians (2000: 25).

The rejection of the contractualist rationale for mutual obligation leads to the second major objection to Work for the Dole: that it undermines the personal autonomy of income support recipients. The program has the effect, it is argued, of preventing recipients from making their own decisions about work-related activities. Bessant (2000: 29) argues that:

Being forced to partake in specified activities for a minimal income denies one's ability to make certain work/career related decisions...The mandatory requirement to perform work in exchange for welfare benefits is destructive of the unemployed person's sense of autonomy and agency.

Similarly, Shaver (2002: 332) argues that mutual obligation entails a transformation of welfare 'from treating the claimant as a sovereign individual to a subject of paternalistic supervision'. Shaver notes that a basic belief of market liberalism is that individuals are the best judge of their own 'utility', and that liberal societies have traditionally protected individual (or consumer) sovereignty. Yet, she argues, 'This presumption of consumer sovereignty has been overturned, on the argument that welfare dependence erodes the recipient's capacity for freedom and autonomous choice of action (Shaver 2002: 343). Underlying this shift is 'a denial of the equality of selfhood as the price of welfare assistance' (Shaver 2002: 342).

These critics reject the new paternalist and active society claims that workfare-style programs contribute to individual freedom and autonomy by assisting the unemployed to achieve their own long-run goals. They counter that programs aimed at 'ending welfare dependency' undermine, rather than develop, income support recipients' personal autonomy. They also dispute the characterisation of people who rely on government payments as 'dependent' and

therefore stigmatised, while those who rely on a wage from an employer are characterised as ‘independent’ or ‘self-reliant’ (Fraser & Gordon 1997). For example, Goodin argues that dependency on unconditional state benefits is preferable to dependency on family or employers, as people who have no alternative but to rely on the latter income sources are at risk of powerlessness and exploitation:

The problem that the welfare state is designed to answer...is the problem of dependency...Under the law of the market, those who are dependent could and would be mercilessly exploited. Economically, you can drive a very hard bargain indeed with someone who is desperately in need and dependent on you for satisfaction of that basic need (Goodin 1988: 173).

As Esping-Andersen has argued, the social democratic provision of income support—when based on notions of rights—results in ‘de-commodification’: a reduction of worker dependence on selling their labour power to survive (1990: 21).

Yeatman has analysed the tensions in the new paternalist claim that workfare supports the autonomy of the unemployed. She argues that mutual obligation entails a ‘paternalist contractualism’ in which clients are in a ‘hierarchical, disciplinary relationship’ with their case manager (the paternalist aspect of the relationship), but the individual is involved in ‘making decisions about and planning for his/her future’ and ‘as far as is possible, decision outcomes reflect a negotiated agreement between the case manager and individual client’ (the contractualist aspect) (2000a: 166–9). While historically paternalism involved the long-term maintenance of relationships of ‘patriarchal’ dependence (as was rejected by Locke), paternalist contractualism aims to develop individuals’ capacity for autonomous action and self-reliance (Yeatman 1999: 265). However, in a subsequent paper Yeatman argues that Mead’s paternalism does not match this idealised model. While Mead’s prescriptions may apparently aim to develop clients’ capacity for autonomous action, he in reality advocates conformity to social norms. She comments:

it is not reasonable to use the authority of government to require all the different kinds of individual on public income support to conform to the same bureaucratic set of rules (Yeatman 2000b: 6).

McLaughlin shares Yeatman’s concerns about the effect of mandatory programs on autonomy, arguing that the justification for interventionist programs for the long-term

unemployed must be 'whether those receiving such intervention experience it as providing for the enhancement or development of capability or the exercise of autonomy, on the one hand, or as restrictive or disabling, on the other' (McLaughlin 1997: 93).

In response to such critics, Mead claimed that it was fallacious:

to suppose that being obligated is opposed to autonomy. To the contrary, the acceptance of responsibilities, at least about personal conduct, is essential to living a free life. Only people who function can really claim their rights (1997c: 131).

Mead assumes that jobseekers who do not wish to take part in particular programs are not 'functioning' and are avoiding their responsibilities. Yet the crucial issue, Yeatman and McLaughlin argue, is whether jobseekers experience programs as furthering their goals, or as externally imposed requirements which do not meet their needs.

Burgess, Mitchell, O'Brien and Watts (1999) go even further in arguing that mutual obligation conflicts with individual autonomy: they claim that the lack of real choice in the mutual obligation 'contract' violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 23 of the Declaration states that 'Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment', while Article 8-3-a of the International Covenant states that no-one shall be 'required to perform forced or compulsory labour'. Such labour is defined by the International Labour Convention as 'all work or service which is extracted from a person under menace of penalty and for which the person has not offered himself voluntarily' (Burgess et al. 1999: 93). Burgess et al. argue that the lack of real choice in participating in Work for the Dole, and the sanctions if one does participate, suggests that income support recipients are being required to perform forced labour.

The third argument against the mutual obligation principle is that it individualises a structural problem. Critics argue that the underlying cause of unemployment is the reduced number of low-skilled jobs resulting from technological change and the export of low-skilled jobs to developing countries, and that the focus on the attitudes of the unemployed is counter-productive (Burgess et al. 1999). Henman and Perry comment that rather than there being any evident overall 'decline in the work ethic', 'labour force participation rose almost

continuously from 68 per cent of people of workforce age in 1966 to 76 per cent by 2002'—largely due to the rising part-time participation of women. However, over the same period there were substantial declines in the provision of male full-time, low-skilled employment and in full-time employment for young school leavers (Henman & Perry 2002: 322–5). Despite this, advocates for mutual obligation diagnose the cause of unemployment, and particularly youth unemployment, as deficiencies in individuals such as lack of 'work readiness' or poor work ethic, motivation or self-esteem. Their proposed solution is the discipline of mandatory work experience; as Peel (2003: 23) comments:

the problem of poverty [has been] turned into the problem of welfare dependency...we are encouraged to focus on what is wrong with poor people, and on their bad decisions, rather than what is wrong with the context in which these decisions are made.

Critics of mutual obligation policies have also argued that the level of unemployment is far higher than the official ABS unemployment data indicates. The Centre of Full Employment and Equity has cited ABS data showing that in February 2004 there were 5.6 unemployed people for every vacancy (CofFEE 2004a).¹⁶ Given the very restrictive definition of unemployment used by the ABS, which excludes jobseekers who have worked for one or more hours in the survey week, are not available to start work within a week or who have not actively sought work in the last four weeks, it is clear that there are many fewer jobs than people seeking them (Mitchell & Carlson 2000; ACOSS 2003). Indeed, using an hours-based measure of unemployment which takes into account underemployed and discouraged workers, CofFEE has estimated that in May 2004 the unemployment rate was 10.7 per cent—almost twice the official rate at the time of 5.6 per cent (CofFEE 2004b).¹⁷ Ironically, Work for the Dole is intended to operate as an 'ersatz work test' in a context in which many cannot demonstrate their work ethic in an actual job, because they are not able to obtain one. As Dwyer (1998: 508) comments, 'everyone is assumed to be indolent until they prove otherwise'.

¹⁶ This was half the average unemployed to vacancy ratio of 11.1 between June 1974 and February 2004, but still considerably higher than the ratios of under 2.0 recorded before 1974 (CofFEE 2004a).

¹⁷ The measure is the ratio of estimated hours unsuccessfully sought by unemployed and underemployed jobseekers to total hours if all available labour was fully utilised. It includes the potential labour of discouraged jobseekers—that is, those who want to work and are available to start work, but are not actively looking for work. In recent years the ABS has developed a series of supplementary measures to the official unemployment rate which also take into account underemployment and discouraged workers (ABS 2002), but are not calculated on the more refined hourly basis used by CofFEE.

Bessant argues that in the absence of large-scale government job-creation measures, the application of the mutual obligation to the unemployed is itself unethical:

There is no value in attempting to establish and maintain an ethical obligation that requires job-seekers to work if that work is not available. Given the fact that current demands for waged work outweigh the supply of jobs available, and given the failure of successive governments to demonstrate a commitment to job creation, continued claims that ‘the unemployed’ have moral obligations to work even though there is insufficient work available are themselves unethical (Bessant 2000: 24, emphasis in original).

Government concerns that income support conditions should ‘make it harder to give up’ the search for work can also be seen as compelling jobseekers to repeatedly experience rejection despite having little prospect of success:

Research on unemployed people has quite consistently found that depression and ‘demoralisation’ sets in after a considerable period of unsuccessful job-searching... ‘Making it harder for them to give up’ the demoralising, frustrating and depressing search under threat of the reduction or withdrawal of basic income support is clearly an ethical question worthy of serious public debate (Kinnear 2000: 30).

Building on the argument that workfare programs individualise a structural problem, Peck and Theodore (1998: 42) claim that they also serve a structural function. By pushing income support recipients off welfare, workfare functions to perpetuate relatively unattractive, insecure and poorly paid jobs:

[‘Work first’] welfare-to-work programmes...not only exploit the conditions found in contingent job markets, they also contribute to the regulation and reproduction of these job markets, most obviously by constituting a continuously job-ready, pre-processed, ‘forced’ labour supply for the lower end of the labour market (Peck & Theodore 1998: 33).

In this view, not only does Work for the Dole fail to address the underlying structural causes of unemployment, it supports the continuation of poor-quality, low-wage jobs.

These three arguments about contractualism, autonomy and social structures target the foundations of the mutual obligation principle. By contrast, the final major critique attacks its current application, arguing that requirements placed on jobseekers must be supported by

adequate government programs which demonstrably improve job prospects. Critics commonly argue that mutual obligation places the burden of obligation on income support recipients to ‘contribute to society’, without adequate government funding of employment and training opportunities which would enable recipients to do so (for example, ACOSS 1999; ACTU 1997; McLelland 1997, 2002; Pike 1997; Saunders 2001). Saunders (2001: 105) comments:

When it comes to the crunch, mutual obligation will involve requiring social security recipients to ‘give something back’ or face sanctions, but there are no parallel requirements (only expectations) on government, business or communities.

Comparing mutual obligation to the Keating Government’s reciprocal obligation policies, McClelland (2002: 216–18) argues that ‘As currently applied mutual obligation will unduly limit government’s capacity building role’, as it is being applied in a ‘more restrictive and coercive manner’, few activity options are available, and the ‘broader institutional context...is much more unhelpful for many welfare recipients’. ACOSS president Michael Raper (2000) commented that in 1999/2000 Australia spent well below the OECD average on employment assistance schemes for jobless people. Expenditure had declined from 0.66 per cent of GDP in 1995/96 to 0.32 per cent in 1999/2000, despite the fact that the number of long-term unemployment payment recipients was higher in 2000 than it was in 1996.¹⁸

As Nevile and Nevile (2003: 17–18)—supporters rather than critics of the program—note, there is tension between the different objectives of Work for the Dole:

there will always be two, sometimes conflicting, primary aims of the Work for the Dole program. One is bound up with the idea of mutual obligation; that those receiving unemployment benefits should do something to help their local community. The other is to provide a work experience program, which will help participants obtain paid employment in the open market.

Projects which may be very valuable to local communities may have little value in terms of achieving the second objective—for example if they involve skills which are not in substantial demand or are currently well-supplied in the labour market. ACOSS Deputy President Elir Morgan-Thomas argues that:

¹⁸ In 2000, an average 414,000 people had received unemployment payments for at least 12 months, compared to 357,000 people in 1996 (Raper 2000).

The fundamental flaw of the ‘Work for the Dole’ program is that it is not designed to get people into jobs. It is more of a political gimmick than a well-designed employment program (ACOSS 2001a).

Critics also argue that the penalties for failing to meet mutual obligation requirements are ‘out of all proportion to the seriousness of the “offence”’, being higher than average fines for criminal offences such as ‘assault occasioning actual bodily harm’, ‘break and enter’, and vehicle theft (Raper 2000). The number of breaches recorded for not meeting requirements almost tripled between 1997/98 and 2000/01, rising from 120,700 to 346,100 (National Welfare Rights Network & ACOSS 2000: 2; Lackner & Marston 2003: 16). Critiques of the breaching regime will be discussed in Chapter 7.

In summary, critics of Work for the Dole have attacked the program and other mutual obligation requirements on a range of fronts. Work for the Dole is seen as disguising the reality of compulsion and denial of autonomy under a legitimising metaphor of consent. The focus on individual character and behaviour is seen as distracting attention from the structural reality of too many people chasing too few vacancies. Further, it is viewed as helping to perpetuate a system of low-paid and insecure employment by compelling income support recipients to accept such work. Critics also view mutual obligation as being one-sided in practice, with increased conditions being placed on unemployed jobseekers at the same time as programs to help them gain work have been cut. However, the government has found it relatively easy to deflect these criticisms of mutual obligation requirements by pointing to the weight of community opinion, as will be discussed in the next section.

Community views about unemployment

There were dual benefits for the government in restricting unemployment payments to those who fulfilled ‘mutual obligations’—not only did it accord with the Howard Government’s philosophy, it was also popular with the electorate. Opinion polls and other research indicate that in recent decades a substantial proportion of Australians have partially attributed unemployment to the unemployed themselves, although the proportion expressing such a view has varied dramatically over the years (Eardley & Matheson 1999). While little in-depth research has been undertaken into Australians’ views about the unemployed, recent studies have indicated that Australians commonly support additional requirements being placed on unemployment payment recipients.

Causes of unemployment

From 1975 until 1993, the Morgan Gallup Poll regularly asked respondents for their views on the causes of unemployment. The most common contributing factors supported varied between ‘government’, ‘trade unions’, ‘world economic pressures’ and ‘people not wanting to work’. The explanation ‘people not wanting to work’ varied between a high of almost half of respondents in 1975 and a low of under one-quarter in 1982, when unemployment peaked at almost 10 per cent (Smith & Wearing 1987; Eardley & Matheson 1999: 5–9). This was followed by a steady increase in the proportion of people at least partially attributing unemployment to people not wanting to work, to a peak of almost 50 per cent in 1989, followed again by a sharp drop to under 20 per cent by 1991—when unemployment was again dramatically increasing. As Eardley and Matheson (1999: 8) note, there was an apparent inverse relationship between unemployment levels and public blame of unemployment on the unemployed themselves:

as unemployment rose people seemed less inclined to ascribe responsibility to the unemployed themselves. Then, as the jobless rate fell there was a growth in the feeling that work must be available for those who put the effort into looking for it.

Analysis by Graetz (1987) of Beed and McNair’s ‘The Changing Australian, 1983’ survey found that members of the workforce generally, and blue collar and clerical workers in particular, were more likely to attribute unemployment to individual characteristics of the jobless than were leaders in government, business and trade unions.¹⁹ Both groups were more likely to view *youth* unemployment, compared with unemployment generally, as resulting from deficits among the young unemployed themselves. Only 16 per cent of workforce responses and 6 per cent of leaders’ responses attributed unemployment generally to individual characteristics of the unemployed, such as insufficient education, skills, motivation or work ethic. However, 50 per cent of workforce responses and 31 per cent of leaders’ responses used individualist explanations to explain youth unemployment.

Graetz suggests that members of the workforce, and blue collar and clerical workers in particular, may rely more on individualist explanations because they have less knowledge about the structural causes of unemployment and are concerned about the taxes they

¹⁹ The survey of 868 members of the Australian workforce and 226 business, government and trade union leaders asked respondents what they thought was the main cause of unemployment generally and youth unemployment in particular, and enabled open-ended responses.

contribute to support of the unemployed (1987: 329). Eardley and Matheson (1999: 10) comment that blue-collar workers may be particularly inclined to individualist explanations when they are experiencing declining living standards, which is ‘consistent with the increase in the blaming of the unemployed during the 1980s, when real wage levels were falling’.

In 1999 the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) conducted a national postal survey entitled *Coping with Economic and Social Change*, involving a random sample of 2,400 adults taken from the Commonwealth Electoral Roll (Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000; Saunders 2002a, 2002b—henceforth called the 1999 SPRC survey).²⁰ Survey respondents most often blamed unemployment on job loss through technological change (three-quarters supporting this explanation), cheap imports, easier access to social security, and insufficient skills. They were least likely to blame the government’s economic management, trade unions or migrants. While 44.1 per cent agreed that ‘fewer people want to work these days’, 48.9 per cent agreed that ‘there just aren’t enough jobs for all the people who want to work’ (see Table A.1, Appendix A).²¹

In the SPRC survey the proportion of Australians partially attributing unemployment to people not wanting to work was relatively high, but below the peaks of almost 50 per cent recorded in the Morgan Gallup polls in 1975 and 1989. Respondents who were currently unemployed, had recently experienced unemployment in their family, had a university degree or voted Labor tended to *disagree* that reluctance to work was a cause of high unemployment. In contrast, those who voted Liberal/National, had not completed secondary school, were self-employed or were aged over 65 were most likely to *agree* (Eardley et al. 2003: 33–4).

Eardley et al. also asked about responsibility for solving unemployment. While three-quarters believed that Australia would never return to full employment, almost half (47.2 per cent) agreed that it was the government’s responsibility to solve unemployment and 43.8 per cent thought that businesses should be required to create more jobs. There was little support (13.5 per cent) for solely blaming the unemployed for their situation (see Table A.2, Appendix A). Respondents were provided with a list of thirteen possible actions the government could take to solve unemployment and asked which three they thought were most important. The most

²⁰ The survey achieved a high effective response rate of 62 per cent; the data set was weighted so as to partially adjust for response bias (Eardley et al. 2000: 7).

²¹ Eardley et al. note that there was a weak negative correlation between the latter two statements: people who agreed with one statement were somewhat less likely to agree with the other.

popular proposals were to ‘give more help to small business’, ‘provide more training for unemployed people’, ‘make it easier for people to combine work and family responsibilities’ and ‘give employers subsidies to take on unemployed people’ (see Table A.3, Appendix A). Only a quarter of respondents supported making it ‘harder to get unemployment benefits’ (Eardley et al. 2000: 15).

Significantly, the SPRC survey suggests that Australians predominantly attribute unemployment to technological change and industry restructuring and believe that the government is primarily responsible for addressing unemployment. While nearly half the respondents thought that reluctance to work was contributing to unemployment, few mainly blamed individual unemployed people for their situation. Respondents most often supported measures which promoted availability of jobs for the unemployed, assisted them to gain more skills or increased rewards from work—not measures which made it harder to get benefits. However, there was some support for the latter measure, and Australians do appear to support increased requirements being placed on some groups of unemployed people, as will be discussed below.

Level of unemployment payments

Australian opinion polls have regularly found that unemployment is a priority community concern. However, Australians generally rate the provision of assistance to the unemployed low on lists of priorities for public spending and support conditions being attached to this expenditure (Eardley & Matheson 1999). In their survey of research on Australian attitudes to unemployment and unemployed people, Eardley and Matheson conclude that:

it is hard to escape the view that, by international standards, Australians appear to take a relatively hard line on the responsibilities of unemployed people—especially the younger unemployed—to actively seek and accept work. A majority also seem disinclined to support increases in public expenditure on unemployment benefits (1999: 31).

For example, research undertaken as part of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 1985 and 1990 found that Australians were more likely than the Americans or British to support reductions in unemployment payments:

in 1985 nearly 52 per cent of Australian respondents were in favour of reducing spending on unemployment benefits to some extent, compared with only one-quarter of those from the USA

and 19 per cent of Britons. By 1990, the Australian majority in favour of reductions had grown to 58 per cent, while falling in all the other countries (Eardley & Matheson 1999: 13).

The ISSP research also found that in each country surveyed support was highest for the most widely used government services and programs, including age pensions, health, education and law enforcement. However, in most countries respondents wanted less public spending on defence and the arts, while ‘in Australia unemployment payments were the primary target for cost cutting’ (Eardley & Matheson 1994: 16). This is despite more recent findings that the average rate of unemployment payments in Australia was the third lowest of 18 OECD countries surveyed—only the US and Italy had lower average rates. In 1999 Australia also had the fifth lowest proportion of its working age population relying on social security payments of sixteen countries surveyed—above only the US, New Zealand, Spain and Japan (ACOSS 2004a).

The 1999 SPRC survey found a more even division of opinion: about one-quarter of respondents thought that the ‘overall level of support the Government provides’ for the young unemployed and the long-term unemployed was ‘too much’, whereas the proportions who thought that it was ‘not enough’ were 21.5 per cent for the young unemployed and 31.6 per cent for the long-term unemployed (Saunders 2002a: 111). However, the wording of the SPRC survey question was not specifically about expenditure on unemployment payments—it may have also reflected views about the provision of assistance for the unemployed to gain work.

A more recent poll found considerably less support for reductions in unemployment payments than in the 1990 ISSP research, although respondents who supported reductions still outnumbered those who favoured increases. The July 2004 Saulwick Age Poll found that, among a random sample of 1,000 Australian voters, 34 per cent thought that the government should spend less on unemployment payments and only 17 per cent that it should spend more (Saulwick Age Poll 2004a). By comparison, 65 per cent thought that the government should spend more on the age pension and a negligible 3 per cent that it should spend less (Saulwick Age Poll 2004b).

A common reason proposed for Australians’ relatively restrictive attitudes to spending on unemployment payments is that highly targeted systems tend to marginalise recipients and

reduce public support for investment in the system, as less people have a stake in defending it (Esping-Andersen 1990). The ISSP provides some evidence to support the proposition that in countries with residualist income support systems the public is less inclined to believe that the government is responsible for ensuring an adequate income for the unemployed. In 1990, 48.2 per cent of US and 53.3 per cent of Australian respondents agreed that it should be ‘the responsibility of government to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed’, compared to 74.3 per cent of respondents in West Germany and 87.1 per cent in Norway. Similarly, 40.3 per cent of US and 40.4 per cent of Australian respondents agreed that it should be the government’s responsibility to ‘provide a job for everyone who wants one’, compared to 71.3 per cent of West Germans and 80.6 per cent of Norwegians (Eardley & Matheson 1999: 20–1; Bean & Papadakis 1998).

Media representations and ‘wedge politics’

The representation of unemployed people by the media and politicians also appears to have influenced popular perceptions. Windschuttle (1980) documented the rise of the ‘dole bludger’ as a favourite archetype employed by the media from 1973. As previously discussed, media campaigns against dole bludgers started after the Whitlam Government’s short-lived liberalisation of Unemployment Benefit eligibility rules in 1973, which critics claimed was adversely affecting work incentives at a time of labour shortages. During 1974 the labour market situation reversed, with unemployment rapidly rising. However, attacks on dole bludgers continued—fuelled by Malcolm Fraser’s claims during the 1975 election campaign that the Whitlam Government had been ‘soft on welfare cheats’ (Golding & Middleton 1982: 3). This campaign appears to have strongly influenced public perceptions: in 1975 a Morgan Gallup poll found that 48 per cent of people surveyed thought that a main cause of unemployment was ‘people not wanting to work’, compared with 30 per cent in the previous year (Beder 2000: 159).

Commonly recurring media stories in what Putnis (2001: 84) describes as the ‘exemplars for public outrage’ tradition have included those depicting ‘welfare cheats’, ‘bludgers’ and ‘surfies on the dole’. A controversial example was the 1996 attack by Channel Nine’s ‘A Current Affair’ on the Paxtons, three unemployed young siblings from the western suburbs of Melbourne—who were shown, for example, saying that they would not change their appearance to be acceptable to employers (Beder 2000: 151; Wilson & Turnbull 2001: 15). Another prominent example was the November 1997 front cover of the *Bulletin* featuring a

surfer and the headline ‘Dole addicts. He plays, we pay...how many more like him?’ (Walsh 1997). In a more recent example, a *Herald Sun* article titled ‘Too choosy, say employers: 12,000 jobs go begging’ claimed that: ‘Thousands of dole recipients are refusing interviews and shunning jobs’. The article cited employers claiming that they could not fill jobs because ‘the dole is too easy’ and people were ‘too comfortable at home’ (Jamieson & Ralph 2001). In his analysis of newspaper reporting in the three months leading up to the 1998 federal election, Putnis (2001: 87) found that ‘antiwelfare images predominated’ in 59 per cent of the articles on welfare in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Herald Sun*. He argued that ‘the news media, particularly the tabloid press, give privileged exposure and authority to antiwelfare perspectives’ (Putnis 2001: 93).

Data on ‘welfare frauds’ has been regularly used to overstate the extent of fraud by presenting all benefit overpayments as being the result of deliberate ‘cheating’ by recipients—ignoring or downplaying the major contribution of administrative errors and delays and recipient lack of knowledge of complex requirements. Journalist Paul Cleary noted that welfare payments were subjected to a higher level of auditing than taxation, despite the fact that tax audits resulted in adjustments in 83 per cent of cases audited—‘But the Government does not put out statements every six months on tax cheats’ (cited in Beder 2000: 166). The differential treatment of ‘welfare cheats’ as opposed to ‘tax cheats’ partially reflects (and may also influence) different attitudes towards these behaviours: an ISSP survey conducted in Australia in 1999/2000 found that ‘many more Australians think welfare fraud is seriously wrong than think tax cheating is seriously wrong’ (Evans & Kelley 2001: 94).

Beder argues that governments and employers benefit from reinforcing community prejudices against the unemployed by blaming the unemployed for their predicament:

The Government would rather people be blamed the unemployed for high levels of unemployment than government policies. The efforts to make sure recipients continue to look for jobs benefits employers who want maximum competition for the jobs they offer. Labelling welfare recipients as bludgers and scroungers, cheats, delinquents and deviants also ‘works to make the unemployed feel guilty and humble instead of angry and indignant’ (Beder 2000: 169, citing Gosden 1997).

In their analysis of the Howard Government’s welfare changes as ‘wedge politics’, Wilson and Turnbull (2001: 391) argue that during the 1996 and 1998 elections:

the Coalition appealed to the group of largely socially conservative, outer-metropolitan working class voters on strategically populist grounds, targeting immigration, welfare and the unemployed in particular. (emphasis in original)

According to Wilson and Turnbull, ‘wedge politics’ involve:

targeting unpopular or stigmatised social issues or groups as a way of defining ‘mainstream politics’ and linking political opponents to their support of these issues or groups...social and economic divisions have created new opportunities for political tacticians to harness resentment towards minorities as a means of extracting political advantage (2001: 385).

They argue that during the Coalition’s 1996 campaign launch Howard made a clear pitch to ‘battler’ working families, as opposed to the unemployed and migrants. \$1 billion would be saved over three years by reducing assistance to the latter two groups and redirecting it to ‘the battlers’ (Wilson & Turnbull 2001: 393). The introduction of Work for the Dole was then used to attack the Opposition’s ‘soft’ position on welfare. Subsequently, Labor reversed its policy from opposition to the scheme to a commitment to retain the scheme in a modified form. Wilson and Turnbull provide some evidence that the Howard Government’s hard line on the unemployed may have strengthened community support for increased conditionality in the income support system.

Overall, based on the limited international comparative data available, Australians seem to take a comparatively hard line on income support for the unemployed. Australians appear to support restrictions in spending on unemployment payments and to partially attribute unemployment to an inadequate work ethic, particularly with regard to the young unemployed. However, they also appear to support increased government assistance to unemployed people to help them gain work, and few predominantly blame the unemployed themselves for their situation. While the hypotheses proposed in the literature to explain these patterns remain quite speculative, they include the influence of Australia’s highly targeted unemployment payments system—which it is argued restricts payments to a stigmatised minority—the influence of media campaigns against ‘dole bludgers’, and the government’s use of ‘wedge politics’. In this context, the community was likely to be receptive to mutual obligation requirements, as discussed below.

Community views about mutual obligation

Three large-scale studies have specifically investigated community attitudes towards mutual obligation: one undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) (Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000; Saunders 2002a, 2002b), one commissioned by the Department of Family and Community Services and undertaken by Roy Morgan Research (2000), and the other undertaken by Wilson and Turnbull as part of the Middle Australia Project (2001). All have found, consistent with government claims, that there is widespread support for some groups of unemployed income support recipients being required to undertake Work for the Dole or other specified activities.

The 1999 SPRC survey asked respondents about their support for nine separate activity test or mutual obligation requirements being applied to different groups of unemployed claimants: unemployed people aged under 25, over 50, long-term unemployed of any age, unemployed people with children aged under five, and people affected by a disability.²² Respondents supported more conditions for the young and long-term unemployed than for the other claimant groups, indicating that they were considered less deserving of ‘unearned’ income support. In the case of young and long-term unemployed people, the requirement to look for work had the highest support of any activity test requirement included in the survey. Work for the Dole was also strongly supported for the young and long-term unemployed, as were improving literacy skills and completing a ‘dole diary’. Undergoing a training program or doing useful community work was strongly supported for the young, older and long-term unemployed, and almost two-thirds agreed that young and long-term unemployed people should be required to accept any paid job offered (see Table A.4, Appendix A).

Some demographic groups were more supportive of mutual obligation requirements than others (see Table A.5, Appendix A). Multiple regression analysis was undertaken to investigate associations between support for such requirements and socio-economic characteristics (Saunders 2002). Support generally increased with respondents’ education and income levels—suggesting that those who were less likely to experience unemployment themselves were more supportive of such requirements. Women were significantly *more* likely to favour requirements—except for unemployed people with young children—while those aged over 50 were significantly *less* likely to support them, particularly with regard to

²² Information about the survey methodology was provided in the previous section.

the long-term unemployed and those with a disability. This suggests that respondents favoured greater ‘leniency’ towards those in situations which they were more likely to experience themselves. Young people, however, were no less likely to support mutual obligation requirements for the young unemployed than they were for other groups. People born in a non-English-speaking country were significantly less likely to support requirements than those born in Australia or another English-speaking country, which may be due to the average higher rate of unemployment among those from non-English-speaking countries (Thapa 2004). In addition, the higher respondents believed unemployment to be, the less likely they were to support requirements (Eardley et al. 2000: 26), suggesting that such respondents were more likely to attribute unemployment to economic conditions than to the actions or characteristics of individual unemployed people.

Most significantly for this thesis, support for young people being required to do Work for the Dole was high regardless of respondent characteristics, with almost all respondent groups scoring around 6.9 out of 9 on support for activity test requirements for the young unemployed. However, the currently unemployed were significantly less likely than other respondents to support mutual obligation requirements (including Work for the Dole) for all unemployed groups, including the young unemployed (scoring 5.8 for the latter group). The consistently high support for mutual obligation requirements for the young unemployed found in the survey, in contrast to varying degrees of support for such requirements for other groups of unemployed, suggests that the community views the young unemployed quite differently to other jobseekers. This is also consistent with earlier findings of Graetz (1987) (as discussed previously) that members of the workforce are much more likely to attribute youth unemployment, compared with unemployment generally, to characteristics of the unemployed themselves.

These findings may reflect a belief that significant numbers of young unemployed people do not share the mainstream values of older people—particularly the ‘work ethic’ (Beder 2000: 139–40). While Lackner (1998) has interviewed some young people who have chosen not to participate in paid work, other Australian research into young unemployed people’s work aspirations has found that the great majority strongly want to obtain work (Winefield, Tiggeman, Winefield, & Goldney 1993; Coventry & Bertone 1998; Winefield 1999). However, popular concerns about the young unemployed have apparently been fuelled by the media depictions of youthful ‘dole bludgers’ discussed above. In addition, public opinion

may have been partially influenced by research findings—publicised in the media by many researchers and politicians—that young people with insufficient education and training are ‘at risk’ of experiencing a wide range of social problems such as long-term unemployment, social exclusion and drug abuse (Bessant, Hil & Watts 2003). Youth researchers commonly argue that many young people are unable to make a successful transition to adulthood if they have insufficient skills to gain sustainable employment (for example, Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004). The public may view requirements for young people to undertake education, training or community work programs as a means of addressing this risk; the apparently strong support for mutual obligation requirements may be partly motivated by anxiety about the young unemployed, not punitive attitudes.

Saunders (2002a, 2002b) classified respondents to the 1999 SPRC survey as having ‘individualist’, ‘collectivist’ or ‘fatalist’ value systems, according to their responses to a series of attitudinal questions. Individualists generally agreed that those who were poor or unemployed ‘only have themselves to blame’ and that economic and social change ‘provides new opportunities and prospects’. In contrast, collectivists agreed that ‘too much emphasis is put on improving the economy and too little on creating a better society’, ‘people are poor because other people are rich’ and that ‘solving unemployment is the Government’s responsibility’. Finally, fatalists viewed economic and social change as a fact of life that had to be tolerated, and agreed that people were poor due to bad luck and that there ‘just aren’t enough jobs for all the people who want to work’ (Saunders 2002b: 32). As expected, Saunders found that individualists generally supported mutual obligation, while collectivists generally opposed it; these findings were strongly statistically significant. The findings for fatalists were less clear-cut, although they tended to oppose mutual obligation (Saunders 2002b: 35). These findings suggest that people who emphasise structural causes of and solutions to unemployment and other social problems are less likely to favour behavioural requirements for the unemployed than those who ascribe blame to individuals.

The Roy Morgan Research study also investigated Australians’ views about mutual obligation. The study involved 2,000 telephone interviews conducted nationwide in the year 2000, as well as ten focus groups in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Allowing for people who were excluded because they did not meet the quota criteria, the effective response rate was only 12.6 per cent (Roy Morgan Research 2000: 16)—this was far lower than that achieved in the SPRC study and may be less representative of the population as a

whole.²³ Consistent with the SPRC survey, Roy Morgan found widespread support for Work for the Dole. Seventy per cent of respondents agreed that unemployed payment recipients ‘should be required to do more than look for work in order to continue to receive their payment’, 77 per cent agreed that they ‘should be required to do something of benefit to the community in return for...payments’ and 71 per cent agreed with ‘unemployed people having to do work for the dole in return for payments’.

Unlike the SPRC study, however, support for Work for the Dole was weaker among younger respondents (58 per cent for 16 to 24 year-olds) and stronger among older respondents (82 per cent for those aged 65 per cent and over). But consistent with the SPRC study, people who had received unemployment payments during the last two years were less likely to agree that unemployed people should be required to do something of benefit to the community than those who had not received unemployment payments (65 per cent compared to 79 per cent). They were also less likely to support having to do Work for the Dole (Roy Morgan Research 2000: 29–32, 55–6).

The main reasons which respondents in the Roy Morgan survey provided for supporting Work for the Dole as a compulsory activity were that ‘no-one should get something for nothing’ (32 per cent of those who supported compulsion), ‘it’s good for people to have something to do’ (32 per cent) and ‘it does something for the community’ (10 per cent).²⁴ These responses are consistent with the government’s rationales for Work for the Dole—the first response reflects the contractual argument that unemployed people ‘owe’ something in exchange for payments, while the second reflects the paternalist argument that Work for the Dole benefits the unemployed themselves. It appears that the government’s rhetoric on Work for the Dole is generally consistent with majority community opinion.

For the 20 per cent of respondents who thought that Work for the Dole should be voluntary rather than compulsory, the main reasons given were that ‘people should have a choice’ (35 per cent), ‘forcing someone to do something could have a negative effect on them’ (14 per cent) and that ‘people have rights’ (10 per cent). The focus of these respondents was on the right of recipients to choose their activities, consistent with arguments of critics that Work for the Dole undermines personal autonomy. Most focus group participants ‘thought that

²³ Responses were weighted on the basis of age, location and gender characteristics of the general population (Roy Morgan Research 2000: 7).

²⁴ This question was open-ended, but coded into broad response types.

unemployed people should be able to choose from a range of activities, the one that was most suitable for them' (Roy Morgan Research 2000: 29, 57).

Notably, 54 per cent of respondents in the study *disagreed* and only 37 per cent agreed with the statement that 'people who are unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their unemployment payments', suggesting a possible point of difference with Abbott's rhetoric about 'job snobs'. Younger respondents expressed the least support for the statement, with 65 per cent of 16 to 24 year-olds disagreeing and 25 per cent agreeing (2000: 34–5). This contrasted with the SPRC finding that almost two-thirds supported the requirement that the young and long-term unemployed accept 'any paid job offered', but may indicate that this requirement is not supported for other groups of unemployed people.

The third major study of public attitudes to mutual obligation, the Middle Australia Project (MAP) directed by Michael Pusey, surveyed 400 'middle Australians' in 1996 and 1999 in five capital cities—two-thirds from Sydney and the remaining one-third from Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide (Pusey 2003: 194). The respondents were randomly selected from a sub-set of ABS collectors' districts with average household incomes between the 20th and the 90th percentile.²⁵ Analysis by Wilson and Turnbull of the MAP data indicates a toughening of 'middle Australian' attitudes towards the unemployed under the Howard Government, at least among the Sydney-dominated sample. A substantial minority of MAP respondents in 1996 attributed responsibility for unemployment to the unemployed themselves, and attitudes appeared to harden over the first three years of the Coalition Government. There was a statistically significant increase in the percentage of respondents who agreed that 'most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to', and also an increase in the percentage who agreed that 'most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another' (see Table A.6, Appendix A). In contrast, there was increased support for spending on 'welfare benefits for the poor' and appeared to be no hardening of attitudes to welfare recipients more generally.

Consistent with other studies, Wilson and Turnbull found that support for Work for the Dole for young people was markedly higher than for the unemployed generally (74.1 per cent compared to 54.6 per cent—see Table A.7, Appendix A). Like Graetz but unlike the Roy Morgan and SPRC surveys, the study also found that:

Respondents in manual and lower service occupations were more likely to support work for the dole for young people than respondents in professional, managerial and technical occupations. Respondents with vocational training were also more likely to support work for the dole for the young unemployed than respondents with either university or no higher education (Wilson & Turnbull 2001: 402).

These results may reflect the fact that the sample largely excludes the bottom 20 per cent of income earners, who may be less likely to support mutual obligation requirements than those in 'middle Australia', and the top 10 per cent, who may be more likely to support it. As Wilson and Turnbull point out, however, it does suggest that Howard's 'battlers' are attracted to the Coalition's rhetoric about Work for the Dole. While acknowledging Eardley and Matheson's hypothesis that attitudes about the unemployed tend to harden when unemployment is falling (as was the case between 1996 and 1999), Wilson and Turnbull argue that the Howard Government's wedge politics have also been a factor.

In summary, Australians appear to strongly support increased requirements for some groups of unemployed income support recipients, and particularly the young unemployed. There appears to be considerable support for the contractualist and paternalist rationales for mutual obligation. The research also suggests that people who favour structural explanations of unemployment are less likely to support mutual obligation requirements than those who ascribe blame to individuals, and that people are likely to favour greater 'leniency' towards those in situations which they may themselves experience—although this was not always the case. Views about the young unemployed are likely to have been influenced by media depictions of 'work shy' youth, but perhaps also by research findings that young people need more education and training to gain sustainable employment. Overall, there are apparent electoral advantages for the government in implementing and promoting a policy course which it already favours on philosophical grounds.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the Howard Government's mutual obligation policies contain elements of both contractualist and paternalist thinking. The government has combined a market liberal, contractualist approach to economic issues with a social conservatism which

²⁵ There was a response rate of about 20 per cent for the 1996 questionnaire and interviews, and 50 per cent of the 1996 participants responded to the follow-up survey in 1999.

advocates paternalist solutions to social problems. According to this approach, Work for the Dole ensures that the community ‘gets something back’ for its expenditure on unemployment payments. It also requires adaptation to the demands of ‘flexible labour markets’ by demonstrating to the unemployed that they have no choice but to work, even when ‘unemployed’. Mutual obligation has been heavily criticised by many social policy analysts and community organisations on a range of grounds, including that it imposes a one-sided ‘agreement’ on those with no alternative but to agree, individualises a structural problem, and does not provide effective assistance to the unemployed to gain work. However, the community broadly supports mutual obligation requirements for unemployed people, while also believing that unemployment has structural causes beyond the control of individual unemployed people and supporting government action to address these.

In the context of the above debate, this study was designed to assess mutual obligation in the light of the views of Work for the Dole participants themselves about the principle, with a particular focus on their views about their rights and obligations. The following chapter describes the methodology used to gain insight into participants’ views on these issues.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research focuses on the meanings unemployed people give to their experiences within the context of the socio-economic structures surrounding unemployment. The research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, with the aim of developing an analysis ‘grounded’ in the data. This chapter outlines the approach taken for the study and describes the methods of data collection and analysis employed, as well as the methodological issues encountered during the course of research. First an overview of the methodological approach and the stages of fieldwork is provided, followed by discussion of each stage. This is followed by an outline of the methods of data analysis employed, and the characteristics of participants involved in the study.

Methodological approach

The focus on the experience of Work for the Dole participants suggested a need for a methodological approach which pays attention to how individuals understand and interpret their own experience. The research design was premised on the view that understanding participants’ perceptions of Work for the Dole is important in analysing the scheme, but that Work for the Dole operates in economic, political and social contexts which may be opaque to participants, yet are also important to analysis. Thus, the approach taken was ‘interpretive while still recognising the power of social structures’ (Silverman 1985: 30). Accordingly, the meanings participants gave to such concepts as mutual obligation and the right and obligation to work were a central focus of analysis, but were placed in the context of the changes in income support and labour market programs for unemployed people in recent decades and the political and public policy debate over the mutual obligation principle. The possible impact of structural issues such as the influence of gender, ethnicity and skill level was also analysed, although participants rarely made such connections themselves.

Given that little research has previously been undertaken on unemployed people’s views about mutual obligation, the study could also be characterised as aiming to develop

‘grounded’ theory—that is, the research did not predominantly set out to test pre-existing theory, but rather to develop theory from the data gathered (Glaser & Strauss 1967). However, the research was not a pure example of a grounded theory approach, as some pre-existing alternative claims made in the policy debate over Work for the Dole *were* tested. These included the claim that Work for the Dole benefits participants, and the opposing claims that it is not beneficial or actually has a negative impact on participants. Nevertheless—consistent with the grounded theory approach—the research also asked open questions about participants’ views about their rights and obligations as jobseekers and aimed to develop categories and connections grounded in their responses. These questions included, for example: What value do participants attach to paid work? What kinds of paid work and working conditions are unacceptable to them? and What do participants believe are their rights and obligations as unemployed people? The use of focus groups and interviews assisted in this process by enabling respondents to discuss their experiences, values and beliefs in an exploratory way.

As discussed in the final chapter, the research identified three main contrasting orientations to the concept of mutual obligation among participants—an autonomy orientation, a disciplinary orientation and an outcomes orientation. These conceptual approaches can be linked to the literature about mutual obligation, various strands of which also highlight issues of autonomy, discipline and employment outcomes. This literature did, of course, influence the interpretation of participants’ responses, but the research was not initially designed with a specific focus on these concepts. Rather, this focus developed following analysis of the survey questionnaires and focus group discussions, when it became apparent that participants’ responses could be usefully conceptualised in this way. The interviews enabled related ideas to be investigated—for example, given the value some participants placed on their need for autonomy when discussing Work for the Dole, did they also place value on autonomy when it come to making decisions about paid work? Given the focus of some on the need for discipline in the income support system, what kind of conditions did they believe should be placed on income support recipients? And given the focus of others on a lack of employment outcomes from Work for the Dole, what did participants think should be done to help the unemployed get work?

The research was carried out in two stages, drawing on a range of methods. Following initial enrolment in a Masters degree, stage one fieldwork was undertaken during 1998 and 1999.

This stage included preparatory interviews with Work for the Dole project managers and participants and a survey of 87 participants, followed by focus group discussions with 59 of these participants. A short follow-up telephone survey was also conducted with 30 of the initial survey participants. Following the upgrade to a PhD, a second stage of fieldwork was conducted in 2002; this comprised in-depth interviews with a new sample of 37 participants (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Stages of fieldwork

Stage 1		<i>N</i>
January–May 1999	Survey	87
January–May 1999	Focus groups	59
November 1999	Follow-up telephone survey	30
Stage 2		
July–September 2002	Interviews	37

The fieldwork thus combined several quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, providing a fuller picture of the issues being investigated than could have been obtained by one method alone (Bryman 1988: 137–40). These methods were selected pragmatically, based on assessments about their usefulness and feasibility at each stage of the research. While the survey provided the most representative method of indicating the prevalence of different views, the interviews provided more insight into these views, and the focus groups enabled debate among participants and highlighted differences in perspectives. The combination of these data collection methods also strengthened the validity of the findings through ‘triangulation’—that is, the use of different methods to enable ‘mutual confirmation’ (Bryman 1988: 131). However, due to the three and a half year time gap between the first and second stages of fieldwork, the stage two data was collected from a different group of Work for the Dole participants and after modifications had been made to the program. This lessened the extent to which the findings could be described as ‘triangulated’, although the findings of the two stages were markedly consistent.²⁶

²⁶ Due, in particular, to the different methods used to select the stage one and stage two samples (the first being randomly selected whereas the latter was a purposive sample, as discussed later in this chapter), it is not argued that program modifications had *no effect* on participant attitudes.

The following sections describe the different components of the fieldwork, before discussing data analysis and participant characteristics.

Stage one

Preparatory interviews

The first stage of fieldwork investigated participants' experience of Work for the Dole and their views about the moral issues surrounding the program, and compared these with the views of government and critics of the scheme and available data about community attitudes. Fieldwork commenced with preparatory interviews with Work for the Dole project managers conducted between September 1998 and January 1999. The aim was to gain familiarity with issues surrounding the program from the perspective of those involved and to refine the research questions. Interviews were conducted with nine project managers of pilot Work for the Dole projects located in the Melbourne metropolitan region, Geelong and Ballarat. Structured interviews of about 30 minutes were conducted, with questions covering background information about the sponsor organisation, the project manager's experience of running their project and their views about Work for the Dole.

The interviews highlighted several issues that were investigated in the subsequent survey and focus group discussions. These included the challenges of managing compulsory participants and the issue of incentives versus compulsion to participate in programs. Another issue was the grey line between voluntary and compulsory participation—several project managers commented that in the context of mutual obligation requirements it was unclear who had 'volunteered' to take part in their project.

Permission was sought from project managers to speak to participants, and pilot interviews with participants then commenced. The original plan was to interview all participants in the study, as open-ended questions are more suited to interviews than to written questionnaires. Interviews enable more in-depth information to be collected about participants' opinions and many people find it easier to express their ideas verbally. By contrast, written questionnaires require the use of forced-choice questions and consequently pre-structure participants' responses (de Vaus 1995: 86). As de Vaus comments:

A major problem of forced-choice questions is that on some issues they can create false opinions either by giving an insufficient range of alternatives from which to choose or by prompting people with 'acceptable' answers. Further, the forced-choice approach is not very good at taking into account people's qualifiers to the answers they tick (1995: 86).

However, the pilot of the interview schedule suggested that the use of interviews could substantially bias the sample. When participants were sought from a Work for the Dole group, six people (about one-third of the group) volunteered. All were voluntary participants in Work for the Dole, even though—according to the project manager—there was a substantial proportion of compulsory participants in the project. This pilot and discussions with project managers suggested that non-voluntary Work for the Dole participants would be less likely to volunteer to participate in a research interview.

As part of the aim of the project was to obtain, as far as practicable, a representative sample of Work for the Dole participants in Melbourne and Geelong, the planned interviews were replaced with a written questionnaire and focus groups. Several steps were taken to reduce the disadvantages of written questionnaires. Responses to the initial six interviews were used to develop a pilot questionnaire, which was then tested on a group of eight participants and further refined. In addition, focus group discussions with survey participants were conducted following the survey; these provided further insight into participants' views and their qualifiers to their survey responses.

Participant selection

One important question in fieldwork design was how best to contact potential participants. Contacting participants by mail was ruled out because to maintain client confidentiality sponsor organisations could not provide the researcher with names and addresses of participants. Although Centrelink or sponsor organisations could have been asked to mail surveys to participants on the sponsors' behalf, this would have required the support of Centrelink and/or sponsors, with possible bureaucratic difficulties. Unemployment payment recipients may have also been averse to filling in 'yet another form', resulting in a low response rate.

Contacting participants by visiting project sites was a more straightforward method and likely to produce a higher response rate. For this reason, the questionnaire was administered on-site at projects, and this did produce a very high response rate; only two Work for the Dole

participants at the projects visited declined to take part, while 87 people participated in total. The shorter, more anonymous form of the written questionnaire was less demanding than the interview format, and participants were more willing to do the survey in a group context—instead of asking individuals to volunteer, people were asked if they wanted to ‘opt out’ of a group activity.

The decision to visit project sites necessitated choices about the projects to be selected. Given time and resource constraints, the research was limited to a sample of all projects run by the 26 sponsor organisations funded in the Melbourne metropolitan region and Geelong as part of the 1998 Work for the Dole funding round. From these, nine projects run by seven sponsor organisations were selected using the following criteria:

1. They had been running for at least two months, to enable survey participants to base their responses on sufficient experience of the project.²⁷
2. At least eight participants were likely to be present at the project site on any one day, to reduce time taken on site visits. Many projects did not meet this criterion—particularly in the last three months of project operation, when participants leaving the project could not be replaced.²⁸
3. The project was not ethno-specific, as issues specific to particular migrant groups were beyond the scope of the research.²⁹

All sponsors running projects which met the above criteria were asked if they would take part in the research, and all agreed to participate. A variety of project types were included in the sample, including revegetation, renovation/restoration work, craftwork, and the production of information publications for local communities and for businesses. However, projects in which a small number of participants (often only one) were placed in organisations such as schools, child care centres and community organisations were not included due to time limitations. The study’s findings may not be generalisable to these kinds of projects, which are likely to provide a different experience for participants than that provided by projects in which a group of Work for the Dole participants work together. They may also not be generalisable to the smaller group projects which were excluded from

²⁷ Of participants surveyed, 31 per cent had been doing their project for less than three months, 40 per cent for three or four months and 29 per cent for five or six months.

²⁸ The two sponsor organisations based on the Mornington Peninsula were also excluded to reduce time taken on site visits.

²⁹ Four funded projects were run by ethno-specific community organisations.

the sample because there were unlikely to have eight people present at the time of the site visit. Such projects may also have offered a different experience for participants than those with larger numbers, particularly as supervisors may have been able to provide more individual attention and assistance to participants. Conversely, smaller projects may have provided fewer social benefits for participants.

Questionnaire design and administration

The questionnaire was administered on-site at nine projects between January and May 1999. It comprised 44 questions and took participants 20 to 40 minutes to complete; questions were predominantly closed-response but included six open-ended questions (a copy is included as Appendix B). The researcher visited Work for the Dole sites and explained to project participants as a group what the survey involved, stressing that the research was independent of Centrelink and the organisation running the project and was voluntary and confidential. All those who were willing to participate were then asked to fill in the questionnaire.³⁰

While the survey had a very high participation rate, it did not capture the views of people who had never attended a project they were referred to, had left the project before the date of the survey or were not there the day the researcher visited. Because of this, it probably under-represented the views of people who object to the requirement to do Work for the Dole. Although data is not available on the number of participants who had been breached for not attending the specific projects surveyed, national data provides a broad indication of the extent to which people referred to Work for the Dole projects were breached during the relevant period. About 7,800 breaches had been recorded to March 1999 on all Work for the Dole projects, with about half the breaches resulting from the jobseeker failing to attend a Work for the Dole interview, and 45 per cent from failing to start or leaving during the course of the project (DEWRSB, 1999: 30). By comparison, 22,000 people had taken part in Work for the Dole by mid-1999. Although these statistics do not cover exactly comparable periods of time, they indicate that for every three people that took part in Work for the Dole during the period covered by the survey, at least one person was breached for failing to participate or for leaving their project.³¹ This suggests that a substantial proportion of income support

³⁰ The researcher remained present throughout to address any questions from participants. Project supervisors were asked to leave prior to participants completing the questionnaire, in case their presence affected participants' responses; all project managers except two did so.

³¹ Some people would, of course, be counted as both participants and as having been breached.

recipients required to do Work for the Dole were not undertaking it; the present research does not encompass the views of this group.

Focus groups

Following completion of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they would like to take part in a confidential discussion about issues covered in the questionnaire. Those who did not wish to participate left the room and the focus group was then conducted. Eight focus group discussions were held with a total of 59 Work for the Dole participants from eight projects; all discussions were recorded for later analysis, with participants' consent. A list of questions was used to focus the discussion on specified topics (a copy is included as Appendix C).

The focus group discussions enabled participants to debate issues and highlighted the complexity of some of their views, as will be discussed in Chapter 11. The fact that participants had already completed a questionnaire enabled them to consider their own ideas before being asked to discuss them in front of other participants. This is likely to have helped individual participants to express their views, particularly when they differed from dominant members of a group; 'group think' being a potential drawback of focus groups. To address another potential problem—lack of active participation among the 'quieter' members of a group—questions were also sometimes directed specifically to members of the group who had not yet spoken on a topic (Fontana & Frey 2003: 73; Sarantakos 1998: 185).

Follow-up survey

A short follow-up survey was conducted by telephone six months after the initial survey and focus group discussions, mainly to track whether participants had gained work. As part of the first survey, participants were informed that the follow-up survey would be conducted after project completion and asked to provide their contact details if they were interested in participating. Thirty-five participants, together with six participants from the pilot survey, provided contact details.

The follow-up survey was undertaken in November 1999, six to ten months after participants were initially surveyed. The survey sought information about any work, training or education which participants had undertaken since completing their Work for the Dole project, any assistance received from Job Network providers, and whether participants' views of doing the

program had changed. Participants who did not want to take part in the full follow-up survey were asked if they were willing to answer ‘three quick questions’; these covered whether they had obtained any paid work since doing the program, and if so, whether they thought participating in the program had helped them to gain that work.

In total, 30 participants (73 per cent of those who had provided contact details, or 32 per cent of the total sample) took part in the follow-up survey. Of these, 25 did the full survey and five the ‘three quick questions’, one person refused to do the survey, and ten people could not be contacted.³² While the follow-up group were a relatively small sub-sample of the original (differences between the initial and follow-up samples are discussed in Appendix D), it provided some indication of the extent to which the program had assisted the sample in achieving work goals.

Stage two

As was previously outlined, a second stage of research was conducted following the upgrade to a PhD. Whereas the first stage of the research had focussed on Work for the Dole, the second stage looked at mutual obligation requirements more generally and at connections between participants’ views about mutual obligation and their values concerning work. This involved expansion of the scope of the study to explore participants’ experience of work and work values, their experience of job search requirements and of ‘breaching’, and their beliefs about their rights and obligations. The stage two fieldwork was conducted between July and September 2002 and involved a new sample of 37 participants in six Work for the Dole projects.

Project selection

Projects included in stage two were selected with the aim of including a variety of project types in different regions of Melbourne, with participants of varied ages and different opinions about mutual obligation. The sample can thus be described as purposive—it was not random but instead designed to include cases with a range of characteristics which would be the subject of analysis (de Vaus 2002a: 90). It was not possible to contact projects directly, as unlike during stage one the DEWRSB website did not include contacts for individual

³² In most of these cases the telephone number provided had been disconnected or the person had moved and forwarding details could not be obtained.

projects.³³ Projects were selected from a DEWRSB list of Victorian Community Work Coordinators (CWCs) and Work for the Dole projects; seven Melbourne-based CWCs across several Melbourne regions were contacted, of which three agreed to participate.³⁴ The lower response rate than the first stage of research was perhaps due to the lack of direct contact with projects and the fact that the program was now well established and some research had already been conducted, thus reducing coordinators' interest in participating.

The three CWCs which agreed to participate were each responsible for several Work for the Dole projects. The six projects selected were located in western, northern, south-eastern and outer-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, and involved revegetation, arts-based, trades-based, office and IT work.

Short questionnaire and selection for interview

The selection process for interviews involved administration of a short questionnaire at each project site. The questionnaire asked respondents ten questions about their experience of and views about Work for the Dole, as well as their age and sex and contact details if they were interested in being interviewed (a copy of the questionnaire is included as Appendix E). On the basis of the initial participant interviews conducted during stage one, it was expected that without rewards for participation few participants would volunteer to be interviewed and that the sample would not represent a cross-section of views; to both encourage participation in interviews and to recognise participants' contributions, \$20 was offered to each interviewee.

The questionnaire was administered on-site at six projects between July and September 2002, using the same procedure as the previous survey. Seventy participants—almost all of those present at project sites—completed the questionnaire. Of these, two-thirds (46 in total) volunteered to undertake an interview. This was a higher rate of volunteering than occurred for the pilot interviews undertaken during stage one, when only a third of project participants volunteered for an interview. In addition, identical proportions of those who supported compulsory participation in Work for the Dole and those who opposed it volunteered to be interviewed—in contrast to stage one, when all six interviewees supported compulsion. The

³³ In 2000 the government began funding CWCs 'to manage the placement of eligible jobseekers into Work for the Dole placements' (DEWRSB 1999c: 1). These intermediary organisations became the primary point of contact for unemployed people to access projects.

³⁴ Of those who did not participate, one did not have participants located as a group at one site, one did not reply, one received no response from sponsor organisations, and one said that it would need to seek permission from DEWRSB to participate.

higher response rate in stage two may have been due to payments being provided during stage two but not stage one. It may also be partially attributable to participants' initial completion of the questionnaire, which could have provided a better sense of what the research was about and increased respondents' confidence in volunteering.³⁵

Out of the 46 volunteers, 40 were selected for interview, with the aim of achieving as far as possible a sample with a balance of male and female participants, different age groups, and people with different views about Work for the Dole. The intention was to gain a sufficient number of people within each group to be able to compare their responses; information about the demographic characteristics of the sample is provided later in this chapter.

Interviews

Interview questions were open-ended and were designed to explore participants' experience of work and mutual obligation requirements, their work values, and their beliefs about their rights and obligations as unemployed people (for the research questions, see Appendix F). The use of in-depth interviews enabled more complex questions to be asked than would be possible in a survey questionnaire, as the interviewer was able to clarify questions, correct misunderstandings and to probe when responses were incomplete or unclear. Interviews could also collect more information than could a survey questionnaire, as participants are usually less willing to complete a long questionnaire than a long interview (Sarantakos 1998: 266–7).

To draw out relevant themes, participants were asked to talk about their particular experiences of work and of income support. They were also asked about their views regarding their rights and obligations to work and their rights to unemployment payments. Other questions covered their views about job search requirements and the requirement to participate in Work for the Dole, and about any experience of being penalised for not meeting payment conditions. A copy of the interview question schedule is included as Appendix G.

Participants were interviewed on-site during project time, in a separate room from other project participants. Interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes, and averaged about 55

³⁵ Participants at the project site visited for the stage one interviews may also have had a higher than average reluctance to participate in interviews—willingness to participate in interviews varied markedly between project groups, with three of the seven groups visited for the stage two interviews also having volunteer rates of only about one-third.

minutes; all were taped with the consent of participants, and then transcribed. Of the 40 interviews undertaken, 37 were usable for analysis.³⁶

The original intention was to also interview about ten people who had refused to participate in Work for the Dole, with the aim of investigating whether their views differed from Work for the Dole participants. However, it was subsequently decided to maintain the focus of the research on the latter group. This was due to a combination of the likely difficulty in accessing people who had refused to do Work for the Dole, and the hypothesis that they were likely to be a group with a different relationship to Centrelink than Work for the Dole participants. Given their ability to remain outside the income support system—at least temporarily—they may as a group be less dependent on unemployment payments. They may have more access to income from employment, a partner, parents or other sources, although some may rely on charity. While a study of this group would itself be valuable, the focus of this study was on the views of those who were dependent on income support and thus to some extent compelled to meet the requirements attached to receipt of such support.

Data analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods was used to analyse the survey questionnaires and transcripts produced from the fieldwork. Quantitative analysis was undertaken using SPSS statistical software, while qualitative analysis of interview transcripts utilised NVivo 2.0 software; this section outlines the methods employed.

Survey responses were coded and analysed using SPSS. Cross-tabulations were produced to investigate whether participants differed in their responses depending on their characteristics, whether they wanted to do their Work for the Dole project and whether they saw it as relevant to the jobs they were seeking, using measures of association recommended by de Vaus (1995). Responses to open-ended survey questions and comments during focus group discussions were also organised and analysed thematically, without the use of qualitative analysis software. Thematic categories used were primarily derived from the data, rather than existing theory (Glaser & Strauss (1967: 37). However, some key concepts from the literature were used to focus analysis; these included new paternalism (Mead 1997a), covering themes

³⁶ Two interviews could not be used due to recording problems, and one because the interviewee could not understand English sufficiently to participate meaningfully.

around the claimed benefits for participants of activity and work tests; autonomy (Yeatman 2000b), covering themes around the need for individual choice and self-determination; and contract (Kinnear 2000; Moss 2001), covering themes relating to the reciprocal obligations of governments and individuals.

Stage two interviews were thematically coded and analysed using NVivo 2.0. Codes were developed by analysing transcripts paragraph by paragraph to identify various themes relevant to each research question; some passages were coded with more than one theme. Thematic categories were periodically reviewed during the course of coding; in cases when very few passages were labelled with a code, it was sometimes collapsed into a larger theme. In other cases, comments with the same code were too conceptually distinct and the code was subdivided or passages were recoded to other themes.

NVivo 2.0 was also used to analyse differences in the views of those of different age group, sex, ethnicity, education levels, skill levels of previous work, and length of unemployment. Where differences were apparent between different groups, further analysis was undertaken to investigate whether these differences appeared to hold regardless of variations in other characteristics. For example, men and women varied in their responses in a number of ways. In some cases this appeared to be due to the higher average education and skill level of the men in the sample relative to the women—when men and women of similar skill level were compared, the differences were much less marked. In other cases the differences were not attributable to different skill levels.

The research identified several ‘public narratives’ which participants used to organise and give meaning to their experiences (Somers & Gibson 1994). As Hinchman and Hinchman (2001: xvii) comment, ‘the stories that individuals create often strike variations upon a repertoire of socially available narratives’: in this research these included the indifferent, error-ridden bureaucracy, the amoral business and, most prominently, the dole bludger. Ezzy (1998: 247) discusses how the basic values of a society influence individuals’ stories about their own lives by providing ‘culturally acceptable plots’; for participants, it was culturally acceptable to criticise uncaring businesses and bureaucracy and inadequate government action to address unemployment, but unacceptable to ‘give up’ the demoralising search for work. Participants were culturally expected to present themselves as still motivated to seek work and regularly doing so, thus differentiating themselves from ‘dole bludgers’. As will be discussed

in later chapters, many participants employed these narratives to justify their moral viewpoints on unemployment and mutual obligation, and most—though not all—participants shared the expectations built into these narratives.

In summary, the research drew on a range of methods and was informed by grounded theory, although it was not a pure example of such an approach. It involved thematic analysis which considered responses overall as well as differences between participants with different characteristics. Before discussing the findings of this analysis, the remainder of this chapter will discuss the demographic characteristics of research participants.

Participant characteristics

Stage one

This section describes the characteristics of participants in stage one, including their age, sex, ethnicity and education levels; their previous employment and length of unemployment will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The characteristics of survey participants are compared with national Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB) data for participants who had commenced pilot projects as at January 1999 (DEWRSB 1999: 14). The DEWRSB data does not provide an exact comparison to the present survey, which sampled Melbourne and Geelong-based participants from the first round of Work for the Dole projects *following* the pilot. However, it indicates that characteristics of the sample were broadly similar to Work for the Dole participants as a whole.

There were more male than female participants in the survey: 62 per cent of participants were male and 38 per cent were female. This was consistent with the general preponderance of men in Work for the Dole: nationally, 68 per cent of participants in the pilot projects were male and 32 per cent were female (DEWRSB 1999). One clear contributing factor was that there were more young unemployed men than women—in July 1999, shortly after the survey was conducted, 56 per cent of unemployed 15 to 24 year-olds were male and 44 per cent female (ABS 1999).³⁷ Survey participants outside the target age group (that is, aged 25 or over) were even more likely to be male—82 per cent were male and 18 per cent female. The

³⁷ Using the ABS definition of unemployment—not all would have qualified for or been receiving unemployment payments, and those who were working a few hours a week and receiving payments would not have been defined by the ABS as unemployed.

national data shows that during the pilot round few women aged 25 and over volunteered for Work for the Dole. This perhaps reflected a perception on the part of some women that the program involved traditionally male types of work such as revegetation and renovation projects; such a perception was noted in the *Evaluation of the Work for the Dole Pilot Programme* (DEWRSB 1999: 18).³⁸ For this reason, women may have been more likely to arrange alternative activities such as study or voluntary work in preference to undertaking Work for the Dole.

Eighty-seven per cent of survey participants were aged between 18 and 24—the target age range of the pilot Work for the Dole program.³⁹ Twenty-nine per cent were aged 18 to 20; 58 per cent were aged 20 to 24, and 13 per cent were aged 25 or over. The sample was somewhat older than national participants in the pilot projects—42 per cent of such participants were aged 18 to 20, 48 per cent were aged 21 to 24 and 10 per cent were aged 25 or over.

Survey participants were predominantly Australian-born, with less than one in ten born in a non-English-speaking country. Eight-eight per cent of survey participants were Australian-born, 5 per cent were born in another main English-speaking country,⁴⁰ and 8 per cent in a non-English-speaking country. It is likely that the proportion born in a non-English-speaking country would have been higher if ethno-specific projects had been included in the sample; however, the figure is higher than the corresponding national figure for the pilot round of only 5 per cent. Most participants had parents born in Australia—73 per cent of mothers and 59 per cent of fathers—but a substantial proportion had one or both parents born overseas.⁴¹

Like the unemployed generally, participants had lower average educational levels than the community as a whole (ABS 2004): 62 per cent of survey participants had not finished Year 12. However, only a small minority (8 per cent) had not completed Year 10, and most participants had undertaken courses after leaving school. Thirty per cent had completed a trade certificate or apprenticeship, 29 per cent another non-tertiary qualification, and 5

³⁸ Women participants in the current study were also less likely than men to have been given a choice of projects they could do—52 per cent of women said they were given a choice, compared to 69 per cent of men.

³⁹ Under initial program guidelines at least 80 per cent of participants had to fall within this range, and people over this age could not be required to participate.

⁴⁰ As defined by the ABS (1998), the main English-speaking countries comprise the United Kingdom, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and Canada.

⁴¹ Twelve per cent had a mother and 18 per cent a father born in another main English-speaking country, while 16 per cent of mothers and 22 per cent of fathers were born in a non-English-speaking country.

per cent had a degree or diploma, while 36 per cent of participants had no post-school qualification.⁴² For most participants (65 per cent), Work for the Dole was the first training or work placement program they had undertaken; 33 per cent had previously undertaken a training or work placement program for the unemployed.

Stage two

The proportions of men and women in the interview sample were identical to the survey sample: 62 per cent were male and 38 per cent female. However, the interview sample was older, as compulsory participation in Work for the Dole or another ‘mutual obligation activity’ had been extended to the age of 49, and the sample selection aimed to include a spread of ages. Half of the interview sample were aged under 25 and half over 25: nine were aged 18 to 20, ten were aged 21 to 24, eight were aged 25 to 39, and ten were aged 40 to 49 years.

Compared to the survey sample, a higher proportion of the interview sample were from non-English-speaking (NES) backgrounds. Nineteen per cent of interview participants were born in an NES country (compared to 8 per cent of the survey sample), while a further 19 per cent were born in Australia of parents who were both born in an NES country. Only 43 per cent had a mother and 41 per cent a father born in Australia (compared to 73 per cent and 59 respectively in the survey sample).

The reasons for this difference between the survey and interview samples were unclear: it was not attributable to the higher average age of the interview sample, as older interview participants were less likely to be from NES backgrounds.⁴³ Nor was it attributable to the inclusion of ethno-specific projects in the interview sample—although one project was run by an ethno-specific group, it did not have markedly more participants from NES backgrounds than other projects in the sample. There may have been a higher than average participation of people from NES backgrounds in the projects selected for stage two, or a higher proportion of people from such backgrounds may have volunteered to take part in an interview. As the short questionnaire participants completed did not ask for information about participants’

⁴² By comparison, in 2004, 16 per cent of the general population of working age had a skilled vocational qualification, 9 per cent a basic vocational qualification, 27 per cent a degree or diploma, and 46 per cent had no non-school qualification (ABS 2004: 19).

⁴³ Thirty-one per cent of participants aged over 25 were either born in a non-English-speaking country or had parents who were both born in a non-English-speaking country, compared to 45 per cent of participants aged 18 to 24.

ethnicity, a comparison of the ethnic backgrounds of those who did and did not volunteer was unfortunately not possible.

Interviewees had higher education levels than stage one survey participants. Half had completed Year 12, while only 5 per cent had not completed Year 10 (compared to 38 per cent and 8 per cent respectively for the survey sample). Only one interviewee had completed an apprenticeship, but 49 per cent had another vocational certificate, 16 per cent a diploma and 22 per cent a degree. Only 22 per cent of interview participants had no post-school qualifications. The more educated nature of the interview sample is likely to have been due to the inclusion of a higher number of participants involved in office-based and IT projects in stage two—education levels of participants in these projects were higher than for projects involving manual work.

Three projects included in the interview sample were located in the western suburbs, and one each in the northern, south-eastern, and outer-eastern suburbs.⁴⁴ Consequently, half of the participants—49 per cent—lived in the western suburbs, while 22 per cent lived in the northern suburbs, 22 per cent in the south-eastern suburbs, 5 per cent in the outer-eastern suburbs and 2 per cent in the north-eastern suburbs.

Conclusion

In summary, this study aimed to investigate Work for the Dole participants' beliefs about work, unemployment and mutual obligation through a variety of methods, enabling a fuller picture of participants' perceptions to be developed than would have been possible with the use of one data collection method alone. The study aimed to develop a 'grounded' analysis based on the experience and views of those subject to mutual obligation requirements, and also drew on the concept of 'narrative analysis' to interpret participants' stories. However, participants' perspectives were also analysed in the context of the political and public policy debate over the mutual obligation principle discussed in the previous chapter, and the apparent influences of participant characteristics such as age, gender and skill level. The following chapters discuss the findings of this analysis.

⁴⁴ Only interview participants were asked in which region they lived.

CHAPTER 5

'IN CONTROL OF YOUR OWN LIFE': EXPERIENCE AND EXPECTATIONS OF WORK

Introduction

As was discussed in Chapter 3, it appears that many Australians believe that a substantial number of unemployed people do not want to work and that qualifying for unemployment payments should not be seen as 'too easy' nor being on payments 'too comfortable'. In addition, former Minister for Employment Tony Abbott has claimed that Australia 'risks breeding a generation of job snobs—people who are prepared to work but only on their own terms' (Abbott 1999). This study was designed in part to address these issues by investigating the value unemployed people placed on work, what they sought in work, and their experiences of employment. For this reason, participants were asked a series of questions about past jobs, their benefits and drawbacks, and the work they were seeking. Their responses are discussed in this chapter.

Previous employment

The great majority of stage one survey participants had previously worked, many for substantial periods. Eighty-two per cent had previously held a paid job, 26 per cent a voluntary job and 11 per cent had worked without pay in a family business; only 12 per cent had not worked at all. Of those who had previously held a paid job, over half (57 per cent) had held their last job for six months or more, and almost half (46 per cent) had worked full-time in their last job. In addition, 45 per cent of survey participants had worked for at least twelve months in the last three years, and 35 per cent for at least 18 months (see Table 5.1 and 5.2). Similarly, a very high proportion of participants in the stage two interviews—92 per cent—had also previously had paid work.⁴⁵ The somewhat higher proportion of interviewees with work experience compared to the survey participants is attributable to the older sample—half of the interview sample were aged under 25 and half over 25, whereas 87 per cent of survey participants were aged under 25.

Clearly, the two samples of Work for the Dole participants had substantial previous experience of work, suggesting that one of the main stated objectives of Work for the Dole—‘to develop work habits’ (DEETYA 1998: 2; Australian Government 2004a: 6)—may have had little relevance for them. However, a few participants said that they needed to *re-adjust* to a work routine after a period of unemployment, and Work for the Dole may have assisted them to do this.

Table 5.1: Months survey participants had paid work in last three years

No. of months	0	1–5	6–11	12–17	18–23	24–29	30–36	Total ⁴⁶
No. of respondents	19	9	16	10	11	9	6	80
%	24	11	20	13	14	11	8	100

Table 5.2: Months survey participants held last paid job

No. of months	1–5	6–11	12–17	18–23	24–29	30–36	>36	Total ⁴⁷
No. of respondents	29	20	6	2	7	0	3	67
%	43	30	9	3	10	0	5	100

Among survey participants who had previously held a paid job, casual employment was a common experience, and most had left their last job due to being laid off or no longer required. Fifty-seven per cent reported that their last job was casual and 38 per cent that it was permanent (that is, that paid leave was provided).⁴⁸ The most common reasons survey participants nominated for leaving their last job were being ‘sacked/laid off’ (29 per cent), or that it was a ‘temporary/seasonal job’ (20 per cent)⁴⁹—together indicating that half of the

⁴⁵ Interview participants were not asked how long they had worked in their last job or in the previous three years.

⁴⁶ Seven respondents did not answer this question.

⁴⁷ Five respondents did not answer this question and fifteen had not previously held a paid job.

⁴⁸ One participant did not know whether their job was casual or permanent.

⁴⁹ Participants were asked to nominate the *main* reason from a list of pre-defined responses; this list was based on categories used in a participants’ survey of the JobSkills program undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Grieves 1995; survey provided to the researcher by the Brotherhood of St Laurence).

participants had left due to a decision by their employer. The next most frequent reasons nominated were ‘not satisfied with the hours/conditions’ (12 per cent) and ‘dispute with the boss’ (11 per cent). Dissatisfaction with pay was much less common as a reason for leaving, nominated by only 5 per cent of respondents (see Table 5.3).

Like the survey participants, stage two interviewees had most often left previous jobs due to a decision by their employer. The most common reasons reported were staff cuts or business closure (over 40 per cent of those who had worked had left at least one previous job for this reason) and not being further required (a third said they had ceased a casual or short-term job for this reason). Other common reasons, each given by a quarter of interviewees, were stress or physical health problems caused by the job, and problems with a supervisor. A fifth had left at least one previous job due to dissatisfaction with pay (see Table 5.4).⁵⁰

Table 5.3: Main reason survey participants left last job

	No. of respondents ⁵¹	%
Sacked/laid off	19	29
Temporary/seasonal job	13	20
Not satisfied with hours/conditions	8	12
Dispute with the boss	7	11
Didn't get on with co-workers	4	6
To study	4	6
Not satisfied with pay	3	5
Moved	2	3
Illness	2	3
More than one reason given	4	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>100</i>

⁵⁰ Categories differ from survey participants because they were developed based on participants' answers to an open-response question.

⁵¹ Six respondents did not answer this question and fifteen had not previously held a paid job.

Table 5.4: Reasons interviewees left previous jobs

	No. of interviewees	%
Staff cuts/business closure	14	41
Temporary/not further required	11	29
Health problems/stress from job	9	26
Problems with supervisor	9	26
Not satisfied with pay	7	21
Got better job	5	15
To study	5	15
Health problems not caused by job	4	12
Not satisfied with hours	4	12
Travel required	4	12
Moved	4	12
Problems with co-workers	3	9
Boredom	3	9
Family reasons	3	9
Other	5	15

Interviewees were asked why they had left each of their previous jobs. Does not total to 100% as multiple responses were included.⁵²

n=34

In summary, many participants in both stages one and two of this study had experienced a pattern of unemployment alternating with periods of insecure and/or part-time employment, as now affects substantial numbers of young people and unemployed people more generally (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004; Le & Miller 1999). It appears that participants most often left jobs because they were no longer required by their employer—not because they chose to leave—suggesting that many moved from employment to unemployment out of circumstance rather than choice. Those who *had* chosen to leave jobs were most often prompted by

⁵² Responses have been presented as a percentage of all *respondents*, rather than of all responses, because the latter approach—while it would enable totalling to 100 per cent—would not provide a clear indication of what proportion of all respondents provided each response.

problems with supervisors, poor health or stress, which appeared to be more significant for the sample than pay levels. These findings are consistent with recent UK research undertaken by Stephen Taylor of Manchester Metropolitan University, in which the most common reason the 200 interviewees gave for leaving an employer was having a poor manager, and relatively few left due to low pay (Nixon 2003). As will be further discussed below, participants in the current research placed particular value on good workplace relationships, although there were a range of other benefits they also gained from work.

The value of work

Previous Australian research into young unemployed peoples' work aspirations has found that the great majority strongly want to obtain work (Winefield, Tiggeman, Winefield & Goldney 1993; Coventry & Bertone 1998; Winefield 1999). Indeed, research commissioned by Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business which examined the 'work involvement' of Work for the Dole participants (that is, the importance to them of having a job) found that 'the level of work involvement was so high that there was little room for improvement' (Winefield 1999: 3). UK research has also found a strong commitment to work among the young unemployed; for example, several UK studies undertaken on the views of participants in the New Deal for Young People (NDYP)⁵³ found that young people in the NDYP target group commonly had 'positive attitudes to work' and 'flexible attitudes to pay and conditions they would be willing to accept' (Millar 2000: 22).

In keeping with this previous research, all interview participants in stage two of the current study expressed a desire to work and saw the benefits of working as outweighing the drawbacks. The money earned was the most frequently mentioned benefit (referred to by over three-quarters of interviewees), as a wage provided the ability to cover regular expenses, have a less restricted lifestyle and plan for the future. However, only one interviewee said that money was the only benefit they gained from work. Chief amongst other perceived benefits were social benefits and 'keeping active', with over half of the interviewees seeing these as important. Work was also described as interesting or enjoyable, providing the opportunity to learn, and improving motivation or self-confidence/self-esteem (each of these

⁵³ A compulsory program for 18 to 24 year-old income support recipients who have been unemployed for at least six months.

Table 5.5: Benefits of work for interviewees by sex, skill level and age

	Percentage who mentioned the benefit									
	Total	Male	Female	Lower-skilled	Higher-skilled	18-20	21-34	35+		
Money	78	96	50	79	92	56	60	23		
Keeping active	59	52	71	63	58	56	47	23		
Social	57	52	64	54	67	22	47	31		
Learning	27	13	50	17	42	22	13	0		
Interest/enjoyment	27	22	36	29	33	22	13	8		
Self-confidence/self-esteem	24	30	14	25	25	0	13	31		
Motivation	24	17	36	21	33	0	7	23		
Ability to plan/security	22	17	29	29	8	11	20	23		
Structure	16	9	29	25	0	22	13	15		
Career/self-employment potential	16	17	14	17	17	11	13	0		
Contribution to society	14	9	21	8	25	0	7	15		
Meeting social norm	14	17	7	17	8	0	20	8		
Achievement/pride in job	14	13	14	13	17	11	7	0		
<i>n</i>	37	23	14	24	12	9	15	13		

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included.

benefits was mentioned by about one in four interviewees—see Table 5.5). The value interviewees placed on the structured activity, social contacts and self-esteem provided by work was consistent with Jahoda's (1982) 'deprivation' theory of unemployment and Warr's (1987) 'vitamin' theory, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Excerpts from interviews illustrate these themes. Gary,⁵⁴ who was in his early 20s and had last worked at a car factory, was typical in the value he placed on the financial benefits, structured activity and friendships provided by work:

Interviewer: And what do you find the good things are about having a job?...

Gary: Oh, you're meeting friends...Of course money...Money's always a big concern, but mostly you find new friends and it just gives you something to do instead of sittin' at home all the time or whatever else. Gives you something to do, keep yourself active.

Similarly, Louise—who was also in her early 20s and had most recently worked as a sales assistant—found work kept away boredom and provided financial stability and a feeling of being useful. When asked whether it was important for her to have a job, she replied:

Louise: Oh, of course, yeah [*emphatically*].

Interviewer: Why is that?

Louise: I get bored very easily, and I like working and just—I like to be financially stable as well, and when I'm not working I'm not. So yeah, it gets hard.

Interviewer: And you said you like working. What is it about work that you like?

Louise: Oh, I just feel useful, it's good, yeah.

Some interviewees commented that work kept them mentally alert—for example, Paul, who had been largely out of work since the late 1980s and was now in his 40s:

⁵⁴ All names of research participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Interviewer: ...and what do you think are the good things about having a job?

Paul: *[Sighs]* Oh, communicating with people, for a start. Keeping yourself motivated, it keeps the mind active. That is a danger, without working. Actually the brain does slow down, there's no doubt about it—you know, I remember going to another job or starting a job once, and it was a week and a half before my brain was going at the same speed as the people in the office.

For Jeffrey, who was in his early 20s and had previously worked long hours managing a fast food outlet, work also had significant physical benefits:

I am not the type of person that can just sit around. I have to be active, like ever since I've quit my job I've put on a lot of weight. That's also a health issue as well, because when I am working I actually lose it.

Karen, a project manager in her 40s, had encountered many problems in recent jobs. Nevertheless, she described a wide range of benefits of work, including financial and social benefits and an improved self-image:

Interviewer: What do you think are the good things about having a job?

Karen: I guess a sense of identity, financial income, independence...contributing back to the community...I guess it's self-worth, although I don't think my self-worth is low because I'm not working, it's just more the financial side of things...Oh, opportunity to learn new stuff, that's a good thing about having a job, meeting people.

As shown in Table 5.5, men were more likely than women to nominate money or meeting social expectations as among the benefits of working, while women more often nominated the enjoyment gained from the work itself. Men were much more likely than women to refer to the financial benefits of working, despite being less likely than women to say that a problem with being unemployed was having too little money—as will be discussed in the next chapter. Men also more often spoke in terms of self-confidence, self-esteem or meeting a social norm. In contrast, women more often said that the benefits of working included keeping active, social benefits, learning, interest/enjoyment, motivation or structuring of their time. The findings concerning pay and social benefits were consistent with the July 2004 Job Futures/Saulwick Employee Sentiment Survey, which found that men were more likely than

women to nominate their pay level as being the factor which most contributed to their job satisfaction—18 per cent of men nominated this factor, compared to 11 per cent of women. In contrast, women were more likely than men to nominate their relationships with co-workers—25 per cent compared to 18 per cent (Saulwick & Muller 2004: 9; more detail about this survey is provided later in this chapter).

It appears that the men in the interview sample placed greater priority on the financial and status benefits of work than women, perhaps reflecting men's traditional 'breadwinner' role—although most in the sample were single—and suggesting that the men continued to perceive more social pressures to work than the women. For example, Dan, a gardener in his 40s, spoke about the status, confidence and security that came from having a job:

Interviewer: What do you think are the good things about having a job?

Dan: ...oh, it's confidence, money, status, I suppose...being able to do something, feeling secure, and being productive.

Similarly, Phil—an IT worker of the same age who was out of work due to health problems—spoke about the sense of control he got from working and the value of 'earning' his wage:

it just puts you back more in control of your own life. You've got, you know, the option to go out and do other things...I guess it's just the sense of well-being, that you're out there, you're doing something...you're earning your wage...

Almost one in five male interviewees spoke of the need to meet a social norm to work. An example was Carlo, who was in his 30s and had been made redundant from his job on the railways, and who specifically tied the norm to work to his family's history of employment:

Interviewer: What is it that's important to you about having a job?

Carlo: Just having a job. Going to a place of employment. Having the money I suppose. Just that, you know, the emphasis of a job... 'cause it's sort of a norm that you gotta have a job...

Interviewer: When you say it's a 'norm' do you feel...that your lifestyle isn't the norm or something? That not having a job is not the norm?

Carlo: Yeah, well not having a job isn't the norm, because me parents have always been employed so—none of my brothers or sisters been unemployed—so me not having a job is a lot different than them having a job.

As Table 5.5 shows, there were some age differences in the perceived benefits of working. Those aged under 21 were substantially less likely than older age groups to mention the social benefits of working and were more likely to mention keeping active, interest/enjoyment, learning or structuring of their time. The former finding is consistent with German and British studies which found that unemployed teenage males reported a substantial rise in social interaction after *losing* a job (Warr 1987). It may be that the younger unemployed retain a network of friends from school which is then lost when they grow older, as their friends gain work. Alternatively, they may not have had sufficient experience of good workplace friendships to view such friendships as a benefit of work. Young interviewees' emphasis on learning is likely to reflect their lack of work experience and consequent need for workplace learning.

There were also some differences between lower skilled and higher skilled workers (65 per cent of interviewees were lower skilled and 35 per cent were higher skilled⁵⁵). Lower skilled workers were more likely to describe security/the ability to plan or meeting a social norm as among the benefits of working, while higher skilled workers were more likely say that learning, contributing to society and social and financial benefits were important. With regard to learning, the difference is likely to reflect the less routine nature of more highly skilled work. For example, Tuti—an IT worker whose company went out of business after an industry down-turn—spoke about the enjoyment he gained from new knowledge:

To work is enjoyable for me...it's interacting with other people, you know, you can share knowledge, you can get knowledge, you can learn. Because doing a job is a learning process...

Overall, consistent with other studies of unemployed people, participants in this study expressed a strong desire to work. They particularly attributed this desire to the financial benefits of working, the social contacts and friendships gained from work and the activity it provided. Other common perceived benefits of work were that it was interesting or enjoyable,

⁵⁵ Participants were defined as higher skilled workers if at least one previous job they had undertaken required a skill level of Certificate III or IV (such as apprenticeships and high-level traineeships), diploma or degree, or at least three years relevant experience, according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS 1997). All other participants were defined as lower skilled workers.

that it provided the opportunity to learn, and that it improved motivation, self-confidence or self-esteem. However, participants did not see these benefits as being attached to all jobs, but rather to the particular types of jobs that they were seeking. The following two sections discuss the types of work sought by participants and the particular characteristics they sought in such jobs.

What type of work?

To investigate the work aspirations of the sample, and the extent to which these aspirations were consistent with available jobs, participants in both the survey and interview stages of the study were asked about the kinds of jobs they were seeking. Their responses indicated that the great majority had realistic job aspirations for their education level, with most seeking jobs which required basic vocational training or no specific qualifications. This was in contrast with Coventry and Bertone's study involving focus group discussions with 30 mostly long-term unemployed young people in outer-western Melbourne, which found that most aspired to jobs requiring 'far more training or education than they had'—mainly trade level and paraprofessional jobs (1998: 217). In the current study, the most common types of work sought by the survey participants were sales and/or hospitality (21 per cent) and horticulture or landscaping (14 per cent), while the next most common were factory work, office or library work, and mechanical, welding or woodworking (6 per cent each—see Table 5.6).

The jobs sought by interview participants differed markedly from those sought by survey participants. This was apparently due to the inclusion of office administration and web design Work for the Dole projects in the stage two sample, as many participants in these projects were seeking work in the same fields. The most common types of work sought by interview participants were office (30 per cent), sales (22 per cent), and information/communications technology (19 per cent). Other jobs sought included hospitality, labouring, factory, child care and graphic design.

Table 5.7 shows the type of jobs sought by interview participants, as well as the types of jobs participants had held during the previous three years. Notably, only two interviewees had held an office job in the previous three years—however, the 11 interviewees in an office-based Work for the Dole project hoped that they would gain useful experience from being placed in community organisations for several months as part of their project. There were a

few industry sectors which some participants avoided due to poor working conditions. In particular, jobs in fast food were markedly unpopular, with four interview participants having previous experience in fast food but none seeking jobs in it. Responses indicated that this was due to stressful working conditions in the industry and the perception that fast food outlets sought juniors who attracted lower wage rates (all participants were aged 18 or over). Telemarketing was another sector which several participants said that they avoided.

In summary, participants were most often seeking work in shops, offices and gardens, and relatively few sought work which required post-school qualifications for entry, indicating that they were seeking reasonably accessible jobs. However, they did have a number of criteria for the kind of job they would accept, as discussed in the next section.

Table 5.6: Work sought by survey participants (%)

Sales/hospitality	21
Horticulture/landscaping	14
Factory	6
Mechanical/welding/woodwork	6
Office/library	6
Information/communication technology	5
Child care	3
Other	15
Anything	5
Don't know	5
No answer	16
Total	100

n=87

Table 5.7: Work held in last three years and work sought by interviewees (%)

	Work previously held	Work sought
Office	5	30
Sales	22	22
Information/communication technology	11	19
Hospitality	16	11
Labouring	5	11
Factory	14	8
Child care	3	8
Graphic design	3	8
Cleaning	3	5
Call centre	0	5
Construction	3	5
Gardening/landscaping	3	5
Transport	11	5
Fast food	11	0
Real estate	8	0
Other	16	8
Anything	–	5

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=37

What kind of job?

To investigate whether interview participants were selective about jobs (or ‘job snobs’ as claimed by Minister Abbott), interviewees were questioned about the characteristics they were seeking in a position. They were asked what they looked for in a job, what they had liked and disliked about past jobs and why they had left them, and what they would not ‘put

up with' in a job. Their responses were then coded based on common themes (multiple characteristics were coded).

The most common job characteristics interviewees sought were good relationships with supervisors and other staff (59 per cent of participants) and interesting, varied or enjoyable work (57 per cent). Other characteristics commonly mentioned were adequate pay (43 per cent) and opportunities to learn (32 per cent). Also mentioned—each by almost a quarter of interviewees—were a safe, healthy or clean environment, a job which was not too stressful and suitable hours (see Table 5.8).

As Table 5.8 shows, women in the sample more often sought good relationships with supervisors/colleagues, suitable hours, opportunities to learn and a job which helped people. Men more often sought flexible, autonomous or creative work, reflecting the larger proportion of higher skilled men in the interview sample: 43 per cent of male interviewees were higher skilled, compared to only 14 per cent of women. Similarly, male interviewees were more educated: three-quarters had completed Year 11 or higher, compared to only half the women.⁵⁶ Compared to higher skilled workers, the lower skilled more often mentioned good workplace relationships, suitable pay and hours and a safe, healthy or clean workplace. In contrast, higher skilled workers more often mentioned interesting or varied work, and work which provided opportunities to learn, flexibility/autonomy or creativity, consistent with the nature of higher skilled work.

Workers aged over 35 were also more likely to seek opportunities to learn, flexibility/autonomy, challenge and creativity, reflecting the higher skill levels of those aged over 35 in the sample. In addition, they were more likely to seek work which was secure and suited their physical capacity, as several had poor health. By contrast, 18 to 20 year-olds were much more likely than over 35 year-olds to mention good workplace relationships, adequate pay and suitable hours, perhaps reflecting the lower skills of under 21 year-old jobseekers and the low pay levels and irregular hours of many of the jobs accessible to them.

When asked what they looked for in a job, interviewees often referred to past negative experiences which they hoped to avoid in the future; these commonly involved poor

⁵⁶ As noted in the previous chapter, women were less likely than men to participate in Work for the Dole overall—higher skilled women may have been more likely to choose alternative mutual obligation activities.

Table 5.8: Characteristics interviewees sought in jobs by sex, skill level and age

	Percentage who sought the characteristic									
	Total	Male	Female	Lower-skilled	Higher-skilled	18-20	21-34	35+		
Good relationships with supervisor/colleagues	59	48	85	75	33	89	73	31		
Interesting/varied/enjoyable	57	57	57	46	75	56	60	54		
Adequate pay	43	43	43	50	33	56	47	31		
Opportunities to learn	32	26	43	25	42	22	33	38		
Safe/healthy/clean	24	22	29	33	8	33	40	0		
Not too stressful	24	26	21	25	25	22	20	31		
Suitable hours	22	9	43	33	0	33	27	8		
Career potential	19	22	14	21	17	11	40	0		
Provides flexibility/autonomy	19	26	7	8	42	0	20	31		
Suitable location	16	13	21	13	17	22	7	23		
Helps people	14	9	21	17	8	22	7	15		
Challenging	14	13	14	13	17	11	7	23		
Related to qualifications	11	13	7	13	8	0	0	8		
Secure	11	13	7	13	8	0	13	15		
Creative	11	17	0	4	25	11	0	23		
Suits physical capacity	11	13	7	13	8	11	0	23		
<i>n</i>	37	23	14	24	12	9	15	13		

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included.

relationships with supervisors or co-workers, or health problems. As discussed earlier in this chapter, about a quarter of interview participants had left at least one previous job due to problems with a supervisor, and the same proportion because of health problems or job-related stress. Similarly, the most common negative experiences in jobs were problems with supervisors, problems with co-workers, and health problems or stress caused by the job (each mentioned by about a third of interviewees). Boredom was less often mentioned—by a fifth of interviewees—despite the stated importance to interview participants of interesting or varied work. This may be because when choosing which jobs to apply for, participants were more able to accurately predict whether they would like the job content than whether they would relate well to supervisors or other workers, and were less likely to take up jobs in which they had no interest.

Three recent Australian studies suggest that the unemployed participants in this study valued similar aspects of work to other members of the Australian workforce. An Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) national household survey of 1,030 employees found that work content and work colleagues are perceived as by far the most important contributors to work satisfaction (Bearfield 2003). According to respondents, the ‘most important factors that make work a positive experience’ were ‘aspects of the job’ (that is, the nature of the work—nominated by 41 per cent of all respondents), and work colleagues (nominated by 36 per cent). Notably, these factors were nominated far more often than the next most mentioned factors—pay and conditions (13 per cent), recognition of efforts (11 per cent), and good treatment by their manager (8 per cent—see Table 5.9). A qualitative ACIRRT study investigating the common characteristics of excellent Australian workplaces found that ‘the central focus of excellent workplaces was the quality of the working relationships between the people who worked in them’ (Hull & Read, 2003: 30). The study found that this was the primary reason staff wanted to stay at such workplaces.

Similarly, the July 2004 Job Futures/Saulwick Employee Sentiment Survey of 1,002 randomly selected Australians in the labour force found that the leading factors contributing to job satisfaction were the type of work undertaken and relationships with co-workers. The 88 per cent of employed respondents who said that they were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘reasonably satisfied’ with their jobs were asked to nominate, from a list of six factors, which contributed most to their satisfaction. Thirty-four per cent nominated ‘the nature of the work I do’ and 22 per cent ‘my relationship with workmates or colleagues’, while 16 per cent nominated ‘the

amount of control I have in my job' and 14 per cent 'the amount I am paid' (Saulwick & Muller 2004: 9—see Table 5.10).

Both the ACIRRT and Saulwick and Muller studies indicate that pay and good treatment by a manager were less significant for the employed population than for the unemployed participants in this research. However, this may have been due to the different questions used in this study, which asked what participants *looked for* in a job, not what contributed most to their work satisfaction. Participants may have viewed adequate pay and good treatment by a manager as basic pre-conditions for a satisfactory job, rather than as the factors which contributed to a particularly positive experience. Overall, in both the earlier research and this study participants placed most emphasis on the nature of their work (such as whether it was interesting and provided opportunities to learn) and on their relationships at work.

It could be argued that participants were too selective about jobs, given their level of disadvantage in the labour market. This issue will be further discussed in the next section, on 'selectivity'. However, it should be noted here that 35 per cent of interviewees were higher skilled⁵⁷ and that eight (22 per cent) had worked in relatively high-level jobs including IT, electronics, project management, small business management and advertising. It was therefore not surprising that many were to some extent selective about jobs. In addition, the characteristics which interviewees *looked for* in a job were not necessarily the minimum characteristics which they would have *accepted*—that is, what unemployed people would prefer in a job may well differ from what they would tolerate in preference to being unemployed. Interviewees' responses to the question 'what would you not put up with in a job?' may provide a clearer indication of the minimum job characteristics they would accept. These responses suggest that by far the greatest concern among interviewees was harassment or poor treatment at the workplace, with more than six in ten participants saying that they would not tolerate such treatment. Women were more likely than men to say that harassment or poor treatment was a concern, and often nominated sexual harassment as something they would not tolerate. Those aged under 35 were also more likely than older workers to nominate harassment or poor treatment as a potential concern. Other concerns mentioned—by far smaller proportions of interviewees—were unhealthy or unsafe conditions (17 per cent), being too stressed or overworked, or being subject to poor conditions (10 per cent

⁵⁷ As defined in footnote 11.

Table 5.9: The most important factors making work a positive experience (%)

Aspects of the job	41.1
Work colleagues	36.1
Pay & conditions	13.4
Recognition of efforts	11.2
Good treatment by manager	8.0
Suitable hours	6.7
Being well informed	6.4
Development opportunities	6.1
Control/autonomy	6.0
Acceptable workload/pressure	4.6
Good leadership/senior management	3.3
Security	3.1
Good OH&S standards	2.0
Promotion opportunities	0.8
No harassment/discrimination/bullying	0.1

All employees aged 15+, Australia. Multiple responses included
n=1,032 Source: *Bearfield 2003, p. 21*

Table 5.10: Factor most contributing to job satisfaction (%)

The nature of the work I do	34
My relationship with my workmates or colleagues	22
The amount of control I have in my job	16
The amount I am paid	14
The convenience of the location	8
The amount I am learning	5
Don't know	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>

n=905 Source: *Saulwick & Muller 2004, p. 9*

each). Boredom or inadequate pay was mentioned by only 7 per cent and 3 per cent respectively (see Table 5.11).

Nonetheless, the characteristics which interviewees most often said that they *looked for* in a job included not only good relationships at work, but also interesting, varied or enjoyable work, adequate pay, opportunities to learn and workplace safety. The following sections discuss in more detail interviewees' views about these job characteristics.

Good workplace relationships

Consistent with the value participants placed on the social relationships gained from work, the feature of work most often sought—by six in ten interviewees—was good workplace relationships. Those seeking work which was lower skilled and less intrinsically interesting appeared to place more emphasis on such relationships: they were particularly sought by the lower skilled, by women (who were predominantly lower skilled in the sample) and by 18 to 20 year-olds (see Table 5.8). For example, Stefano's work in a highly routinised laboratory job had made him aware of the importance of working with 'the right people':

Interviewer: ...and what kind of things do you look for in a job?

Stefano: ...I guess people at the workplace, that's probably most important, regardless of what job you're doing, if the support's there and you have that little network of people, yeah. I guess you can get through anything with the right people.

For Joe, a second-generation Macedonian-Australian who had last worked at a market, it was important that manager and employees worked together 'like a family':

Joe: an understanding boss, understanding workmates...where you can just be happy, like family you know. Where everyone pulls their own weight...where everyone helps each other and has feelings for each other, and yeah, pretty much close knit...

Similarly, Con—a Greek-Australian in his late 20s who had last worked in real estate—wanted to work in a company where people worked well together and had a good work ethic:

probably something that's a good environment, good people with...a good work ethic, not a...blasé sort of boss or overbearing sort of boss, just get the work done, make it as pleasurable as possible sort of environment.

Table 5.11: Characteristics interviewees would not tolerate in jobs by sex, skill level and age

	Percentage who would not accept the characteristic						18-20	21-34	35+
	Total	Male	Female	Lower-skilled	Higher-skilled				
Harassment/poor treatment	63	53	77	68	60	63	77	44	
Unhealthy/unsafe	17	18	15	21	10	25	23	0	
Too stressful/excessive workload	10	6	15	5	20	13	15	0	
Poor conditions	10	6	15	11	10	3	8	11	
Boredom	7	12	0	0	20	0	15	0	
Inadequate pay	3	6	0	5	0	13	0	0	
Other	13	12	15	5	30	0	15	22	
Nothing	13	12	15	11	10	3	2	22	
<i>n</i>	30	17	13	19	10	8	13	9	

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included.

Con found aggression in the workplace unacceptable:

Interviewer: What kind of things wouldn't you put up with in a job, do you think?

Con: An aggressive employer, I wouldn't put up with aggression, unnecessary stress...for me the biggest issue...is having a peaceful sort of situation, where I can do my work and enjoy it as much as I can, so I wouldn't put up with *[sighs]* unnecessary headaches and dramas.

Like Con, most interviewees—and especially younger interviewees and women—wanted to avoid aggressive or abusive supervisors and workmates, and almost half (46 per cent) recounted negative experiences with such managers or colleagues. Interviewees often left jobs or were selective about new jobs due to such experiences. For example, Luke—aged under 21—had become unemployed after leaving a chef's apprenticeship because he 'did not get along with the new employer at all':

he was...bossing everyone, instead of just talking to people, taking them aside, he'd try and embarrass you in front of everyone.

Luke commented that 'every day we *[the staff]* were there we were sworn at', and that he had walked out when his employer started throwing bread at staff, and 'it came flying straight past my head'. Similarly, Cathy had left a job at a legal firm after six months because she found her supervisor stressful:

he was never happy. Like I was new there...and he'll ask me to do something, and if I got something wrong he wouldn't be too happy, and he'd yell about it. So I thought, this is too much stress, he knows that I've just come out of school and I've got no experience in this, and he should be easier on me...

As previously mentioned, several interviewees referred to poor workplace relationships in the fast food sector. For example, Kelly described being sacked at the age of fifteen after an argument with her supervisor at a fast food outlet, where she was working after school-to-midnight shifts:

the manager was asking too much, like she was saying that my orders weren't getting out within a minute, and I'm telling her that the food isn't up, that's why they're not getting out in a minute and

stuff like that. And she's goin' 'Well you've gotta do a better job', nah nah nah, 'otherwise you're not gonna be able to continue here'...I turned around and said 'Listen I'm doin' the best I can', I go 'If you can't handle that, that's your problem...you can do it by yourself' and then she turns around and she goes 'Get out!' She goes 'You won't be getting paid for this week' and I turned around and went 'I don't care' and just walked out.

Another concern was abuse and 'backstabbing' by other employees. For example, John—aged under 21—strongly objected to the abuse of other employees he had witnessed:

Interviewer: What kind of things wouldn't you put up with in a job, would you say?

John: Abuse. Verbal abuse, physical abuse, anything like that, I don't like it, can't stand it. I don't mind if you're having a bit of a laugh with someone, like there's a bit of abuse going on there, but it's only a joke, it doesn't go any further than that...But, a lot of people don't know when to stop. It just goes a little bit too far sometimes and it does get serious...

At one catering company, 'because of my nationality [*Greek*] and because of how young I was, I was copping a bit of abuse from the manager'—eventually causing him to leave.

Most interviewees clearly thought that their relationships with supervisors and workmates were the most important aspect of a job, and wanted to work in harmonious workplaces. Judging by the number of interviewees who experienced poor relationships in some jobs, this was not easy, although most had also experienced good relationships with supervisors and other staff.

Interesting/enjoyable work

The next most frequently sought characteristic in a job, mentioned by almost six in ten interviewees, was interesting, varied or enjoyable work. For some this involved interaction with different people, for others varied tasks or a job in which they continued to learn. For example, Steve—aged in his early 20s—was looking for work that involved 'mental stimulation' and varied interaction with people:

I get to meet new people, and it'd be like a different experience every day, you know, dealing with different people, maybe dealing with clients over the phone, so that's definitely what appeals to me

about doing office work. A little bit more mental stimulation as well. You know, use my brains a little bit more than my brawn.

Similarly, Dominic—aged in his early 20s—enjoyed the variety of people he met while working in hospitality:

You get to meet people...wherever you go, a café or restaurant or whatever, there's always different faces. Every day is different.

Gary had enjoyed a previous job in which job rotation provided variety:

See at [car manufacturer] they let you change, like you weren't stuck on one job all day...I became a team leader there so I moved up, and...we worked out with the group, okay you know, after each break, we'd change people. Everyone was happy in the job because everyone was changing. They weren't going brain dead, stuck there...

However, work did not have to be high skilled for interviewees to find it interesting. For example, Elena—aged under 21—had found a previous supermarket job interesting due to task variety:

I was working in different sections [of the store], and getting to know everything, and I was doing stock take and changing all the labels and all that stuff, and I just really enjoyed it...I liked keeping myself busy.

Higher skilled workers were particularly likely to seek varied or interesting work—consistent with the type of work for which they were qualified—with three-quarters of the higher skilled mentioning this compared to less than half of lower skilled workers. For example, Karen, a project worker, sought ‘variety and a challenge...opportunity to learn new things’.

Most interviewees had experienced work they found interesting in the past, and hoped they would again find such a job; in particular, some avoided highly repetitive work. For some, interaction with a variety of people provided interest, rather than the specific tasks the job involved. For others, the opportunity to learn was the factor which made a job interesting, as will be discussed in a later section.

Adequate pay

Although relatively few participants reported *leaving* a job due to low pay, adequate pay was an important consideration when *seeking* work: four in ten interviewees mentioned this as something they looked for. Half of the lower skilled workers and 18 to 20 year-olds referred to pay, compared to only a third of the higher skilled and those aged over 35. This may have been due to the low pay levels of many of the jobs available to younger, less skilled workers and the smaller gap between income support and a very low wage.

Two issues were important to interviewees concerned about pay rates: receiving an adequate income to live on, and a similar rate to others of the same age and doing the same kind of work. The eight interviewees who, after prompting, mentioned specific minimum rates of pay that they would accept nominated hourly rates from \$10 to \$16; this was similar to the average 'reservation wage' of \$12.50 nominated by unemployed participants in the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research).⁵⁸ By comparison, in 2004 the adult federal minimum wage was \$12.30 an hour or \$24,370 a year (AIRC: 2004).

A few interviewees said they had been offered jobs paying as low as seven dollars an hour, and considered this unreasonable:

Gary: And then Centrelink started pressuring me saying you got to do this and you got to make sure you get a job, and they were signing me up for jobs that were only paying like seven dollars an hour. To me...it's slave labour.

Interviewer: Was that...when you were over 21?

Gary: Yeah...I was 21...No-one can work for that, and they want you to travel 90 minutes from home...Most of the ones with container unloading and stuff like that and labourer, and it's on their computers hourly rate of seven to ten dollars an hour...And you think, how can you work for that? A normal person couldn't afford to live on seven dollars an hour.

⁵⁸ This data is from the 2001/2002 wave of HILDA, which included a sample of 609 unemployed people (Dockery 2004: 176–7, 194).

Interviewees who looked for certain pay rates often commented that they should be paid in accordance with award rates. Several referred to the different rates which applied for different ages, and three said that they should be paid the legal rate for their age and job type. For example, Dominic commented that he would probably not work for under ten dollars an hour or whatever the 'going rate' was in an occupation. As he had completed three years of an apprenticeship, he was looking for fourth year wages if he gained a building job. Jeffrey particularly objected that his pay as a manager in charge of ten staff was less than others doing similar work:

Like with [fast food company]...it was getting shit pay. I was a Store Manager on 26 grand a year, which is like a training assistant manager for anywhere else. I was classified as a *trainee* manager. Everyone else was getting 29 or 30....

However, most interviewees did not nominate pay rates as a concern, despite the interviewer specifically mentioning pay levels as one of several possible considerations when job-seeking. This suggests that interviewees were usually willing to accept the pay rates for available jobs, or that such rates were not at the top of their list of concerns; some specifically commented that this was the case. For example, Luke was fairly unconcerned about pay and hours, commenting that his previous chef apprenticeship had involved low pay and weekend work:

Interviewer: Are there any things [you look for] about hours, or pay, or things like that ?

Luke: Oh well, when I was doing my apprenticeship I was getting 200 dollars a week and that's not that much but, it's still pretty good, and I enjoyed doing it, so...it doesn't really matter about the pay that much but, neither with the hours...

Overall, a substantial minority of interviewees indicated that they would not work below a certain rate. Of these, some commented that it was not possible to 'get by' below a certain rate or such a low rate would be unfair. Younger and low-skilled workers were particularly likely to be concerned about adequate pay.

Opportunities for learning/career potential

For almost half the interviewees, the opportunity to learn new skills or the career potential and challenge of a job were important. This was much higher than for the employees in the ACIRRT study, among whom only 6 per cent nominated 'development opportunities' as one

of the most important factors making work a positive experience (Bearfield 2003). This difference may reflect the concerns among many of the participants in this study about their relative lack of workforce experience and need for more skills to gain a secure job.

Interestingly, women were much more likely than men to refer to opportunities to learn—mentioned by 43 per cent of women compared to 26 per cent of men—which may have been linked to the higher value women placed on the intrinsic benefits of work as opposed to its financial and status benefits. Those aged 21 to 34 also appeared more concerned about developing their skills and a career than the older interviewees (most of whom were male), perhaps because the latter already had substantial workforce skills and experience.

Nadja, an office worker from Israel in her 40s, was an example of a participant who liked to continually learn:

Anything that I really dislike?—I don't know, I guess if it's not busy enough, and if it's dragging, I don't like anything like that. I like to be busy, I like the time to pass and to do things, and I'd like to be able to learn, even if it's only something small, but to learn and advance as I go along.

Khoa, aged in his early 40s, also sought a job in which he could expand his knowledge—although he had lowered his expectations due to the depressed state of the IT job market:

as soon as I...saturate my knowledge in certain job, I tend to move on, rather than staying and doing the same job every day...I'm the type of person, learning new thing every day...I can't expect much, because I accept virtually any job, but with the IT, if I still get another job in IT, I prefer to have a job that's challenging me.

Similarly, Dan, a gardener, felt that a highly repetitive job would drive him 'crazy':

I just like learning all the time, yeah, so I do need a job that is stimulating, not just piece work, bang, bang, bang all the time, drive me crazy.

One in five interviewees commented that they were interested in a job they would like to do long term or which had potential for progression. For example, Kelly—who was aged under 21 and doing an internet-based Certificate II in Business Administration—thought that getting a job in a call centre would not be too difficult and that she could build on the experience:

Yeah, telemarketing and the call centre, I think I basically just look at them because I know that they are easy to get into, and after there you can go to business administration higher up.

With substantial experience in hospitality, Steve was looking for casual kitchen hand work while doing an office-based Work for the Dole project, and hoped to gain work as a receptionist after finishing his placement. He commented:

I just want to make something better of myself, you know, because generally all the males in my family are the labourers type, you know...I just, I wanted to do better than that. Really I should have stayed in school, but as my sister said, 'You never really knew what you wanted to be'...Well now I do, I'm training for it, you know.

Four interviewees also said that they were seeking a job related to their qualifications. They believed it was wasteful to have studied for several years—and in two cases gained years of industry experience—and then not to use these skills. For example, after nine months of unemployment Stefano was now looking for a wide variety of jobs, but still hoped to be able to use his psychology qualification:

well, given my experience, I'm pretty much open to anything now...But if I had to create one myself, it'd have to be something that actually taps into my skills and, somehow utilises my qualifications somehow, and I don't like the idea of finishing a psychology degree and becoming a carpenter.

Similarly, Dominic still hoped to be able to complete his apprenticeship, after being laid off fourteen months previously when his company outsourced most of its work:

for myself I want to finish my building [apprenticeship]. That's the only thing I've really got in my mind. I don't mind working here and there, but at the end of the day, I want to finish my apprenticeship.

For many interviewees, opportunities for learning were seen as an important aspect of work which prevented boredom and supported their individual development. For those interviewees trying to start or resume a career, unemployment represented the gradual wastage of years of study and/or work experience, with the fear that they would never gain entry or re-entry to their chosen field. As will be discussed in the next chapter, such

participants also faced pressures from Centrelink, as well as more general financial and social pressures, to take jobs in fields in which they had no interest so as to gain work.

Workplace safety

Another significant issue in looking for a job, nominated as important by a quarter of interviewees, was having a safe, healthy and/or clean workplace. Many had experienced unsafe or unhealthy work conditions and wanted to avoid such conditions in future jobs—a quarter of interviewees referred to previous jobs which were unsafe or had made them physically ill. These included jobs which involved transport accident or other injury risks, exposure to very cold temperatures, or permitted little sick leave to recover from illness. For example, Louise had left a previous job in a furniture factory because of a work-related injury:

because it's very repetitive and because it's pulling the vinyl over the wood and that, it started to buckle my hands. I started to get arthritis in my fingers.

She had received no compensation or assistance from her workplace over the injury, commenting only that management 'understood' why she had to leave:

Interviewer: And did you tell them about the problems that you were having?

Louise: Oh, they knew that my hands—you could see it. They were inflamed. I kept on with that job just to see if...but it ended up getting worse. So I had to leave, but yeah, they understood.

Jason also rated workplace safety as important, along with a friendly atmosphere and award wages, but felt that his ideal workplace may be unattainable:

I'd like it to be friendly, and have award wages—a place where I'm not going to get asbestos or any disease, unclean or unsafe conditions like that. You know what I mean, like all the Workcover stuff, you know I'd hate to be working in one of those joints. Safe, reliant, happy places. Bit of a dream [*laughs*].

He was also concerned about chemical hazards, and had turned down a few jobs because of safety concerns:

Like unsafe chemicals, like in big factories and they leave tins open and stuff like that. I actually had an interview at the actual place, and I just saw it and...I just walked around and just walked home.

Similarly, Gary would not accept jobs which did not have adequate safety:

One job I did do with the recruitment agency, I worked for Essendon Airport, and they had me standing on top of a private jet with no harnesses an' that, paint stripping an aeroplane, so...I rang up the recruitment agency and said 'Look, you've got to come down there and have a look at this, because they have no safety at all'. So if I was very worried about it I would say it before I'd do anything anyway, but if the tools are there and everything's safe, well there's no problem with conditions.

Overall, participants who had experienced unsafe working conditions were often unwilling to put themselves in such situations again. A significant minority had experienced such conditions, indicating that work safety was a notable issue faced by this sample of unemployed people.

In summary, like employed participants in other Australian studies, interviewees placed markedly strong value on good workplace relationships—particularly with supervisors. This accorded with the high value they placed on work for the social contacts it provided. Interesting work was also commonly valued, consistent with the role of work in preventing the boredom associated with unemployment (as discussed in the next chapter). Pay levels were nominated as important by about four in ten interviewees, while a third looked for work which provided opportunities for learning. Interviewees' comments clearly indicated that they looked for things in a job that had sometimes been lacking in previous jobs, with problems with supervision having most often concerned them in the past. Freedom from harassment and poor treatment was overwhelmingly the most significant feature of a minimally acceptable workplace. The priority interviewees placed on good workplace relationships and interesting work were consistent with the views of employed participants in other Australian studies, suggesting that the unemployed participants in this study valued broadly similar aspects of jobs as employed Australians, although they were more likely to mention opportunities for learning and pay as important factors. Overall, rather than the distinctive attitudes of the 'culture of dependency' postulated by supporters of conditional

welfare (as discussed in Chapter 3), they did not appear to have markedly different attitudes about work than other Australians.

Selectivity

Participants in this study overwhelmingly wanted work and believed that they should work (as will be discussed in Chapter 10). However, they did not share the ‘any job is a good job’ philosophy espoused by Tony Abbott (Gordon 2000; Douz & Taylor 2002) and new paternalists such as Lawrence Mead (1986, 1997a). Interviewees were specifically asked to comment on Minister Abbott’s view that ‘some unemployed people are too fussy about the job that they’ll accept’. Consistent with other Australian and UK research (Coventry & Bertone 1998: 214; Millar 2000: 21), the great majority believed that they should seek and accept work that to some extent matched their interests and abilities: about four in five interviewees said that they would not take jobs that they expected to strongly dislike. For example, Gary believed that people should only work in jobs they enjoyed:

Interviewer: Is it important for you to have a job, do you think?

Gary: Oh, it’s important for everyone to have a job but it’s a thing of, you’re better off having the right job for you. Like I’ve tried a lot of jobs and stuff but, if you don’t like it, well you’re not worth being there. I say to [project supervisor], if you can’t even come ‘ere and have a smile on your face, you shouldn’t come.

Gary justified the right to selectivity on the basis that an employee would not perform well in a job which they disliked:

See you go to a job and you are not happy with it you’re not going to do the job properly. So then, the employer’s not going to be happy with you and you get a bad report. So, if you like the job you go there and do it properly, you get a good report.

When asked what she thought about Abbott’s claim that some unemployed people are ‘too fussy’ about the jobs they will accept, Kelly responded that some jobseekers are inherently unsuited to some jobs, commenting ‘he has to realise that there are some jobs that people just cannot handle, because it’s the way they are’. She had previously explained that she herself suffered from social anxiety, limiting the range of jobs that she felt able to do.

Some interviewees also commented that they should not start a job that they would be likely to leave quickly. Lisa, aged in her early 20s, commented:

I think it's *important* to be fussy about the job...you have to be happy in the environment that you're working in, because otherwise you're not going to be working there for very long. It's as simple as that.

Similarly, Nadja—a migrant from Israel in her 40s—believed that jobseekers were justified in being selective, as accepting the wrong job would only lead to problems:

I think they're fussy because they don't want to take something that they know in advance they're not going to be happy with. I mean, it can cause a *lot* of problems if you accept a job just for the sake of accepting *any* job, and then you're going to end up not being happy there anyway. So I'm not saying you've got to be *thrilled* with the job—a job is a job. But it's got to be something that you can continue on doing.

Karen described unhappiness at work as leading to widespread problems: 'I think if people are happy with what they're doing, there'd be less stress, less people going off on sick leave...maybe less unemployment'. Similarly, Con described the malaise that could result from disliking one's job, and how for some people it could reduce motivation to seek a better job: 'you're wasting your time, leads to stress, frustration. You lose motivation for other work'. The views of these interviewees are supported by two Australian studies—discussed in the next chapter—which found that young people who were dissatisfied with their jobs rated almost as poorly on a range of psychological measures as the unemployed, despite their higher average incomes.

Some interviewees were also concerned that if they accepted a job outside their career path it would mean giving up or delaying that career, and for this reason felt justified in selective job search. Tuti believed he would harm his IT career by doing work outside that field, as he would be unable to keep up with new developments:

Because if I'm an IT worker and then I'm delivering a pizza, I ruin my future career, that my IT career is finish, finish...

Similarly, Matthew, a graphic designer in his early 20s, thought that the investment in his education would go to waste if he took lower level jobs:

Maybe if I applied for a lot of lower level jobs, then I probably would have a job, but I've put so much effort and the government's put so much effort into me, as well, gaining my skills, it kind of seems like a waste. It would be even more of a waste if I just...stayed on unemployment benefits for the rest of my life, but I don't want to do that. I want to ultimately start my own business. It's a matter of finding a job which will be a bridge to that.

Con—who was studying the accounting software package MYOB part-time and aiming to embark on an office-based career—also wanted a job that would move him in the right direction and avoid frustration:

Interviewer: Do you think that you should do work if there's work available for you?

Con: Well, depends...me going to work in a factory job now, would equal me being employed in six months time or a year's time due to dissatisfaction, and then maybe being unemployed for a year after that, trying to get my act together again. So, not just jumping into any job now, without it being on the career path that I'm after, or remotely even offering the spectrum for me to get somewhere that I want get to, is—it's stupid. 'Cause I'm just going to end up either losing the job, or getting sacked, or quitting the job, and I'd be a more *frustrated* person to deal with and you know, having to sort of start all over again trying to look for work and retraining myself...

However, some medium-term unemployed interviewees said that they had lowered their expectations as their length of unemployment grew. For example, Khoa was now looking for almost 'any job' after being made redundant from a job that he had greatly enjoyed:

At the moment I'm very much like—I will do everything to get out of the cycle of staying at home and have no job, because it *very* depressing. When I just left [telecommunications company], I say okay, I have to have a job I'd really like. And the last couple of months, I just went okay, just get a job, and now I really want a job, any job at all, as long as it's not, you know, absolutely boring. Yeah, I just prepared to get any job.

Similarly, when asked what kind of work he wanted to do, Stefano—a psychology graduate in his early 20s—replied:

at the moment, I really don't have any specific requirements or there aren't really clearly defined preferences, anyway. Like, pretty much because you don't have a choice these days.

He had been unemployed for nine months and his self-esteem, confidence and expectations had all declined. He commented:

from what I know from my circle of friends and myself, it's almost like a trend that the selectivity has gone down since high school—selectivity has gone down and qualifications and experience has gone up.

While the overwhelming majority of interviewees disagreed with Abbott's claim that some unemployed people are too selective about jobs, a small number—five out of the 37 in total—strongly agreed. Four of these interviewees were male lower skilled workers, and may have been arguing from personal experience of a lack of options. Dan commented:

I have noticed some people...that are fussy, yeah that's right. I mean, I think if you really do need a job, just do it for a certain amount of time until you can get something that you would want to do. I think they are being a bit fussy...I don't think you can afford to be fussy.

Selectivity appeared to be linked to education and skill level and length of unemployment. Those who had completed Year 12 were more likely to stress the need for selectivity than other groups, indicating that they felt they were more able to—or had more right to—be selective. In addition, lower skilled workers who had been unemployed for over eighteen months in the previous three years were less likely to say that they were selective than those who had been unemployed for shorter periods. Lower skilled workers aged over 25 were also less likely than younger lower skilled workers to say that they were selective about jobs, which may have reflected their greater average length of unemployment.

Interviewees whose highest post-school qualification was a certificate were most likely to say that they were *not* selective about jobs. Interestingly, those with *no* post-school qualifications as well as those with bachelor or diploma qualifications were more likely to say that they *were* selective. However, this may have been because those with no post-school qualifications were all, with one exception, aged under 25, while those with certificate-level qualifications were on average older and less likely to have completed Year 12.

Overall, the great majority of interviewees did not believe that they were obliged to take any job that was available. While they did not want to remain unemployed, nor did they want to take a job which they would strongly dislike, and they disagreed with being required to do so. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, participants objected to the pressure which many had experienced from Centrelink or Job Network agencies to take such jobs. It should be noted, in the context of the debate over whether casual employment is a ‘dead end’ or a ‘bridge’ towards more permanent employment (Burgess & Campbell 1998; Gaston & Timcke 1999; Melbourne Institute 2005: 25–6), that interviewees did not object to accepting casual jobs. Only one interviewee stated that she only wanted permanent work, and only one-fifth referred to the hours of employment as a criteria for choosing jobs. Rather, their main focus was on workplace relationships, job content and adequate pay.

The Roy Morgan Research survey discussed in Chapter 3 found that most Australians believe unemployed people should have some choice regarding the work they accepted: only 37 per cent agreed with the statement that ‘people who are unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their unemployment payments’, while 54 per cent disagreed. Consistent with the greater selectivity among younger participants in the current study, the Roy Morgan study also found the least support for the statement from younger respondents, with only 25 per cent of 16 to 24 year-olds agreeing and 65 per cent disagreeing (Roy Morgan Research 2000: 34–5). However, the 1999 SPRC survey previously discussed suggests that Australians have a different view when specifically asked about the young unemployed and the long-term unemployed—almost two-thirds of that sample agreed that payment recipients should be required to ‘accept any paid job offered’ (Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000: 19).

Conclusion

The views of participants in this study about work were inconsistent with the community archetype of the ‘dole bludger’ who does not want to work. Consistent with other research on the unemployed, participants had a strong desire to work, and particularly valued the financial benefits, social interaction and sense of interest and purpose it brought. Many also had substantial experience of work on which to base their views about employment. They usually appeared to be quite flexible in terms of pay levels and hours and to be seeking jobs which did not require high skill levels. However, they did not seek just any job, and were particularly concerned about workplace relationships, interesting work, adequate pay and opportunities to

learn. The importance participants placed on job content and their relationships with co-workers was consistent with studies of the wider Australian workforce, and indicates that they disagreed with Minister Abbott's view that almost any job was preferable to receiving 'welfare'. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, none enjoyed being unemployed for long periods and many had very negative experiences of unemployment.

CHAPTER 6

'A BIG VOID': BEING UNEMPLOYED

Introduction

There is a substantial body of evidence that unemployment has many negative consequences for standard of living, mental health and well-being (for example, Warr 1987; Feather 1990; Murphy & Athanasou 1999; Saunders & Taylor 2002). As part of this study, interview participants were asked about their experience of unemployment and looking for work, to provide a comparison with their experience of work and Work for the Dole and gain insight into how this experience informed their views about mutual obligation. This chapter discusses their responses.

Previous research

Marie Jahoda's classic study of the impact of unemployment in the Austrian village of Marienthal during the Great Depression found that unemployment produced a range of negative impacts in addition to material deprivation: boredom, lack of time structure, a sense of purposelessness, reduction in social contacts, and loss of status and identity (Jahoda 1982). According to her functionalist 'deprivation' theory, employment supports psychological health by providing the reverse conditions to unemployment: meeting needs for obligatory activity, time structure, a sense of shared purpose, a range of social contacts outside the family, and status and identity. These needs could only be entirely met, she claimed, through employment.

More recent Australian and European research has confirmed that unemployment has negative material, psychological and social consequences. Due to Australia's low level of income support payments, unemployment in Australia is highly associated with poverty. For example, using ABS Survey of Income and Housing Costs data for 25 to 55 year-olds, Saunders found that in 1997/98, 84.3 per cent of single unemployed people without children and 64.5 per cent of couples in which neither partner worked had incomes below the Henderson poverty line (Saunders 2002c: 181–3). In the September quarter of 2004, Newstart Allowance for a single adult receiving maximum Rent Assistance was \$242.30, or 76 per cent

of the poverty line (Melbourne Institute 2005). Poverty has been found to substantially contribute to the negative psychological impact of unemployment, although whether the financial strain of unemployment is the only underlying cause of distress or whether non-financial drawbacks of unemployment also contribute is not yet clear (Winefield, Montgomery et al. 2002: 3).

A meta-analysis of sixteen longitudinal studies published between 1986 and 1996 found clear evidence that unemployment led to a higher incidence of depression and that mental health improved after re-employment (Murphy & Athanasou 1999). British and German longitudinal studies have found that unemployed people experienced higher rates of anxiety and negative affect and reduced life satisfaction than when they were previously employed (Heady 2002). Similarly, a longitudinal study of Adelaide school leavers found that unemployment led to declines in self-reported activity, perceived competence and life satisfaction and to increased depression (Feather & O'Brien 1986). Another Adelaide-based study of school leavers found that unemployment led to higher levels of self-reported boredom, depressive affect and helplessness and lower levels of happiness and self-esteem (the latter for girls only) than did employment (Tiggemann & Winefield 1984).

However, research has also found that the quality of a job plays an important role in the comparative effects of employment and unemployment. In his 'vitamin' theory, British psychologist Peter Warr proposed nine environmental determinants of mental health in employment: opportunity for control, opportunity for skill use, externally generated goals, variety, environmental clarity, availability of money, physical security, opportunity for interpersonal contact, and valued social position (Warr 1987: 2). He argued that these features of good jobs could be also be experienced when unemployed, and that their absence is harmful whether someone is employed or unemployed:

The harmful features of some jobs are also those that cause deterioration in unemployment, and the factors that are beneficial in jobs can also enhance mental health during unemployment (Warr 1987: 1).

According to Warr, while employment is normally more conducive to mental health than unemployment, some jobs may be worse than unemployment because they offer even less in terms of the environmental determinants of mental health. Conversely, the experience of

unemployment can be improved by modifying the environment to provide more of the features normally associated with work.

Similarly, British psychologists David Fryer and Roy Payne argue that while Jahoda's account highlights important human needs, these needs are not necessarily met in jobs and can be met outside paid work. They argue that unemployed people experience psychological distress predominantly because 'efforts to assert agency are frustrated over time by inadequate resources, low social power and perhaps lack of exposure to solving varied problems due to [previously] having performed routine jobs' (Fryer & Payne 1984: 291). Unemployed people who are sufficiently self-directed can address these problems and find more satisfaction from being unemployed than from working in an unsatisfying job. Haworth (1997: 17) comments that Jahoda has been criticised for claiming that individuals without a job are unable to meet their own psychological needs, even if they have sufficient material resources to do so:

In essence, the criticism made of Jahoda's theory is that it places too great an emphasis on the role of social factors in shaping behaviour, while presenting too passive a view of human beings, one which neglects the key role of personal agency and the factors which can restrict this, such as lack of money and the bureaucratic features of social organizations with which the unemployed have to contend.

Australian psychologists Winefield, Tiggeman, Winefield and Goldney (1993) have also been critical of Jahoda's argument that any employment is more beneficial than being unemployed. In their longitudinal study of a large sample of Adelaide school leavers moving from school to the labour force, they found that young people who were dissatisfied with their jobs did not rate significantly better than the unemployed on a range of psychological measures.⁵⁹ Similarly, in another South Australian study, Gordon O'Brien and Norman Feather (1990) found that school leavers who had gained 'good quality' employment—defined as a job which participants rated relatively highly in terms of opportunities to learn new skills, choose how they worked, and use their abilities, education and experience—were less depressed, had higher life satisfaction, felt more competent and more in control of personal outcomes than those who were unemployed. However, there were few differences on these measures between those who were unemployed and those working in a 'poor quality' job—the latter

⁵⁹ It should be noted that the great majority of young people in the Winefield, Tiggeman and Winefield study described themselves as satisfied with their 'job as a whole'—in the 1987 follow-up period, 417 were satisfied (90.3 per cent of those employed) and 45 (9.7 per cent) dissatisfied with their job. More men than women (11.8 per cent compared to 7.7 per cent) were dissatisfied with their job.

expressed significantly higher life satisfaction, but 'felt equally depressed and lacking in a sense of internal control and competence' (O'Brien & Feather 1990: 162). As O'Brien and Feather (1990: 162) comment, this finding was particularly notable given the substantially higher average income gained from the young people employed in poor quality jobs when compared with the unemployed: 'Apparently, the status and freedom of movement engendered by higher income did not compensate for the debilitating effects of a poor job'.

There is also evidence that for both the unemployed and the dissatisfied employed, the type of activities undertaken during spare time affected psychological well-being. Winefield, Tiggemann and Winefield found that for both their unemployed and dissatisfied employed groups, time spent engaged in activities with others was positively correlated, and time spent doing nothing and watching TV negatively correlated, with well-being. There were no significant associations between spare time use and well-being for the satisfied employed. Winefield et al. suggest that the unemployed and the dissatisfied employed may need to engage in particular types of leisure activity to compensate for not gaining psychological benefits from work. They also note that the poorer well-being of the unemployed and dissatisfied employed may be due to their relatively low incomes, which limited their ability to engage in activities with other people. While the dissatisfied employed could be expected to have higher average incomes than the unemployed, they 'expressed overall dissatisfaction with all aspects of their jobs (including the rate of pay)', suggesting that they were poorly paid (Winefield et al. 1992: 311).

In apparently contradictory findings, O'Brien, Feather and Kabanoff (1994: 29) found that the quality of activities engaged in by unemployed young people—when measured by the extent to which the activities required skill utilisation, autonomy, variety, interaction and pressure—had no effect on their well-being as measured by several psychological measures. Whether unemployed young people were rated as having high- or low-quality activities, they had 'high depressive affect, lower life satisfaction, lesser commitment to the Protestant work ethic, and lower levels of perceived competence than youth in employment'. O'Brien et al. suggest that the conflicting findings of different studies may be due to the differing measures of adjustment and of leisure used. In interpreting their findings, they comment (1994: 33):

Skill-utilisation, interaction and autonomy may engender a sense of meaning for those in employment because it contributes to a sense of identity in a socially valued role. However, the

unemployed may not see their identity as being shaped by their activities because society does not see their role as meaningful whatever they do.

In summary, the literature on the psychological effects of unemployment indicates that we would expect to find signs of poor mental health among the unemployed people participating in this study, although those who have found enjoyable and meaningful ways to occupy their time may be coping better than others. Lack of money could be expected to have a major impact on the well-being of the participants, both directly and indirectly by placing limits on activity, social contact and ability to pursue life goals. The literature is also consistent with findings of the previous chapter that while participants disliked being unemployed, they found some jobs as undesirable as unemployment. The next section discusses participants' experience of unemployment.

Experience of unemployment

Most study participants had experienced substantial periods of unemployment in the previous three years. While Work for the Dole is intended for people who have been unemployed for between six and twelve months, this is measured according to the current continuous period in receipt of unemployment payments. The broader focus used in this study—looking at the total amount of time unemployed in the last three years—took into account those who have experienced alternating periods of employment and unemployment. This showed that 20 per cent of stage one survey participants had been unemployed for between twelve and eighteen months in the last three years, and over half (56 per cent) for eighteen months or longer. Among stage two interview participants, 30 per cent had been unemployed for between twelve and eighteen months, and 38 per cent for eighteen months or longer (see Table 6.1). As was discussed in the previous chapter, participants most commonly left jobs because their employer no longer required them—not because they had chosen to leave.

In the interview phase of the study, participants were asked 'Can you tell me what it's like for you being unemployed?'. In response, all except one interviewee described unemployment in negative terms; although a few said that they enjoyed having free time in the initial months of unemployment, none enjoyed being unemployed for longer periods. The main problems with being unemployed largely mirrored the benefits of working: lack of money, boredom and inactivity, depression and low status. These were consistent with Jahoda's findings from the

1930s concerning the prevalence of boredom, a sense of purposelessness, and loss of status and identity among the unemployed. It is also consistent with more recent Australian studies on the experience of unemployment (Feather 1990; Blakers 1992; Saunders & Taylor 2002). Among women, the predominant issues raised were boredom or inactivity and lack of money (raised respectively by two-thirds and over half of female interviewees). Along with these issues, men also mentioned significant problems with stigma, depression and low self-esteem. Money problems and boredom were also the main issues raised by lower skilled workers (referred to by two-thirds and almost a half of these workers respectively), while only a quarter of higher skilled workers referred to each of these issues (see Table 6.2). There were no notable differences in experience of unemployment between younger and older interviewees.

Table 6.1: Survey participants' time unemployed in last three years (%)

Months	<12	12–17	18 or over	Total	<i>n</i>
Survey participants	24	20	56	100	70 ⁶⁰
Interview participants	32	30	38	100	36

Meg, who was in her late 30s and had been unemployed for long periods, provided a stark description of the boredom commonly experienced by interviewees. She found that the hours stretched before her in the day:

I suppose I've got too much time on my hands at the moment, so I get up...at 8 o'clock in the morning, and...by 9 o'clock I'm bored, because there's nothing to do. You know, I've gone through and done the dishes, put my washing on or something like that, and then...by 9 o'clock I'm bored...

Kelly, who was under 21 and had been mostly unemployed since leaving school early due to glandular fever, commented:

⁶⁰ Seventeen survey respondents did not answer this question. The detail requested (the question asked respondents how many months they had been unemployed in each of the previous three years—see Question E9, Appendix B) and its placement near the end of a 44-question survey is likely to have contributed to this high non-response rate.

It's depressing. You do get bored, every day. Doing the same thing, looking for a job, having to get all your other things done, like doing normal day duties and things like that. It does get very depressing.

Table 6.2: Perceived impact of unemployment on interviewees by sex and skill level

	Lack of money	Boredom/inactivity	Depression	Stigma	Reduced self-esteem	More time for own projects	Little impact
Male	11	8	6	8	7	1	1
%	48	35	26	35	30	4	4
Female	8	9	2	1	1	1	0
%	57	65	14	7	7	7	0
Lower skilled	16	13	4	7	3	1	0
%	67	45	17	29	13	4	0
Higher skilled	3	3	4	2	2	1	1
%	25	25	33	17	17	8	8
Total	19	17	8	8	5	2	0
%	51	46	22	22	14	5	0

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=37

Con, like five other interviewees, felt a lack of direction about the job he was seeking. In his late 20s, Con did some taxi driving but was studying the accounting software package MYOB and looking for office work:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what it's like for you being unemployed?

Con: It's pretty boring...I find that I don't have the same self-esteem, as when I am employed...not having strong goals, is the main thing...even though I'm studying and what not, because...I don't have that clear direction as to what I want to do at the end of it...Because it's not a more definite sort of structure as to what I'm doing and where I'm going, it feels a bit purposeless, and so it's a bit aggravating, 'cause

you know, time's clicking and...you're not really doing much with it, aside from leisurely activities...[it's] pretty boring, after a while—you don't appreciate the leisure time that you've got.

Hürriyet, a psychology graduate in her early 20s, spoke about the social isolation she felt and how it was affecting her facility with English:

you don't have much of a social life. You don't come into contact with a lot of people. It was much better when I was studying, and at least I had friends. And my English has gone almost, because I've been home all the time, and I've been talking in my own tongue, in Turkish. And now I'm finding it hard. You know, your life gets restricted.

Three interviewees were pursuing what could be described as 'personal projects' (that is, work-like but largely unpaid activities) while unemployed: two composed or performed music and one was practising and teaching yoga for nominal payment. These projects appeared to help them cope by providing opportunities to engage in purposeful activity and to develop or maintain their skills and self-esteem (consistent with the findings of Fryer & Payne 1984; Haworth & Evans 1987; Warr 1987; and Winefield, Tiggemann & Winefield 1992). For example, Jeffrey, who had been unemployed for seven months, commented:

I'm in a band and I teach [music] an' all that, so I'm a bit creative myself...I play a flute, saxophone, euphonium, tuba...that's my *[pause]* home away from home, where I get out, be myself, don't worry about anything. Just like people take long walks. I have the music.

However, such projects did not sufficiently compensate for the lack of paid employment. The three interviewees did not view such activities as a viable long-term alternative to employment, unlike those interviewed by Fryer and Payne (1984) and Lackner (2000). Jeffrey commented that he needed a job because he was 'financially unstable', having paid for the insurance on his instruments with credit and now facing credit card debt. Despite his musical interests, he was also relatively inactive and lacking in energy:

Interviewer: Do you find not having a job means it is harder to be active?...

Jeffrey: Yes. Because you're at home all the time. You get lazy...Like, if you're at home, you've got the whole day to rest, which really tires you out...

Stefano, a psychology graduate who had been unemployed for nine months, had spent time producing his own CD. However, he found that ‘being unemployed for a while now, it sort of takes its toll money-wise, as well as confidence and, I don’t know, your belief in your own self-worth in the community’. He commented:

[on] one side it’s good because you’ve got all the time to do your own projects and stuff, and on the other hand...it’s actually quite a sad existence being on unemployment...Yeah, being unemployed is [*pause*] it’s almost a lesson to teach you to become gainfully employed as soon as you can. It’s not pleasant to be unemployed. The income you receive being unemployed is far below the poverty line...it’s a limited existence being on the dole.

He said he had lowered his employment expectations and was now considering sandwich hand jobs.

The great majority of interviewees did not value the additional free time that unemployment brought, particularly given the restrictions placed on their lives by a very limited income. For example, Jason, who was aged under 21 and had worked as a casual labourer, experienced being unemployed as a ‘void’:

really it’s no fun being on the dole, unless you’ve got something criminal, or you’ve got money or rich parents or something. If you’re just living in...a normal working class family...there’s only so far that that 190 dollars will go...when you’re on the dole you wake up, and yeah, go see your mates and there’s a million things you can do—but there’s still sort of a void. A big void of sort of nothing. I don’t know if everyone feels that way, but I do.

Similarly, for Richard—a copywriter in his early 40s—life went ‘on hold’ when unemployed. Echoing Fryer and Payne’s (1984) account of unemployment, Richard had experienced a loss of agency due a lack of income and the bureaucratic ‘hoops’ he had to ‘jump through’:

Interviewer: And can you tell me what it’s like for you being unemployed?

Richard: [*Sighs*] Ah, totally frustrating because you’ve got to put everything else—your life goes on hold. Financially you’re hamstrung...it’s certainly hard to go on the dole, it’s certainly hard to come up with all the financial record stuff. You do jump through a lot of hoops. I certainly felt that pressure a bit. Yeah, your life goes on hold. Very frustrating.

Interviewer: How do you mean by ‘on hold’?

Richard: Financially you can’t do anything at all...no travel, no hobbies, no holidays. You have to cut back on, you know, food, car, health insurance, anything you can think of, entertainment, mucking around, being able to drink, being able to go out—being able to buy anything, let alone a house. It’s hard paying the rent.

Paul, who was long-term unemployed, also found the lack of money frustrating:

Interviewer: And can you tell me what it’s like for you, being unemployed?

Paul: Oh, it’s frustrating because...I obviously haven’t got any money just to keep up with my normal life, like, things which [government] Ministers wouldn’t identify, like dentist’s bills and just keeping up with general cost of clothing and stuff. That’s basically it. I can get by on the food bit, I can just get by on the bills, but as far as anything on top of that goes, dentists, clothing...a whole range of things really, you’re in trouble.

Almost half of the men in the stage two interviews spoke about feelings of depression or reduced self-esteem. For example, Tuti, an IT worker in his early 40s, said ‘If you are unemployed...it seems that the world is just, you know, stop in front of us’. Tuti needed to work to meet his own desire for activity, as well as to support his family:

This is wasting my time, my lifetime, you know...I have a family, I have to feed the family—I have to get activity for my[self], you know, not just giving the family food or something, I need to do *something*.

Khoa, another IT worker and a refugee, was also experiencing depression after being made redundant:

Interviewer: And what is it that’s important for you to have a job—why is it important?

Khoa: Well, because of the boredom. No job, I feel like very depressing and—just basically that. Depression is the real killer for me at the moment.

Joe, who was in his late 20s and had worked as a labourer and driver, had been depressed during a previous period of unemployment and found it difficult to look for work:

Interviewer: And, can you tell me what it's like for you being unemployed?

Joe: It's a burden. Just wakin' up every morning...it's an actual burden when you are really looking for work and you can't get it...it frustrates you, and you just don't want to leave the house basically, and it comes to the point where you don't even want to look for work...Like you get depressed with yourself...especially when you're trying. And no-one wants to have a bar of you...

Two women also spoke about feeling depressed. One of these, Lisa, spoke of low self-esteem because available jobs required computer skills that she did not have, and she was unable to access an affordable course:

There's a certain point where you think to yourself that 'Am I worth it? Am I worth being in this workforce?' I mean there's levels of depression that people go through and I can actually vouch for it...because I *did* have a state of depression, because I was unhappy with the way that the world was going. Because I felt that I was not accepted, because I didn't know that much.

The stigma of unemployment was also a significant issue for both higher and lower skilled men, being mentioned by one in three male interviewees. For these interviewees, the public narrative of the 'dole bludger' loomed large. Some felt that they were perceived by others as a 'bludger' or an 'idiot', and felt awkward when friends discussed their jobs. They feared that others thought they were deficient in intelligence or education, 'not trying hard enough' or generally inferior for failing to gain a job.

It was notable that only one woman spoke about stigma, and one about reduced self-esteem, suggesting that these were less significant issues for female interviewees. As we saw in the previous chapter, it appears that the male interviewees continued to perceive more social pressures to work than the women and found unemployment more stigmatising. This was not attributable to the women in the sample currently fulfilling alternative roles as homemakers or mothers (as postulated in Warr & Parry 1982; Warr 1987), as very few lived with a partner or had children. However, women may still feel that their identity is less bound up with being employed than do men, and that it is more socially acceptable for them to 'stay at home'.

While the women in the study clearly disliked being unemployed, the reasons they gave for this usually related to their inactivity, boredom and lack of money, rather than low self-esteem or stigma. Research on this issue in Australia and other developed countries has been mixed, with some studies finding that women experienced less negative psychological impacts from unemployment than men (for example, Feather 1990; Artoraz, Benach, Borrel & Cortes 2004) while others have found no significant sex differences (for example, Hammerstroem & Janlert 1997; Creed & Watson 2003).

One of the male interviewees who felt stigmatised was John, a second-generation Greek-Australian aged under 21, who said that his family treated him badly because he was unemployed:

people treat you differently. Like my Mum and my Dad and my girlfriend's mother—because I'm unemployed they see me as if I'm a bad person, as if I'm uneducated—and I don't know what's going on...basically sometimes they treat you like you're scum.

Steve, who was in his early 20s and had previously worked in transport and hospitality, also felt that others looked down on him for being unemployed. He felt unable to counter such attitudes:

Steve: sometimes I'd like to be able to not be excluded from those conversations where, you know, my friends are talking about what they do at work...it'd be more along the lines of maybe a lack of acceptance, simply because I don't work.

Interviewer: Do you feel like there's a lack of acceptance?

Steve: Sometimes. I feel like, you know, people are looking down on me...and it makes me feel very uncomfortable and [pause] criticised—but what can I say, you know?

Jason also perceived strong social stigma. He identified with the Australian film *Muriel's Wedding* in its defence of the 'underdog' and critique of the public image of the 'dole bludger'. While he claimed not to care about others' opinions of him, they clearly did concern him:

Interviewer: What else is there that you don't like about being unemployed?

Jason: Mmm...Just the stigma...that you get with it, you know—'I'm on the dole'. But then another person comes up, 'Oh, you know, I've got a car and I work at this place' and blah, blah, blah. And even with me mates, it's just like 'Oh, how's work been mate?' and 'Oh yeah, I've been doing this and this and that' and then they ask me 'What have you been up to?' and I say 'Work for dole, look for jobs, and that's about it'. You know, there's a lot of things wrong with the whole society view of the unemployed...your traditional dole bludgers like on *Muriel's Wedding* and stuff...

Interviewer: ...What is it that happens in that?

Jason: Just how the old man was just going off constantly, going 'Oh, bloody dole bludgers', you know, always saying that. And then at the end Muriel says 'No, they're not lazy, you know everyone's special, you just gotta fuckin' look for it'...

Interviewer: Do you feel that people are looking at you that way?

Jason: I know people see me as an unemployed idiot. I don't really care. I don't really care about people's opinions about me.

He hated going to Centrelink because it made him feel 'downtrodden':

like sometimes there's a nice person who talks to you, but usually you just get that feeling, you know. I hate going to the dole office. This gloomy feeling. It's like a cemetery...you just go in there and you get the feeling of the downtrodden.

Dan, a landscaper in his 40s, had been unemployed for over a year but continued to hide this fact:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what it's like for you being unemployed?

Dan: Pretty terrible. I don't even—I'm embarrassed about it, actually, because I don't tell people that I'm unemployed—they suspect it of course, but I don't like to mention it. I don't like to even *[pause]* admit that I'm doing a Work for the Dole Program, because it just shows you're on the dole...

Stefano felt a sense of guilt about being unemployed, which he ascribed to social stigma and a feeling that he was wasting his time:

Stefano: I don't know where it's coming from, but there's always a sense of guilt when you're fully able to work, to be employed full-time and you just can't find any—even though it might not be a fault of your own—for me it's not a fault of my own, but I still feel that guilt that I'm wasting time, when I could be earning a decent wage...

Interviewer: Where do you think that that comes from?

Stefano: I'm just trying to put my finger on that actually [*pause*]. It's just the stigma that people are subject to, that on the dole, when you get the [*pause*] the expectation that you're a bludger, you're not trying hard enough, and you're wasting your time. And you put all that into perspective and you can imagine what you'd be earning if you were actually working. So one year on the dole is what, 9,000 dollars—one year working could be anything from 25 to 30, to 35...So there's a big gap there between inactivity and actually being employed.

When asked whether people had implied that he was a 'bludger', Stefano responded that some displayed a lack of understanding of what it was like to be unemployed, and also denigrated the utility of the psychology degree he had completed:

Yeah, there are personal—ah, I wouldn't call it insults, it's just people say personal things...They might have been employed into a nine to five job since they left high school, so they wouldn't know the first thing about being unemployed. Not only that...in the same breath they'll undermine your studies, saying that it doesn't lead to a job, claiming that it's totally useless...So, say, three years study and one year on the dole, that's four years of your life that they're undermining, in one sentence.

Stefano later said that some of these comments were made by members of his own family, who considered university study a waste of money.

Bob, in his late 40s, was the only participant who did not describe being unemployed in negative terms. Unemployment may have seemed relatively insignificant to him in the context of the recent dramatic events he had experienced: his small business had closed down

and he had undergone a divorce and other family difficulties. He had been receiving unemployment payments for about eighteen months and was seeking a sales job in a stable company. His experience of unemployment had been quite different from other interviewees, particularly as he was not facing financial problems and did not feel a stigma about being unemployed:

You know, financially I'm not too bad, so I'm not worrying about where the bills are coming from...I've always been able to find something to do...I've no great dramas saying I'm unemployed, no great bug bear about walking into Centrelink with the form in the hand, like, you know, some people do. I won't say I'm over-enjoying the experience, but I'm not at the other end of the scale either...I'd prefer to be off it, obviously, but I don't have any problem with it...

Overall, however, there was little positive that interviewees had to say about being unemployed. While a few had additional time to spend on personal projects, the overwhelming picture was of the limitations imposed by unemployment and the boredom, depression and reduced self-esteem experienced. Unemployment was not seen as providing freedom from the constraints of work, as depicted in the public narrative of the 'dole bludger', but rather as imposing its own major constraints. Further, being unemployed meant that paid work was in part replaced by the largely unrewarding and depressing activity of job seeking, as discussed in the next section.

Looking for work

When asked about their experience of looking for work, two-thirds of interviewees asked this question⁶¹ described it as difficult, and four in ten as 'frustrating'. This was largely due to their experience of being repeatedly unsuccessful, as well as a sense of being ignored by employers and employment agencies. A quarter said that looking for work was depressing, but several spoke about the importance of trying to maintain optimism in the face of repeated rejection. Interviewees had been continually reminded by Centrelink that they were required to regularly seek work, and as we saw in Chapter 3 this general expectation conformed with widely shared public opinion; so even if interviewees had 'given up' searching they may not have admitted it. Nevertheless, most interviewees believed that they would eventually gain work if they kept searching, as most had experience of employment in the recent past.

Meg, who had experienced long-term unemployment with intermittent work, spoke about the desire to give up after repeated ‘knock backs’. However, she had managed to ‘pick herself up’ after periods of feeling defeated:

I’ve been there myself...getting a whole lot of knock backs and thinking, you know, I don’t think I can do it...every knock back letter you get, you get a little bit more weary...you think ‘What’s the use of doing it, what’s the use of trying any more?’...Well, then something happens and you pick yourself up and you think, ‘Yep, I’ve got to do something about this’...

She was feeling relatively optimistic at the time of the interview and—like some other interviewees—said that the Internet made applying for jobs easier:

At the moment it’s not bad, there’s a lot more jobs out there at the moment, and it’s easy with the internet because there’s so many, you know, places that you can put your resume up on...

Karen, a project manager in her 40s, described the experience of job-hunting as like ‘bashing [her] head against a brick wall’, and found it difficult to maintain any hope of success. She laughed about this and claimed to have become ‘a bit blasé’, in an apparent attempt to cope with her frustration, but found the process ‘very demoralising’:

Interviewer: And what’s it like looking for work, do you find?

Karen: ...Boring. It’s driving me nuts. I just can’t stand it. I’ve got to the stage I’m a bit blasé now *[laughs]*. I just sent in the applications and go, ‘Here we go, another reject come back’ *[laughs]*. I try to feel positive but I think, I’ve had just so many rejects that—I know I’ve got to just keep trying and trying and trying, but...I just get a bit fed up with it all, I get very tired and sometimes I just want to stop and just do nothing. ‘Cause it’s very draining, and very demoralising.

Karen felt particularly discouraged because she believed that she was a strong candidate for positions:

⁶¹ This question was added to the interview schedule for the last nineteen interviews to provide additional qualitative information about participants’ experience of job seeking.

I keep applying for all this things, and I know I've got a good application, I know I can meet the criteria—what are these people looking for? I mean, there must be this perfect person out there who meets their every need. It certainly isn't me [*laughs*].

Dan, a gardener in his 40s, also described the reduced self-esteem and temptation to give up when faced with continual rejections:

what happens when you don't get jobs, it really knocks your self-esteem, and you can nearly say, 'Okay, I can't do this', and you can virtually give it up and go and do something else, because you can't get in there. But you just got to keep pushing, I suppose, but it does knock down your strength...

Dominic described the sharply reduced motivation he experienced after a period of unsuccessful job-seeking:

I enjoy working; I've been working ever since I can remember really... until I've noticed that the last sort of year or so that I've been on the dole, I've become lazy. At times I've become so frustrated that I don't even want to look for work, I just think 'fuck it', you know, 'why should I?—the employers out there's all...pricks or whatever'. You know, you get fed up with it. You're getting nowhere.

One in five interviewees also criticised a lack of responses from employers to their applications or a lack of feedback from interviews. Gary objected to employers' seemingly common practice of not replying to the applications he had gone to considerable effort to prepare. He felt that he had done all he could, but been ignored:

I looked for jobs and I sent resumes to Ford, Holden, Toyota, I sent resumes everywhere and I paid money to get 'em all made up professionally so they all looked nice, and I even got no answers back. They never sent me anything back...I tried my best, I sent like 50 resumes out to people.

Jen, who was aged under 21 and had finished Year 12 but had no work experience, felt that she did not perform well at interviews. However, she had received no feedback from employers about why she had been unsuccessful; she observed 'they don't say anything. They just say we will call you and they never do'.

Similarly, Karen had been required to apply for at least ten jobs a fortnight but received no responses from employers and agencies. She recalled one job she had applied for when she rang the company ‘every week for about five weeks, and they never rang me back’. She commented:

I’ve found when I’ve rung up for jobs when I’ve sent in applications, nothing has happened, wouldn’t return calls, they say, ‘Oh, no, better people out there, whatever’—well, don’t even bother telling me. So I’ve stopped ringing up, stopped following up [*laughs*]. Because it was just a waste of time, I wasn’t getting any feedback.

Richard—formerly in the advertising industry—was frustrated by the reduced access to employers resulting from recruitment through agencies, and doubted the fairness of the ‘filtering’ process:

in this day and age when most white collar is farmed through headhunters and agencies, you never get to an interview. The single biggest fault is you never get to see the person who’s going to make the decision... We’re not privy to what’s going on. Number one: I never get to impress the person who’s going to employ me, and number two is: are these people at agencies getting their friends jobs first? And of course we know that, on paper, judging a person on paper and in person is a very different thing.

Tuti also believed that job agencies were ‘a barrier’ in the way of getting a job, commenting that they were ‘not a good place to see, when you are unemployed’ and that it was better to contact employers directly.

In summary, interviewees commonly described looking for work as difficult, frustrating and/or depressing. A number said that they felt ignored by employers and employment agencies, and spoke about trying to maintain a sense of optimism in the face of temptation to give up the search. Over two-thirds of interviewees had been unemployed for at least a year during the past three years, and were clearly finding it very difficult to gain a suitable, ongoing job. The next section discusses interviewees’ explanations for their long-term or repeated spells of unemployment.

Barriers to gaining work

The most common reason interviewees gave for not being able to get work was insufficient experience (with almost half nominating this) and there being too few jobs available (nominated by a third). More may have thought there were too few jobs available, but responded in terms of why they were less competitive than other applicants. Another common perceived barrier was unsuitable qualifications—over a quarter said that employers considered them underqualified, while others were considered overqualified. A quarter had been disadvantaged by health problems, and one in five said that employers considered them too old. Some also found interviews difficult or said that employers were prejudiced against the unemployed.

Interviewees' responses were comparable to those in the 2004 ABS Survey of Job Search Experience (ABS 2005). Like participants in the current study, the most common 'main difficulty in finding work' nominated by those unemployed for between six and twelve months⁶² in the ABS survey were 'insufficient work experience' (18.7 per cent), 'too many applicants for available jobs' (13.1 per cent), and 'lacked necessary skills or education' (10.4 per cent). Transport problems were also often nominated (10.2 per cent), as well as being 'considered too old by employers' (8.8 per cent) and 'own ill health or disability' (8.5 per cent). The lower absolute proportions of respondents nominating the various barriers in the ABS survey are attributable to the survey asking for the main barrier they faced; the current study sought multiple responses. The only marked difference between the two sets of findings was the lack of people in the current study who mentioned transport as a barrier—although a number cited transport problems as a concern when discussing job search requirements, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Interviewees' perceptions of the various barriers they faced are discussed below.

Insufficient experience

Many interviewees said that employers thought they had insufficient relevant experience. For example, Matthew was frustrated that he could not get work in an IT call centre because of lack of experience, especially as he believed that he knew more than many people who currently worked there:

Interviewer: And what's it like looking for work, do you find?

Mathew: Frustrating. Especially when I know that I could do IT support job or call centre at an internet service provider, for example...I could easily do that job, and I could do it better than a lot of the people that are in that current job...I've called them up to try to get help and they know less than me...I've applied for so many of those jobs, and it's always the same, pretty much, that I don't have experience, work experience in a call centre.

Similarly, Karen was frustrated by being unable to gain project management jobs—despite having worked in the field for several years—because employers thought that she had insufficient technical experience:

you've got to have industry experience in certain areas...you have to come up as a technical person, which I'm not...You don't need half this stuff to be a project manager, you just need to have good people skills and to be able to manage a project...I mean, I can talk to technical people, but because it's an employer's market out there, they can be very fussy about what they're looking for.

Interviewees were often subject to a 'catch 22' in which they could not gain experience because they did not already have it. Hürriyet had been concerned that work would conflict with her studies and so had no previous employment experience except a work experience placement. Consequently, she was now at a significant disadvantage in the labour market:

And I never really, like, did work, like most people would when they're studying at high school or uni...so when I went out looking for work they're like 'Don't you have any work experience, from your younger years?' So that's been like a barrier for me to getting work. 'Cause I only have the qualifications and not the experience.

Kelly felt disadvantaged by both insufficient experience and education—she had been ill during her VCE year:

after I finished with [the illness] I tried to look, and most of the time they were saying my jobs were too far apart, because of that year that I had been sick and things like that, and most of the time I don't have enough experience, I don't have VCE.

⁶² In their current period of unemployment—which was comparable to many Work for the Dole participants.

Meg also believed that her history of intermittent employment weighed against her:

a lot of it is lack of experience...because I haven't got a very stable work history, you know I've done a lot of temping work and stuff, it's not a stable work history...

John believed that the stigma associated with where he lived, his age and his lack of experience outside of hospitality disadvantaged him:

John: A lot of people [*pause*] like when you ring up from an ad in the paper, because of my age...they think, oh, 19, he just wants to go out...‘What area are you from?’ [An outer suburb]—it's got a pretty bad reputation—‘Oh, he's probably on drugs or something like that’...Sometimes they call you in for an interview, but yeah, basically a lot of people don't want to know me because of my age.

Interviewer: And do you find that discouraging?

John: Ah, sometimes. When I was under 18, because they pay you less they want you, but when you hit 19, 20, 21...[they] think, oh, well we've gotta pay this guy full price pretty much and we don't even know if he can do the job properly. Look, if I don't know the job I tell them...I need training to do this job, even if it's just for two weeks or whatever. I will still work but I just want someone to show me what to do basically. But they don't want to do it, they don't want to go through the time...They want someone with experience.

He commented that even if he went back to school and then got a university degree, employers would still say ‘yeah, he may have done a degree, but there's no on-the-job experience, and how well does this person actually know. And is he reliable, and different things like that’. He commented that ‘the system's gonna collapse on itself one day’, as:

Everyone wants someone with experience, but they're not willing to train anyone to give them that experience. So in the end everybody's gonna want somebody who's got experience in a certain field, and there's not gonna be anyone with the experience...

Insufficient jobs

A number of interviewees commented that employers could insist on experience because there were so many applicants to choose from—the result of insufficient jobs. A third of

interviewees said that there were not enough jobs to apply for, resulting in strong competition for those available. Stefano had found it increasingly difficult to get an interview, or even a response to an application:

Stefano: the circle of friends that I have, it's a large circle and we all seem to have the same experience with regards to working, finding employment...it seems that *[pause]* even the process of application has been cut off somewhat, so you'd apply and you wouldn't even get a reply sometimes, or you'd get a reply but not an interview. So *[pause]* the progression has just been stunted.

Interviewer: So, do you mean in the past that it seemed to be easier to get an interview than it does now?

Stefano: Yeah, it seems that straight after high school we all had jobs, we were all employed, and now we've got more qualifications than back then, like even myself with a degree now, I find it difficult to apply for jobs now, or even get a response from employers. So I feel, yeah, that the whole process is a lot tougher, even if you've got more experience.

Richard said during fifteen months of unemployment he'd had 'two decent interviews' out of 400 applications. He viewed the current labour market as a 'buyer's market' in which even opportunities to get to an interview had become scarce:

High unemployment, it's a numbers game. It's a buyer's market. They can take the most qualified person on paper they can find, without lifting a finger. It's totally frustrating...It's always hard to get a good job, so now we don't even have a chance to get to face-to-face.

Louise thought that the official unemployment rate gave a misleading picture of the actual state of the labour market—a view also expressed by a number of commentators, as was discussed in Chapter 3. She pointed out that the underemployed were counted as employed in the official data:

See the government...like when they talk about employment—I don't think they really know what's going on. So when...there's less unemployment, like 6 point, whatever they say—that's not full-time work, and that's not permanent work either...so it's a bit of crap, if you understand what I mean.

Richard expressed a similar view, commenting that the inclusion of discouraged jobseekers would greatly increase the measured unemployment rate:

unemployment realistically is 15 to 20 per cent of people, because part-timers who give up, women who give up and go back to the home because they're unemployed, they're not counted. So realistically it's, you know...worst unemployment since the Depression, probably...

For a third of interviewees, the structural realities of unemployment at least provided an explanation for their position. An additional explanation for some participants was employer perceptions of appropriate qualification levels, as discussed below.

Overqualified/underqualified

One result of the shortfall in vacancies was that employers could demand a higher level of qualifications than they would have in the past. However, applicants could also be considered *overqualified* for certain jobs, with employers believing that 'overqualified' applicants would be unhappy in the job and would not stay long. One in four interviewees said that employers considered them underqualified, and one in seven thought they were considered overqualified. For example, Stefano commented that despite his psychology degree and his knowledge of music production, he was underqualified for jobs in those fields:

the amount of work that's available is limited now...I know stuff about music [production], but say if there was a job available...instantly they'd select a graduate of [specialist course]...there's qualifications for every little sub-field, so even if you have interest in it, you can't really get into it. And me with the Degree in Psychology, it's really basic and...it's just a general degree that doesn't really open any doors [like] an IT degree would.

After ten year's experience running his own IT business, Phil had been unemployed for ten years due to back problems and now lacked skills in current technology:

I needed to be able to rebuild my skills, you know, bring them up with current technology, operating systems etc, and I just wasn't able to get the training in that area at all. The training that's out there is great for someone who's got no experience with computers, and wants to get the basics. For someone who's already...got lots of experience with past technology and wants to update it to the current leading edge technology, there's nothing, there's no support for 'em.

After unsuccessfully trying to get a job at their previous level, some interviewees had tried applying for lower level positions—but found that employers considered them overqualified. For example, Khoa had found that there were few jobs available at his previous level in his field of IT, but that he was not considered for less senior jobs:

Most employers, they want people very much are stable and stay there. They don't want the lower job, offer to me, the first thing is I'm over 40, second thing is they know my background, qualifications, experience, and they reckon I'm just only parked there for a short period, until I find another job. So my theory on this, I found out that either I apply for the same position as I had, or higher—I tend to be more likely to be interviewed than [when] job is less than qualification.

Jeffrey was also in a difficult position, as all of his previous work experience was with one fast food chain—where he had been promoted to trainee manager. He was considered overqualified for hospitality and retail work below manager level and underqualified for other jobs:

the possibility of me getting another job, with something else is very, very rare because I don't have the experience. But then I do have the experience in hospitality, I get turned down because I've got too much.

Age

Another difficult issue for participants was that of age discrimination. One in five interviewees said that employers considered them too old for available jobs. In some cases, such participants were still young but said that employers wanted juniors to save on wage costs. Only three interviewees said that were considered too young by employers (all participants in this study were aged 18 or over). Cathy commented:

Actually it's hard 'cause I'm 22...like these days, they want someone really young, they would prefer someone younger. I think age has maybe got something to do with it.

Similarly, Louise—aged in her early 20s—believed that many employers did not want to hire her because she was no longer a junior:

My age comes into it a lot, and the fact that I'm just young as well freaks me out, 'cause I think older people, how hard it must be for them. Because a lot of them want juniors, like you know pay rates and whatever.

Meg was substantially older and also felt that her age, combined with insufficient work experience, was a problem:

Meg: I'm waiting for the day when somebody says your age...is a factor. You know, because I mean, I'm [late 30s], and I haven't got a lot of work experience...they want to employ the younger ones where they...don't have to pay so much.

Khoa, in his early 40s, also felt significantly disadvantaged by his age:

Khoa: Well, I think the big hurdle with me at the moment is I'm over 40. I think it's a bit hard to get job. I didn't realise out there that when actually looking for work, people tend to ignore people over 40...

Interviewer: Do employers comment about your age...?

Khoa: No, they don't. But by comparing people—you know, like ten years younger than me, very much the same experience, and they more likely to be interviewed than me.

Similarly, Richard felt that he was considered too old for the youth-dominated advertising industry. He felt that employers were not interested in applicants who were unemployed mid-career, and wanted younger applicants who they could pay less:

The 40 year-old male is like going the way of the dodo, going the way of the dinosaur. It's a shocking thing...if I was an electrical engineer, it would be less of a problem, but I happen to be in a trendy industry, which is about baseball caps. It's about 25 year-olds who think they run the world. So I find myself on the side of the ageing Australian male, it's very funny. I feel like I'm 50, instead of 40...I might just be educated and useless, which is what I call myself. Educated and useless, because I'm too old.

Karen was also in her early 40s, and thought that older workers were being ignored:

the more businesses close down, there's more people that are going to be put on the unemployment pile, and as more people are rejecting older workers, it will be harder for older people, 40 and over, to find employment. So they're not addressing the issues. They think about youth employment, people that come out of prison...migrants, all the minority groups all get looked after, but they forget that people who are 40-plus, have still got lots of drive and energy and enthusiasm, and are

quite happy to learn new stuff, but they're forgotten about, they're just sort of stuck in there, don't want to know about them.

A significant minority of interview participants clearly believed that employers preferred younger applicants, either because they considered them more suitable for positions or could pay them less.

Health problems

Another barrier faced by some participants was health problems. Six interviewees had ongoing health conditions that significantly restricted the jobs that they could do, while a further two had left their last job due to significant health problems. In three of these cases mental health conditions had caused problems at work. Several commented that they had not received adequate support from Centrelink to address their work barriers, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

John was limited in the jobs he could do by asthma and a knee injury. He seemed afraid he would be considered a malingerer, commenting that his injuries sounded like 'nothing at all' but were in fact a significant barrier to getting a job:

I've got a really bad problem with my knees...I can't stand up for more than an hour before my knees start shaking, and I've just got to sit down and relax...So I can't do jobs as a waiter any more. I can't get jobs as a panel beater or anything like that because of the dust, in factories...Just little things like that, that just turn around on you and make it so much harder.

A chronic illness had resulted in Nadja leaving a high-pressure office job she greatly enjoyed. She was now hesitant to return to that industry in case the high-pressure environment exacerbated her condition:

It's like a chronic disease but it's not—it's really not bad, and it's now controlled with medication, but it took a long, long time to control it, I was very up and down for about two years...and now I've got this, like, casual work that I do, some book-keeping.

Similarly, Paul was disadvantaged by a long-term back problem which had started in childhood. Although he had 'always worked through it', he had to avoid physical labour:

I think I'm probably difficult for [case managers], because I've got lower back problems as well and...physical work is basically ruled out for me, so I've got limitations there.

Phil also suffered from back problems, but had refused to go onto a Disability Support Pension or sickness allowance as he wanted to return to work:

Like, at one stage there, for three-odd years, they were determined I was going to end up on a pension...my back problem was such they just reckoned...we're putting you on a pension, retire...I just wasn't happy with the whole concept, you know...Not the type of thing that I wanted, at under 40 years old.

He was now also facing problems with eyestrain after years of work in IT:

As I say, at the moment my eyes are ten years further down the track, I woulda loved to be able do all this study and training ten years ago when, you know, the eyes were still fresh and bright. Now, I'm sort of getting all sorts of headaches and things like that as well, so it's slowing me down...

Overall, consistent with the ABS Survey of Job Search Experience, the major problems interview participants believed they faced in gaining work were insufficient available jobs combined with insufficient experience and (sometimes) qualifications. Participants felt that employers had so many potential applicants that they could be very selective in who they employed and minimise any need to provide training. Age discrimination was also an issue of concern to some participants, and those with ongoing health problems faced particular problems in the job market.

Conclusion

The substantial literature on the impact of unemployment has documented its many negative effects. Consistent with this literature, no interviewees in this study enjoyed being unemployed, which they commonly associated with lack of money, boredom and inactivity. Many male interviewees raised concerns about stigma, depression and low self-esteem, suggesting that without a job they suffered from a lack of a valued identity and felt stigmatised by the 'dole bludger' stereotype. Both men and women experienced unemployment as seriously restricting their ability to meet basic living expenses and requiring a difficult and frustrating search for work. Participants' desire to get on with their lives was being continually frustrated by their inability to gain a job. They also felt that the labour

market was an employers' market, with applicants with less relevant experience than others facing the 'catch 22' situation of lacking the experience to gain a job which would provide the relevant experience. Participants generally felt that their unemployment was due to factors outside of their control—insufficient available jobs, their age or their employment history—but despite this, a number said that it was important to not give up. While—as we saw in the previous chapter—participants did not believe that 'any job is a good job', they clearly were not attracted to the unemployed 'lifestyle'. Their dislike of the inactivity associated with unemployment indicated that any program which offered purposeful activity, such as Work for the Dole, may well provide some benefits. This chapter has considered the experience of the absence of work; the next considers the experience of its consequence—dependence on Centrelink payments and the associated need to meet a large number of behavioural conditions.

CHAPTER 7

'PLAYING THE GAME': JOB SEARCH REQUIREMENTS AND 'BREACHING'

Introduction

To maintain eligibility for income support, unemployed people must undertake a substantial quantity of work-like activities—but without the usual monetary and status rewards of working. In addition to participating in Work for the Dole, they must normally apply for a specified number of jobs per fortnight and complete a Jobseeker Diary. These activities form a part of recipients' mutual obligation requirements; Centrelink (2004) notes that 'Mutual Obligation...means you are expected to actively look for work, accept suitable work offers and undertake extra activities to improve your chances of finding work'. As part of this study's investigation of participants' views about conditionality and compulsion, interviewees were asked about their experience of and views about job search requirements, job search assistance and the enforcement of requirements through payment penalties known as 'breaching'. This chapter initially considers interviewees' views about job search requirements and assistance with job search, before discussing the breaching regime.

Job search requirements

Unemployment payment recipients are normally required to identify on their fortnightly forms three jobs sought and one contact with a Job Network provider. Recipients are also required, usually when they commence receiving unemployment payments, to complete a Jobseeker Diary for twelve weeks and submit it to Centrelink (Ziguras, Dufty & Considine 2003: 19).⁶³ They may have to complete another diary after a further period of unemployment if Centrelink determines that they have made 'marginal work efforts' (Borland & Tseng 2004: 4). They must note 'job contacts' in the diary, including the type of job, type of contact (such as by phone or in person) and employer contact details. The usual requirement is a minimum ten contacts a fortnight; this is reduced if the jobseeker lives in an area with relatively few job opportunities or is also doing Work for the Dole. Recipients considered by Centrelink to be 'at risk' of not complying with the activity test can also be required to ask employers to sign

⁶³ The Jobseeker Diary was introduced in July 1996, shortly after the election of the Howard Government (Borland & Tseng 2004: 4).

an Employer Contact Certificate (ECC) to verify that they have applied for a job with the employer (Tann & Sawyers 2001). The following section outlines previous research on payment recipients' views about these requirements, before considering the views of participants in the current study.

Previous research

As part of a Department of Family and Community Services-commissioned survey on unemployed people's views about activity testing, unemployment payment recipients were asked about the Jobseeker Diary (Tann & Sawyers 2001; information about the methodology is provided in the next chapter). The survey found that two-thirds of participants who had received a diary considered their jobs search requirements to be 'about right'. However, 'over half (52%) agreed that having to fill in a [diary] was depressing as it reminded them of the number of knock backs they had been getting', and 'over a third (36%) agreed that most of the jobs they went for were unsuitable and they only went for them to meet the requirements' (Tann & Sawyers 2001: 14).

The study also identified concerns about Employer Contact Certificates (ECCs). Among those subject to this requirement, 62 per cent agreed that 'asking an employer to sign an ECC is a bit embarrassing', and 'almost half (46%) would not ask an employer to sign an ECC if it was a job they were really interested in'. Nearly half (47 per cent) thought that the requirement motivated them to keep looking for work, and this was particularly the case for young jobseekers (64 per cent), but only 25 per cent thought that it improved their chance of finding work. Most (62 per cent) disagreed that the requirement improved their job prospects, usually because they feared it could reduce their chance of getting a specific job and increase the stigma associated with being unemployed.

An independent study conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence also examined jobseekers' views about job search requirements and other activity testing (Ziguras, Dufty & Considine 2003). The study, conducted in 2002, involved face-to-face interviews with 45 disadvantaged jobseekers recruited through St Vincent de Paul and Brotherhood of St Laurence services in Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula. Participants were very disadvantaged: their average length of time on benefits was 2.6 years, almost half had a recent history of homelessness or transient housing, and one in five were currently unemployed due to ill health.

Participants were asked about their experience of ‘negotiating’ a Preparing for Work Agreement (PFWA), which specifies activities they will undertake such as completing a Jobseeker Diary, contacting employment agencies and being prepared to travel 90 minutes each way to seek work (Ziguras et al. 2003: 18). Just over half of the 28 who could recall signing a PFWA ‘felt that it was useful, mainly by making clear the range of requirements they were expected to meet’. However, most felt that they were not able to include activities of their choice and ‘felt under pressure to agree to whatever the Centrelink staff member proposed’ (Ziguras et al. 2003: 35). Ziguras et al. (2003: 35) note:

Most people commented that the administration of the PFWA did not provide much scope to respond to their own needs and goals. The ‘computer-driven’ method by which the agreement is filled out tended to be formulaic, there was little capacity to record more detailed information, and Centrelink staff did not spend much time in discussion of aims or needs. The process of completing a PFWA clearly does not currently assist in goal setting.

Of the 23 who recalled completing a Jobseeker Diary and commented on its helpfulness, over half (56 per cent) considered it was hardly or not at all helpful, regarding it as ‘just another compliance mechanism or purely a bureaucratic exercise for Centrelink’ (Ziguras et al. 2003: 20). Of the 11 who had been required to ask employers to sign an ECC, all bar one considered this requirement to be unhelpful. Consistent with the DFACS study, ‘the majority suggested that having employers sign an ECC was counterproductive, as employers were less likely to hire someone who was currently unemployed’ (Ziguras et al. 2003: 36).

Ziguras et al. conclude that:

While perceptions about the mutual obligation regime varied, those with greatest barriers to employment felt the system was least helpful. People with substantial barriers to employment, at the same time as managing other difficulties in their lives, were so engaged in meeting their requirements, that these seemed to have replaced actual job search activities. Requirements were experienced only as an annoyance, not as an aid. Many people in this situation expressed great dissatisfaction with, even hostility towards, Centrelink (2003: 38).

In summary, the limited previous research on job search requirements indicates that most unemployment payment recipients consider the Jobseeker Diary to be a reasonable, although depressing, requirement. Most subject to Employer Contact Certificate requirements objected

to these, while the most disadvantaged jobseekers were particularly concerned about the difficulties of meeting job search requirements and a lack of assistance provided.

The current study also investigated interview participants' experience of and views about job search requirements. All but four interviewees had been asked to fill in a Jobseeker Diary at least once—some had done several—and were asked what they thought about the requirements and whether they had experienced any difficulty in meeting them. Unlike the Tann and Sawyers' study, about half the interviewees said that too many applications were required; the same proportion reported experiencing pressure to do work that they considered unsuitable. In addition, a quarter of interviewees specifically expressed concern about the psychological impact of the requirements. In contrast, about a third said that they considered the job search requirements to be 'okay' or 'fair' (see Table 7.1), considerably lower than in the Tann and Sawyers' study.

The differences between the two studies may be attributable to the current study being less representative of unemployment payment recipients as a whole, and the different context in which questions were asked.⁶⁴ Although the interview sample was not designed to be numerically representative of unemployment payment recipients generally, interviewees' responses do highlight the kinds of perspectives unemployed people have on job search requirements, as will be discussed below.

Some participants strongly objected to Centrelink or Job Network advice regarding jobs they should apply for, and felt that service providers did not care about their individual needs or goals. They spoke about the sense of humiliation, stigma and powerlessness they experienced when directed to apply for jobs they did not want or treated as if they were unskilled or trying to 'cheat the system'. Their personal stories tapped into a public narrative about an 'uncaring, faceless bureaucracy' with no interest in their individual needs. Putnis (2001: 76) describes this as the 'citizen against an uncaring bureaucracy' newsframe sometimes utilised by the media when reporting 'stories about the individual versus the social security system'. As Putnis notes, this image strongly contrasts with the alternative public narrative that Centrelink requirements are necessary to catch or deter 'bludgers' or prevent welfare dependency. While the former narrative was often employed by participants who objected to job search and other

⁶⁴ The Tann and Sawyers' study involved closed-response telephone interviews, while the current study involved open-response face-to-face interviews.

Table 7.1: Views of interviewees about job search requirements by sex, skill level and age (%)

	Total	Male	Female	Lower-skilled	Higher-skilled	18-20	21-34	35+
Too many applications required	49	52	43	50	50	56	47	46
Experienced pressure to apply for unsuitable jobs	46	48	43	46	50	56	33	46
Job search requirements ok/fair	35	26	50	33	33	33	33	38
Requirements have a negative psychological impact	30	30	21	17	50	27	27	31
Too much travel required	22	22	21	33	0	44	33	8
<i>n</i>	37	23	14	24	12	9	15	13

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included.

mutual obligation requirements, the latter was frequently called on by those who considered requirements to be fair or reasonable.

Too many applications required

Half of those interviewed thought that too many job applications were required as a condition of receiving payments, particularly for the Jobseeker Diary. This response was consistent across gender, age group and skill level, indicating that it was a view held by people searching for a broad range of job types. For example, Stefano—a psychology graduate in his early 20s—was concerned about both the number of applications required and the job search rules:

In the diary [the requirements are] atrocious. Ten a fortnight, ten documented applications a fortnight. [*Sighs*] It's a hard act to keep up with...You can't have them all bundled up in one day, you have to apply for different jobs, a wide variety, you have to apply for jobs within 90 minutes of your own home...say I filled out 70 per cent honestly, I've actually gone to all the interviews, I've rung up people—everything...in my mind, it's perfect. But according to this diary...it's making me out to be insufficiently seeking work. Which is not the case at all. So, so what if I actually look for four jobs in fortnight one, and 50 in fortnight two?

Jeffrey—in his early 20s—found it difficult to meet the Jobseeker Diary requirements, but was resigned to having to do so:

It is hard. Don't get me wrong but it is, trying to find ten jobs a fortnight—that is basically one a day. My specialty is the hospitality business, but it has to be done, that's the way I see it. If it has to be done, it has to be done.

Phil—a former IT worker in his late 30s—felt that the requirements were imposed on recipients in a one-way fashion, with no allowance for individual circumstances or needs:

At the moment we're given rules, and we're meant to just...take 'em, as opposed to, you know, sitting down and working out what's going to work for particular people in a given situation...it might work as a generic tool for a fair percentage of the people, but it's not going to work for everyone, and there should be some allowance for the people who have got their alternative approaches to...getting employment.

One in five interviewees expressed concern about the requirement that jobseekers apply for jobs up to 90 minutes away from their home each way. These participants argued that it was

too costly for them to travel that distance looking for jobs or that they did not want a job that far from home, and many felt that Centrelink did not acknowledge the difficulties they faced in meeting travel costs. For example, John—who had most recently worked in hospitality—found that there were not enough jobs for him to apply for within a reasonable distance from home and that searching further afield was too costly:

Interviewer: What do you think about having to apply for the ten jobs a fortnight?

John: Sometimes it's ridiculous, because like I can apply for ten jobs a fortnight, that's not a problem, but after a while there's nowhere in the area that you can go for a job, and you've got to start goin' even further away and it just costs way too much to get to an interview that's gonna be in St Kilda...if you're only on the dole for maybe four or five months you can get ten jobs a fortnight...but when you're on it for a couple of years...after a while you've got nowhere else to go.

Gary, who had last worked at a car factory, also objected to the cost of looking for jobs a long way from home. He was particularly annoyed that Centrelink had told him he should go in person rather than telephoning:

they want you to go driving around everywhere, it costs money, but they don't take that in concern. After you've done 52 jobs around this area...and then you gotta move further and it costs more money the further you go...I had a complaint about me using the phone. I said 'Well, it's cheaper for me to ring up than to go driving around'. I said 'Are you gonna give me more money to drive around?'

Joe, a labourer and driver, objected to pressure to accept work a long distance from home:

Interviewer: Has there ever been any pressure from Centrelink or the Job Network agencies to apply for jobs that you don't want?

Joe: From the agencies, yes. They believe that you should take any work that's offered to you, or even Centrelink believes that. I don't think that's right...you have to be prepared to travel an hour and a half each way to work, and like if you turn down that job, like [if you]...say to Centrelink 'Look, I didn't want it because it's too far', they don't take that into consideration.

Joe was an example of a participant who felt pressured by the requirements to apply for unsuitable work. Many participants had experienced such pressure, as discussed below.

Pressure to do unsuitable work

Almost half of those interviewed said that they had experienced pressure from Centrelink or Job Network providers to apply for jobs that were unsuitable, either through inappropriate referrals or due to the high number of applications required for the Jobseeker Diary. Participants' comments on this issue reflected their belief that they should seek and accept work that to some extent matched their interests and abilities, as discussed in Chapter 5. A third had experienced pressure from Centrelink or Job Network providers to apply for specific jobs that they thought were unsuitable—usually because they did not want the type of work involved or the job was too far away.

The group most likely to report experiencing pressure to apply for unsuitable jobs were those aged 18 to 20 (56 per cent—see Table 7.1). This group were entirely lower skilled workers, and there may have been few jobs for which they were qualified to apply—with consequently greater pressure to apply for jobs which they considered unsuitable. Lower skilled workers were most concerned about pressure to apply for jobs involving substantial travel time and costs (a third of lower skilled workers but no higher skilled workers expressed this concern). In contrast, higher skilled workers were more concerned about pressure to apply for jobs considerably below their skill level (a third of higher skilled workers but no lower skilled workers raised this issue). These differences are consistent with the higher skilled being more concerned with job content such as variety and opportunities to learn, while the lower skilled were more concerned with their lack of money while unemployed, including the costs of job search—as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Several interviewees commented that Job Network providers were only motivated by the desire to maximise their placement fees, and referred clients to any jobs regardless of their suitability. For example, Leah—who was aged under 21—was interested in child care, cleaning or factory work, but felt that she was being pressured to do other work she did not want. When asked whether her Job Network provider notified her of job vacancies, she commented:

Leah: Yeah...and they ring you up and just say there's a job at a bakery, and you're not really keen about it, they'll just send your resume off for you. I think that's a bit unfair, it is.

Interviewer: So even if you said you don't want that job they'll still send the resume?

Leah: Yeah...and if they're interested and they call you up for an interview, you've got to go. You can't reject it, otherwise they report back to Centrelink and that's it, they'll put a breach on you or they'll cut you off.

Leah felt that Job Network providers were not interested in her preferences:

I don't know, they're very pushy. They don't actually agree with the jobs that you want to do. They want to just put you in what they think suits you.

Luke, who had left his job as an apprentice chef due to an abusive employer, had experienced similar pressure from Job Network providers:

They do try to con you into doing a job like you didn't want to do. And then...if you don't show up to it, then they cut you straight off [Centrelink payments]. So, you gotta watch a lot of them, just to make sure that they are genuine, and do have your best interests instead of just wanting to get you a job what you don't enjoy doing.

Nathan thought that Job Network organisations aimed to move people into jobs as soon as possible—regardless of their suitability—to maximise their placement fees:

because they are all private, they just want the people they can come in, chuck them into boring job x...like a call centre, and go, 'Thank you for my cheque'...those people have no interest in the actual client themselves.

Similarly, Tran—who was in his early 20s and had a diploma in design—felt that Job Network providers were unsupportive and required him to apply for unsuitable jobs so they could get job placement fees:

[Intensive Assistance] wasn't really helpful. It was more like all they do is pester you...the place I went with, it didn't seem like they actually care...because they're getting certain funding from the

government and they have to meet that, so their main job is just to find you job, it doesn't really matter if you're happy with that job, like any job.

The views of these participants are consistent with Considine's (2003) finding (discussed in Chapter 3) that the Job Network payment structure encouraged a staff focus on moving clients off benefits as soon as possible, rather than helping clients to meet their own work goals.

Some interviewees also objected to pressure from Centrelink to apply for jobs which they considered to be unsuitable. A Centrelink Customer Service Officer had told Hürriyet that any job was better than receiving Centrelink payments, which as a university graduate she considered inappropriate:

They're just like, you know 'Get any work and get off our back'. It's weird...They're like 'Accept *anything*, from *any* location'. They don't care if you want the job, if you're happy with it or not as long as you have something, so you don't get money from Centrelink. The lady told me openly... 'Any work is better than getting payments from Centrelink'...and I was quite surprised her, you know, saying that to a person who has completed university. Like I can't apply for jobs as a factory hand, or a labourer, something like that. They don't care. They treat everyone the same.

Karen, a project manager in her early 40s, was also very unhappy with how Centrelink staff treated her. She believed that Centrelink staff did not appreciate that it was pointless for jobseekers with management experience to apply for much lower level positions:

they're just so rude sometimes, and they just don't seem to have the knowledge...all they do is read the riot act. They don't understand that people who've been in management positions or executive positions have a very different approach to the work environment to say, people at other levels...if you apply for a job a lot lower than what your experience is, you don't get considered...[employers] think well, this person's not going to stay, and I'm not going to get the value out of them, so I'm not going to even bother interviewing them.

Karen felt that Centrelink treated unemployed people uniformly as low-skilled 'dole bludgers' who should take any work they could get, regardless of their skill level. Since receiving income support she had accepted several short-term, low-skilled jobs, but was no longer willing to accept such work:

this is the way Centrelink thinks, that, you know, they've got these rigid little rules, and you can't deviate away. Everyone is treated exactly the same, that we're all a bunch of morons, that we're low-paid, unskilled workers...And that we're all dole bludgers, and that we're all out there to scam the system, and that's the impression I get. And you know, people do make mistakes, genuine mistakes, and there are people out there who want to scam the system...play their little games, but there are people that maybe just want to...just survive.

Two interviewees said that they had been pressured to do work that they were physically incapable of. John believed that Centrelink had ignored his asthma and damaged knees:

I told them I had a problem with my knees and with my asthma I can't go for every job, and they just turn around and say, 'You've got no basis'...Doesn't matter whether it be the worst job in the world, they want you to get that job. If they found out that you've refused a job, they will actually put a breach on you, basically...Even if it's costing you, you are not allowed to say no—actual guy from Centrelink told me that...I told them with my knees, and they said 'Look, if all you can find is waiting, then that's what you gotta do'.

Similarly, Paul felt that a case manager at the rehabilitation agency CRS had pressured him inappropriately:

I had some bad injuries at the time and I had blurred vision in my left eye, and it was like she didn't believe me, you know, it was like, 'Oh, you can do that, you can do this'. You've got to be kidding, aren't you? *[laughs]*.

While these participants had experienced *direct* pressure to apply for jobs they did not want, others felt *indirect* pressure due to the high number of applications required under job search rules, as discussed below.

'Meeting the quota'

The pressure to 'meet the quota' of applications required led to some interviewees applying for jobs they did not want or believed they had no hope of getting; an experience mentioned by six interviewees. In these cases, job search became an empty ritual which served the purpose of repeatedly demonstrating the willingness to work, rather than actually gaining work. Phil, an IT worker who had been unemployed for several years with back pain and other health problems, experienced ongoing pressure to apply for unsuitable jobs. He had

been trying unsuccessfully to get financial assistance to upgrade his IT skills, and was applying for jobs without hope of success. He commented:

it's easy enough to find three jobs to go for...to me it's a bit of a pointless exercise in that I haven't got the skills to be able to take on those jobs at the moment. So, yeah, it's frustrating from that point of view. I know I'm going out and applying for jobs that I can't get, but I just got to keep doing it...to satisfy the quota.

Jeffrey, who faced a lack of hospitality jobs for an adult worker with management experience, felt that Centrelink's job search requirements simply enforced activity without regard to its usefulness:

all they see is just applying for jobs. Just apply for jobs, apply for jobs, apply for jobs. They don't see it as, okay, you've applied for jobs, you have too much experience. They don't go into detail of what's actually happening. All they want to know is how many jobs you applied for.

Tuti, an IT worker, also viewed the diary as a pointless exercise in 'going through the motions'. He had lost his job following an industry downturn and there were few jobs advertised in his field:

Jobseeker Diary is alright, you know, as long as there is a job market. If there isn't any job market then...I write everything in the job diary, nicely, and then give it back to the Centrelink...

Five interviewees said or strongly implied that they 'made up' some employer contacts for their Centrelink forms. For example, there were few jobs Dan—who was in his 40s and had been unemployed for over a year—could apply for, and so he sometimes invented them. He felt that the system was to some extent forcing him to lie, as he would not get income support without saying he had applied for the right number of jobs, regardless of their availability:

Interviewer: And what do you think about the number of jobs that you have to apply for a fortnight?

Dan: Well, I think it's too much probably, because there's not that many jobs that I can do, and I can't really go for jobs that I can't do. So, it's a bit difficult to put down ten a fortnight, when there's only one job a week in the paper, or wherever...

Interviewer: So what do you do in those situations?

Dan: Lie *[laughs]*. Oh, no, I just—yeah...I just put something down that I feel like...maybe could do or just something like that...because that's what they want to see...and if I don't, I don't get paid, so, it's sort of forcing me to be a little bit deceitful, I suppose.

Dan's comments echoed Peel's discussion of 'the game' which those reliant on income support had to play to get assistance: 'You might lose a little dignity, you might have to spin out a story that isn't absolutely true, but that way you stand some chance of getting help. That's the game' (Peel 2003: 76). Another interviewee, Nathan, viewed the whole system as a game—he believed that the job search requirements were pointless as Jobseeker Diaries and fortnightly forms were not checked:

It would be great if people weren't faking it, but all they've got to do is say 'I rang these people, prove otherwise'. I don't know anyone who has been checked up on a Jobseeker Diary job, let alone their fortnightly form or anything—I mean what's the sense of a fortnightly form if no-one ever checks it?

Others did, however, believe they were being 'checked up on'. Kelly had a friend who had been asked for evidence of her job applications:

I know that she got checked up on, because they asked her for...the notices when they say that you didn't get the job, they send out a letter to you. She got asked to bring them in, and because she doesn't keep them...and they didn't believe her and they had to go back through the diary and ring up some people and say 'Did she come in there?'

Kate, a sales assistant aged under 21, also had reason to believe that entries were checked and wanted to ensure that her entries were 'legit':

a couple of times I've actually had them ring me, and ask me if I'm rah rah rah's company and I'm like 'Hey?...this is a private house'. 'Okay thanks, that's a bodgy' and they hang up. The only thing I can gather is it's Centrelink ringin' up, because every now and then, they will do a random. But I've been told they only do that if you give them any suspicion. But, I don't want to do that anyway. I want them to know that every time they ring up, every job they ring up is legit, because that's how it's supposed to be done anyway. It's hard, they do make you work your balls, but, you've gotta do it.

Nathan was apparently correct in his belief that cross-checking with employers was not routinely undertaken. In response to Labor questions, the Minister for Family and Community Services advised in July 2003 that Centrelink checked only the number of jobs applied for, the types of jobs and types of contacts listed, and their geographical spread. The Department of Family and Community Services had no records of jobseekers being penalised for inventing entries, although 10,600 unemployed people had been penalised in 2001/02 for submitting an ‘unsatisfactory’ Jobseeker Diary (out of 727,000 Diaries distributed in that year—Crabb 2003). It seems that Centrelink primarily relied on jobseekers feeling obliged to meet the requirements or fearing being ‘caught out’, rather than actual substantial checking of the accuracy of entries. Interviewees’ common experience of being ‘breached’, as will be discussed later in this chapter, may have reinforced the need to meet requirements by contributing to a fear of being found out and penalised if they did not.

Psychological impact of requirements

In addition to the practical concerns many interviewees had about job search requirements, a quarter specifically expressed concern about their psychological impact. Higher skilled workers were markedly more likely to express such concern than lower skilled workers (50 per cent compared to 17 per cent—see Table 7.1), perhaps because their previous experience of relatively high-status work diverged so markedly from the feelings of powerlessness and stigma they now experienced. For example, Karen felt a strong sense of being stigmatised and harassed by Centrelink, despite feeling that she was ‘meeting all the requirements’ and trying hard to get a job or start her own business through the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS):

Centrelink have said, ‘Well, there are people who don’t comply with things, and that’s why we treat everyone the same’, and I actually said to Centrelink, ‘I feel like a *criminal*’. Every time I get something to *check* on me, and...I feel like saying, ‘Why don’t you talk to the other departments in Centrelink?’ They don’t talk to each other to find out what’s going on. Yeah, just *sick* of all the harassment.

Stefano believed that active jobseekers were having their honesty constantly questioned, while those who ‘fudged’ could still get around the requirements. Like many in the Tann and Sawyers (2001) study, he found the Employer Contact Certificate requirement ‘almost like humiliation’:

they're putting greater stress on the people that actually are looking for work. They're making them document every single thing that they go to. Rather than them knowing in their own mind that they're honest...they get their honesty abused...you go for a decent set of interviews, but you have to document everything, you even have to get a stamp from their workplace. To go to that extent, it's almost like humiliation...It's just, it's insulting the honesty of people, and...it's making the people that fudge...work more keenly to fudge it, that's all it is.

Those facing personal or financial problems, such as Jason—a lower skilled worker aged under 21—could find having to complete the diary particularly stressful:

Especially if you've got something on your plate you know, financial troubles, other troubles...You look at your diary, and I've done that many times, and just thrown it across the room, just to get it out of my sight, because I do not want to think about it. It's actually stressing.

Paul, aged in his 40s, felt the government had increased the number of job applications required 'purely for the public, just to make them think, you know, "We'll get on top of these dole bludgers"—it's that sort of mentality'. When asked whether the requirements made 'much difference to the people on the payments themselves', he responded:

Speaking for people my age, no. None whatsoever...If you get a job, you get a job...it's no incentive, or discipline thing or anything—has no effect whatsoever. Except negativity in that person...I know people who've gotta write out the eight and they're just terrified by it, yeah. There just aren't eight jobs per fortnight to go for, like in most cases, for most people.

Some were resigned to 'playing the game' at Centrelink, such as Rod, a musician in his late 30s:

Rod: ...You've got to play the game. You have to play the game.

Interviewer: Uh huh. And what does playing the game involve?

Rod: Whatever they want you to do, you know. Get a job, you know, in a plastics factory, or go to Job Search Training, which is even more of a zoo than this [Work for the Dole project] is...whatever they do, whatever they say, you have to do, and it's very—you know, it's quite demeaning.

Again, there are echoes of Peel's (2003) discussion of the 'game', in which the unemployed have to tolerate demeaning requirements in order to qualify for income support. Rod thought that some income support recipients 'regressed' to adolescent-like behaviour in reaction to these requirements:

There's people in there taking this money to sustain themselves, and they get indignant, you know, when they have to be somewhere or whatever...outwardly indignant. I mean, I'm indignant all the time about it, but outwardly, you know, 'You can't make me do this!' What are you—fourteen? You know, what's the story here? It's funny to see the dynamics of a group like that...they just sort of regress back to school. I guess it's, you know, somewhere that's not as brutal as the real outside world...

This comment was interesting in light of the paternalist rationale for mutual obligation, which casts Centrelink in the quasi-parental role of requiring certain activities of jobseekers 'for their own benefit'. In Rod's view, some jobseekers responded to paternalist requirements by 'regressing' to an adolescent-like resistance of authority—not an outcome likely to support their sense of agency.

These participants felt that current job search requirements were demeaning and added to their feelings of powerlessness and anxiety about being unemployed. Their concerns about the psychological impact of job search requirements were consistent with Fryer and Winefield's (1998) argument that job search may cause as much psychological distress as a highly stressful job. For many participants, pressure to apply for unsuitable jobs and to repeatedly 'prove' they were genuine undermined their sense of agency. However, while most interviewees expressed concerns about job search requirements, a substantial minority considered them to be reasonable, as will be discussed below.

Requirements fair

About a third of interviewees said they saw the job search requirements as fair or reasonable, either because they could be used to identify people who were not genuinely looking for work or because it was necessary to apply for that many jobs to get work. Notably, half of the women considered the requirements to be fair while only a quarter of the men shared this view (see Table 7.1). This was consistent with the higher proportions of men who believed that unemployment payments should not be conditional on job search requirements, as will be discussed in Chapter 10. Women were more likely to view the right to income support as

being conditional on the individual behaviour of jobseekers, which may have been at least partially due to the lower average education level of women in the sample—those with less education were also more inclined to this view. This finding on gender differences is consistent, however, with the finding from the 1999 SPRC survey that women were significantly more likely than men to support mutual obligation requirements (as we saw in Chapter 3).

Kelly viewed the job search requirements as a reasonable way to identify people who ‘aren’t really doing what they should be’, which she was felt was unfair when she herself was meeting the requirements:

Interviewer: And do you agree or disagree with having to apply for the ten jobs a fortnight, for the diary?

Kelly: I agree with it, because I think most people don’t really look for jobs. I think they just fill ‘em out from the phone book, and things like that [*laughs*]... I’ve seen a lot of people at Centrelink just print ‘em out and then fill ‘em out. I don’t like that, because here I am looking for work, and other people aren’t really doing what they should be.

Kelly considered that the diary made it ‘harder for people to make it up’ because more detail was required about the jobs applied for. For participants such as Kelly, the job search requirements were a reasonable way to ensure compliance by making it harder for people to avoid seeking work. For others, such as Lisa, applying for at least three jobs a fortnight was necessary to get work, ‘because that’s how much you should be looking for anyway. If you want to go out and work...you should be doing more than three’ (she had not yet been asked to complete a Jobseeker Diary, with its more intensive requirements).

Some interviewees had quite complex reactions to the requirements. For example, Con—who was Australian-born of Greek parents—thought that the requirements were fair ‘in theory’, as he believed that the purpose of unemployment payments was ‘to try and get you to work’. However, he also felt that he was being ‘cracked down’ on when he had done nothing wrong. He appeared to be experiencing some tension between his view that the overall system was justified, and his personal treatment under it:

Well, [the requirements are] a pain, but when you think about it, it's fair, and it works, in trying to get you to work...so, in theory, in my opinion, coming from my background...I'd say yeah, it's a fair system...I did one [Centrelink] interview, a couple of weeks ago [and now] they want to see me again with my Jobseeker Diary...when you know in your own mind...that you're trying to do the best you can, so, you think, okay, I can see that you're trying to crack down, but you're cracking down on the wrong person at that moment.

Joe, who was born in the US of Macedonian parents, also had quite complex views about the job search conditions. While he felt that it was generally 'too easy' to get unemployment payments in Australia, he also thought the requirements were 'a bit harsh' for those facing social or emotional problems. Although he felt that it was 'good for Australia' that payments were available, he believed that they were too readily available and should not be seen as an entitlement:

Interviewer: And what do you think about the Centrelink requirements?

Joe: ...they're not that harsh. But with some, the requirements they have on some certain situations, they are a bit harsh. Like, they don't take into consideration factors—social, emotional status and all that...and they just turn you away. But as in them giving you money every fortnight, yes they do do that, and that's good for Australia, that we have a government that will look after the people that don't work, but it creates a lot of people that just become lazy then...I dunno, I just reckon it's a bit too easy.

Interviewer: Right. What do you think's 'a bit easy' about it?

Joe: Just having to go to Centrelink and, you know, 'Oh, I've got no work' and then once—look the money they're giving you isn't a lot but they shouldn't be entitled [*sic*] to give you anything. It's not their problem that you can't get a job.

There is now some independent research available on the outcomes of the Jobseeker Diary requirements. Borland and Tseng (2004) compared off-benefit outcomes for 18 to 49 year-olds required to complete a Jobseeker Diary during 1997/98 with a matched group not subject to this requirement.⁶⁵ The study found that 36.6 per cent of those required to complete a

⁶⁵ The time period was chosen because industrial action underway in Centrelink at that time 'introduced a significant source of randomness into assignment into the JSD' (Borland & Tseng 2004: i).

Jobseeker Diary had left benefit six months after commencing the diary, compared to 31.5 per cent of the control group—a difference of 4.3 per cent. However, in the twelve months after commencement the overall average difference in period on payments between the groups was only about one fortnight. In addition, the data set used (the Department of Family and Community Services Longitudinal Administrative Data Set) did not provide information on whether those who had left benefits had obtained work. So while Borland and Tseng concluded that the Jobseeker Diary requirements had a positive effect on off-benefit outcomes, there is still a lack of evidence of a substantial impact on *employment* outcomes.

Overall, many participants had concerns about the Jobseeker Diary and other aspects of the job search requirements, and were particularly concerned about the reduced autonomy experienced through being pressured to apply for jobs they considered inappropriate. Some participants felt powerless and demeaned when they were treated ‘like a number’ or as if they were ‘cheating the system’, with no account taken of their individual needs and aims. Further, many had substantial concerns about the assistance they received to help them with job search, as will be discussed below.

Assistance provided by agencies

As was discussed in Chapter 3, since 1998 the Job Network system has been the primary mechanism for assisting jobseekers to get work.⁶⁶ However, the great majority of interview participants thought that Job Network agencies had not helped them with job search. When asked whether they found Job Network agencies helpful and if they had ever been contacted regarding job vacancies, most responded that they did not find agencies helpful and two-thirds said that they had not been assisted with appropriate referrals. In most cases they said they had never been contacted about job vacancies, and had to rely on regularly checking whether the agency had suitable jobs listed. In some cases they had been contacted about clearly unsuitable jobs.

The ten interviewees who had previously received Intensive Assistance were more likely to have received helpful referrals, with half of these saying they had been helped in this way. In contrast, of the 27 interviewees who had *not* received Intensive Assistance, only five reported having been assisted with appropriate job referrals. Further, only one in five interviewees

⁶⁶ At the time interviews took place in late 2002, the second round of Job Network contracts were in operation.

found Job Network agencies helpful in providing services other than referrals; these participants appreciated the availability of free facilities (such as computers, internet access, photocopiers, fax, and telephone calls) and help with resume writing and interview techniques through Jobseeker Training courses.

Many interviewees—40 per cent—said that they wanted more assistance with job referrals. They wanted Job Network agencies to contact them when a vacancy matched what they were seeking, instead of having to constantly contact agencies in case a suitable job was available. This onus placed on jobseekers was viewed by many as a waste of money and effort and could also be demoralising. Some also experienced the Job Network as a hurdle to be overcome in the search for work, such as Nathan:

Interviewer: It sounds like you don't use the Job Network agency regularly?

Nathan: I tried, but the services they were meant to provide they don't. So that was a joke. They don't have any jobs that aren't advertised, that you can't access just straight off the net or in the social security. In a lot of ways they can be a hindrance because it's like you've got to go to them, and get them to go to the employer, which is just a layer of bureaucracy that shouldn't exist. If they've got a job advertised it should be the people can go and apply directly.

Gary had been unemployed for over twelve months in the last three years, but said that he had never been contacted by a Job Network provider to inform him that a job was available; instead he had to spend some of his very limited income on visiting the provider. John commented that unemployed people could not afford to be constantly going into Job Network providers or Centrelink to check what jobs were available:

[Agencies] say something like 'Yeah, don't worry, if they want that job so badly, they can come in'. The thing is—what they don't understand...You can't go there day after day after day after day. It puts too much stress on the person, and costs money...Not everybody can afford that every day.

When asked whether he thought he had a right to assistance to get work, Joe responded:

Yes, 'course I do but...I found that lately they're not prepared to offer extensive assistance to people who really want to work, it's like more or less 'Give me your resume and I'll be in contact with you', and they never contact you...It just happened to me too many times.

Some who utilised the online and touch-screen systems to search for vacancies were also frustrated by the prevalence of out-of-date job advertisements. For example, Steve commented:

I've rang for jobs and been told that it's been filled, it was filled a week ago, and it's still on the system, still on the touch screen system. That makes it very frustrating for me...*[Sigh]*...last week I went through jobs that I was qualified to do...and I had applied for them all already, they're still on the system. Some of them I've applied for twice and still haven't heard anything back.

For Elena, aged under 21, the lack of assistance showed that the government did not care about unemployed people:

I believe that they can help a bit more, 'cause they don't really help much. The government doesn't—not with the unemployed. They don't really care about the unemployed people. I've noticed that, you know.

Similarly, Lisa thought that government assistance was mainly limited to income support. Like some other participants, she focused her comments on Centrelink—as the agency with which she had most contact—despite the fact that Job Network agencies have primary responsibility for assisting the unemployed to get work:

They don't help you. Centrelink don't help you. All they do is give you money. And they try and guide you into that path, but they do not find it for you...Out of probably 100 per cent they probably give you only about 65—not even 65, probably even about 45 per cent. All they're trying to do is give you that backbone of money, to force you into doing what you need to do.

Half of the interviewees said that the government should provide more personalised assistance to assist them to gain work. Many would have liked one-on-one advice and assistance with job search, but were not eligible for such assistance because they did not qualify for Intensive Assistance; a number had previously received Intensive Assistance but no longer did. Some interviewees were frustrated by the small number of options for assistance available, as they

felt they had not received appropriate support. For example, Nadja wished that personalised support was available when needed:

I'd like to be able to say to them, 'Look, I've been looking for work for six months, I'm sick of it, please help me'. I'd like for them to have a person that's there, that can help me.

Similarly, Jason felt that he was just 'another number' at his Centrelink office and received no individualised assistance:

even just talking to the people when they're having interviews they're just like 'Yep, yep, no, no'. Just pretty much get you in, get you out. You're another number, another client, see you later...

When asked whether he thought he had a right to assistance to get work, Rod had a pithy comment about mutual obligation:

Yeah, because again, if I'm playing their game, then they need to play as well. And they need to put in, and not just generalise about stinkin' dole bludgers, or whatever we're classified as these days. It needs to work both ways, yeah.

Since participants were interviewed for this study the government has introduced a number of changes to the Job Network as part of the third round of Job Network contracts. This includes a Service Guarantee (which defines the nature and frequency of services which jobseekers will receive), automatic referral to customised assistance (formerly Intensive Assistance) after twelve months of unemployment,⁶⁷ and automated electronic matching of jobseekers through the online Australian Job Search database (DEWR 2002). Although initial glitches in the automated referral system were reported—for example, *The Age* reported that a 62 year-old was notified of a vacancy as a junior assembler and a 27 year-old man was informed about a call girl's job (Crabb, Szego & Millburn 2003)—if functioning effectively these measures should go some way to addressing participants' concerns regarding basic job referrals and assistance. However, the changes did not address their concerns about the pressure to apply for inappropriate jobs and a lack of personalised support for those ineligible for Intensive Assistance (now called customised assistance).

⁶⁷ Previously referral to Intensive Assistance was subject to an assessment that jobseekers met the required level of disadvantage using the Jobseeker Classification Instrument; many long-term unemployed did not qualify (DEWRSB 2001: 29–33).

Regardless of such concerns, participants had little option but to comply with job search requirements. Those who did not, in Centrelink's assessment, meet job search or other payment conditions faced serious consequences: payment reductions or suspension.

The breaching regime

The government's mutual obligation requirements are enforced by a system of heavy penalties for non-compliance. Penalties can be applied for failure to meet 49 'activity test' requirements, and 19 'administrative' requirements such as attending Centrelink interviews and providing certain kinds of information to Centrelink (Pearce, Disney & Ridout 2002: 4). Penalties depend on whether recipients have previously 'breached' payment conditions in the previous two years: on the first activity test 'breach', payments are reduced by 18 per cent for 26 weeks, on the second breach, by 24 per cent for 26 weeks, and on the third breach, payment is stopped for eight weeks (Centrelink 2004b). Administrative breaches are penalised with a 16 per cent reduction of payment for thirteen weeks or two weeks non-payment. This section considers interviewees' experience of and views about breaching, after first outlining the changes to the breaching regime under the Howard Government.

The number of breaches imposed on unemployment payment recipients increased dramatically following the Howard Government's tightening of administrative and activity test requirements and imposition of increased obligations on the unemployed (National Welfare Rights Network & ACOSS 2000: 2). The number of breaches recorded almost tripled between 1997/98 and 2000/01, rising from 120,700 to 346,100 (National Welfare Rights Network & ACOSS 2000: 2; Lackner & Marston 2003: 16). ACOSS (2001b) estimated that 35,400 third breach penalties were imposed in 2000/01—two and a half times the 13,600 third breaches imposed a year earlier. The most common reasons for breaching in 1999/2000 were failure to attend an information seminar (15.6 per cent of breaches), failure to correctly declare earnings (14 per cent), and failure to attend an interview with a service provider (11.7 per cent).

The 'breaching regime' has been strongly criticised by welfare organisations and social policy researchers (for example, National Welfare Rights Network & ACOSS 2000; Hanover Welfare Services 2000; Salvation Army 2001; Lackner & Marston 2003). This led in August 2001 to a coalition of nine community sector, employment service and union organisations

commissioning an independent review of the breaching system, conducted by Professor Dennis Pearce (Emeritus Professor of Law, ANU), Professor Julian Disney (Director, Social Justice Project, University of New South Wales) and Heather Ridout (Deputy Chief Executive, Australian Industry Group) (ACOSS 2001c).

The Independent Review recommended extensive changes to the breaching regime, including steps to 'ensure that obligations imposed on jobseekers are appropriate to their particular circumstances' and improvements to Centrelink and Job Network communication with jobseekers. It proposed that Job Network providers be required to report apparent breaches only if they are 'satisfied that the jobseeker did not have a reasonable excuse for the apparent non-compliance and has not made subsequent reasonable attempts to comply', and that steps be taken to ensure jobseekers 'have a reasonable opportunity to explain their action before a decision is taken' and are provided with fourteen days warning before penalties are applied. The review also recommended that penalties be repaid to jobseekers if they take reasonable steps to comply within four weeks, and that maximum penalties be limited to 25 per cent of payments for eight weeks 'except in the case of persistent serious breaches' (Pearce, Disney & Ridout 2002: 14, 69–70, 74–5, 83–5). A Commonwealth Ombudsman (2002) report on breach penalties made similar recommendations regarding breaching processes.

The government responded to the criticism and proposals for change with a number of limited changes to the breaching regime. Since July 2001, jobseekers can have their penalties waived if they agree to commence a Work for the Dole placement (Pearce, Disney & Ridout 2002: 86). In some cases breaches can also be waived for Newstart recipients who start another specified program (Lackner & Marston 2003: 27). In 2001/02 the Department of Family and Community Services issued a policy statement 'emphasising that a jobseeker's assertion that a letter was not received is to be accepted if there is "no valid reason to doubt it"' (Pearce et al. 2002: 34). In addition, in 2002 the Minister for Family and Community Services 'announced a number of changes, including lessening penalties for some activities and introducing 'temporary suspensions' for jobseekers who miss appointments' (Lackner & Marston 2003: 17).

Several initiatives were also introduced to attempt to gain jobseeker compliance without further breaching. In late 2001 Centrelink trialled a Second Breach Intervention Pilot and introduced a Third Breach Alert process, both of which involved more detailed investigations

of extenuating circumstances and of ways to ensure compliance for jobseekers who had been breached twice. Centrelink also introduced ‘a supplementary assessment process when the initial Centrelink interview indicates that...specialist assistance may be appropriate’ (Pearce et al. 2002: 7–8).

The increased focus on breaching processes appeared to have a substantial impact: between 2000/01 and 2001/02 the number of breaches imposed declined from 346,100 to 232,800—a fall of 32.7 per cent (Lackner & Marston 2003: 16). Appeals data also indicated a significant drop in breaching which could not be sustained on client appeal, although a high number of such breaches remained. The number of breaches imposed following a participation report from a provider and later revoked following client appeal decreased from a very substantial 58,700 in 2000/01 (34.3 per cent of all participation report breaches) to 14,500 (18.3 per cent) (Lackner & Marston 2003: 31).

In March 2003, in a concession to the Democrats to secure support for the extension of mutual obligation requirements to sole parents and the mature-age unemployed, the government agreed to soften first breach penalties. Jobseekers facing a first breach penalty for not meeting certain requirements (such as missing a Centrelink interview) now faced eight instead of 26 weeks of penalty if they attend an interview as soon as possible. However, penalties for second and third breaches were not changed (Lackner & Marston 2003: 15; Cherry 2003). The government also agreed to establish a taskforce to further examine Centrelink breaching processes (DFaCS 2003).

Interviews for the present study were undertaken between July and September 2002—about a year after the peak in breaching, although the number of breaches remained high. Several of the initiatives outlined above had already been introduced at the time of interviews, including penalty waivers if recipients started Work for the Dole, reductions in penalties for some activities and increased investigation of extenuating circumstances. However, many interview participants’ experiences of and perceptions about the breaching regime remained very negative, as will be discussed in the following section.

Experience of breaching

About 40 per cent of interview participants in the present study, fifteen in total, said that their payment had been reduced or stopped for a period due to alleged or actual failure to meet Centrelink requirements; most of these breaches had occurred during 2002. This was comparable to the findings of the Brotherhood of St Laurence study of 45 disadvantaged unemployment payment recipients discussed earlier in this chapter, of whom twelve (or one-quarter) had had their payments reduced or stopped in the previous year due to a breach penalty (Ziguras, Dufty & Considine 2003: 26). Participants in the current study most commonly attributed such penalties to system error or unreasonable Centrelink requirements, as discussed below.

System error

Six interviewees said that their payments had been stopped or reduced due to system error. In several cases, phone calls they had made to a Job Network member or Centrelink explaining why they could not attend an interview were not recorded, despite verbal assurances that they would be. Such oversights resulted in payments being stopped, and sometimes necessitated many contacts with Centrelink to get them reinstated. In some cases, according to interviewees, payments were reduced for six months because of errors by Centrelink or Job Network providers.

Gary had been subjected to a payment suspension when he could not attend an appointment with a Job Network provider because he was at a job interview:

I actually rang the people up and I said ‘Look, I can’t attend the appointment, I’ve got a job interview’, and they said ‘Yep, no problems, but we’ll ring you up and make another appointment’...And they never rang me up. I just got a letter sent in the mail saying that because I didn’t attend the interview I’m going to be suspended of all payments...

Gary had further problems when he tried to prove that he had gone to the interview by providing an interview slip from the employer:

they said no, they weren’t going to accept that because he didn’t have a proper business stamp on it. It had his ABN number, it had everything...I said look it was only a small business...they

said—‘Why hasn’t he got his own letterhead then?’ They were actually deducting my payments because of that.

Gary was told that Centrelink would follow up the issue with the employer, but when he checked twice with the employer they had not been contacted. Echoing other interviewees’ concerns about the stigma of unemployment, Gary felt that the Centrelink customer service officer had treated him badly because he was unemployed:

Like, the way she was even speakin’ to me on the phone, like I was nothing, because I was on the dole I was a piece of shit, and of course it upset me...when I did get hold of her...I said ‘I’ve left you five messages’ and ‘Oh sorry, I haven’t had the time to do it’...She wouldn’t do it, she kept ignoring me...until one day I went in there and I got her up on the counter, and then she said ‘Look I’ll work it out’, and she still didn’t...so I lost my payment.

Kelly had experienced a series of Centrelink mistakes which had substantially reduced her payments. In the latest incident an apparent computer error had resulted in almost all her payments being cut:

Kelly: ...they’ve sent me a letter saying I’ve skipped an interview, and they’ve cut my payments down to 40 dollars a fortnight, and I haven’t skipped an interview...So I’m only getting 40 dollars a fortnight for God knows how long, until they figure it out.

Interviewer: Do you know why, what’s happened to make them think that?

Kelly: No. I’ve had other problems where they’ve said there’ve been interviews and there’s no record of it on the computer that I’ve turned up and things like that. It just always seems to be there’s something wrong with my file...I think that it’s because...they have so many people dealing with the one person.

Kelly had car insurance and other payments due, and had made many attempts to contact the Centrelink officer handling her file, with no success: ‘I’ve received no phone calls after ten times being told...I’m gonna receive a phone call’. Kelly’s experience was of a dysfunctional system:

Centrelink's just all over the place. They don't know where they're goin', what they're doin' [laughs].

Some interviewees commented that the income support system was getting increasingly complex. Over a number of years Serena had travelled overseas several times and sought work on her return, usually relying on benefits for a few weeks until she had found a job. She felt that 'every year it seems to get more and more complicated':

it's just too much paper work—it's like being in India, there's so much red tape, yeah? And by the time you have wangled your way out of it, you've reached nowhere. At least in India you can *bribe* someone and just get your ticket in the end.

Like Kelly, Serena thought that Centrelink structures were dysfunctional:

there's just *so* many people dealing with...one person, they're just confusing themselves. And you know, I admit they've got a really big workload and you know, all the rest of it...but they should restructure or something, you know. It's just like one big frustration, so many people have problems with Centrelink. There must be a problem.

Serena's Rent Assistance was cancelled due to Centrelink losing her form. She managed to get her payments reinstated in two weeks after being 'very persistent'. She commented 'and I've a good command of English, I know how social systems work...and people don't have a lot of that. Yeah, what do they do?'

A few interviewees expressed sympathy for Centrelink staff trying to administer such a complex system. For example, Matthew commented:

Centrelink, they have got such a problem with making mistakes. Same everywhere, like all friends, and me included, there's always—there's so often problems, mistakes that are made...But yeah, I can see why it's such a problem...the whole thing is people...no wonder they have so many troubles [laughs]...Say, a shop, they sell a product, yeah. There's not so many intangibles with that—with humans, there's so many different things, so it is hard...

Participants' concerns about Centrelink processes echoed procedural concerns highlighted in the Report of the Independent Review. The report commented that two basic principles of natural justice observed in courts are that 'the onus of establishing a breach of the law...is on

the party asserting that a breach has occurred' and that 'a penalty cannot be imposed unless the person affected has a reasonable opportunity to present their case in answer to the assertions being made against them'. They argued that 'Neither of these basic principles of the rule of law are sufficiently observed in the administration of the breaches and penalties system' (Pearce et al. 2002: 15).

While Community Work Coordinators and Job Network and Work for the Dole providers cannot themselves determine whether recipients will be penalised, they are contractually required to notify Centrelink if recipients do not meet requirements relating to their operations. Centrelink then determines whether a penalty will be applied (Lackner & Marston 2003). Guidelines for Job Network providers do not explicitly require providers to make any attempts to contact jobseekers before they submit 'participation reports' (notification of non-compliance) to Centrelink (Pearce et al. 2003: 66). Small-scale studies of Job Network providers have found that 'Some case managers used the participation report as a last resort, while others submit a participation report after only making one attempt to contact the person' (Lackner & Marston 2003: 24). If a breach is then applied, jobseekers often only find out when there is less money than expected in their bank account—because a letter regarding the breach has not yet arrived or has gone to an out-of-date address (National Welfare Rights Network & ACOSS 2000; Pearce et al. 2003). Critics argue that in such situations the jobseeker has not had a reasonable opportunity to present their case before the breach is applied (ACOSS 2001b). In scenarios such as those experienced by Gary and Kelly, jobseekers are unable to prevent the application of penalties and instead face a wall of bureaucratic confusion and indifference. Although their breaches may eventually be revoked, the financial hardship in the meantime can be considerable.

Severity of penalties

Another frequent criticism of the breaching regime is that excessive penalties are imposed for often minor and unintended failure to meet requirements (National Welfare Rights Network & ACOSS 2000; Pearce et al. 2003). The National Welfare Rights Network and ACOSS (2000: 3) have argued that:

Activity Test penalties which range from \$632 to \$1304 are clearly excessive and unjustifiably harsh when compared to the average fines for serious criminal offences such as 'assault occasioning actual bodily harm' (\$681) 'break and enter' (\$706), vehicle theft (\$627), and 'driving under the influence' (\$546).

In 2000/01, the most common penalty imposed was \$837 (ACOSS 2001c). Pearce et al. (2002: 79–80) note that the redefinition of many former ‘administrative’ breaches as ‘activity test’ breaches has increased the penalties which apply:

the distinction between the two categories of breaches has been subverted by the widespread practice of providers and Centrelink staff writing into activity agreements many obligations that were meant to be covered by the administrative category...[the effect of this practice] is to nullify the decision of Parliament, explicitly stated in the legislation, that administrative breaches should be less heavily penalised than other breaches.

As participants in this study commented, the impact of such financial penalties is substantial. ACOSS (2002) argued that:

the first ‘Activity Test’ penalty for a breach of Centrelink requirements pushes unemployed adults 34% below the poverty line while a second penalty pushes young jobseekers a terrible 47% below the poverty line.

In a 2001 census by the Salvation Army conducted in 40 of its emergency relief centres, one in four applicants for emergency relief reported having been breached by Centrelink in the previous year. Eleven per cent of these applicants admitted that they had resorted to crime to pay for food, accommodation, bills or medicine (Salvation Army 2001). The Report of the Independent Review noted that:

Breach penalties often trigger extra penalties such as bank overdraft fees, utility charges for late payment or reconnection, and even the costs of eviction and trying to find alternative accommodation...It is significant in this context that the standard deduction rate used by Centrelink to recover overpayments from jobseekers who have no other income is 14%. This presumably reflects a view that a higher rate would leave them with insufficient money for basic necessities (Pearce et al. 2003: 81).

Six interviewees acknowledged that they had not met a Centrelink requirement, but objected to the level of penalties imposed after they made a simple mistake. For example, John, aged under 21, was breached for six months after he forgot an interview time:

I think I had an interview that I had to go to—and I didn’t go but I called them like half an hour afterwards—when I realised, ‘cause I’d actually forgotten what the day was—and...‘Nuh, it’s too

late, bad luck', and they deducted my payments by 30 dollars [a week]...just because of one little mistake, they shouldn't come down on you so hard...

Tran found out that Centrelink had a long memory when his payments were reduced for not attending a Job Network provider interview during a previous period on unemployment payments:

I thought you know, I'll cancel next week, so I didn't have to come to a Job Network member...but because I didn't turn up, they like told Centrelink...So they suspended me like 20 per cent.

Tran reapplied for unemployment payments four months later, and found that the breach still applied. He felt that the requirements were 'pretty tough' and left recipients with no choice but to comply:

you have to do everything they tell you to do. You can't actually, you know, forget to do something, because they're pretty tough on you...You have to fill in all your diary. You have to show up when they want you to show up. You actually have no choice.

He also objected to the impersonal, automated nature of the compliance regime:

there's no like personal contact, they just print you out [a letter]...[A] few people told me they [were] sent a letter saying you've been selected for Work for the Dole, even though they've been on it for three months. Like, they don't really know you. You are just information on the computer screen...

The impersonal operation of the system also meant that individuals often did not get a chance to put their case before they were penalised (Pearce et al. 2002: 15). Tuti thought that Centrelink was too quick to penalise people, without finding out what the reason was for the recipient's breach of requirements:

they should ask first, before they make a breach. But Centrelink sometimes didn't want to know...if you fail this, then you got a breach, straight away.

Hürriyet also felt that Centrelink requirements were being enforced by unsympathetic staff and were getting 'harder and harder':

they treat us like ‘Oh, you’re dole bludgers’. One or two of them is alright, but the rest, they don’t care, they’re like, ‘Bring this in, do that’. Now they’re looking for a tiny excuse to cut off our payments...they’re just trying to make life so hard. You know, you don’t turn up to an appointment, they reduce your payments or cut it off....It’s gone [*sic*] harder and harder.

Some participants commented that more attention needed to be directed towards the underlying problems many long-term unemployed people faced which led to lack of ‘compliance’. For example, Joe felt that there was insufficient allowance made for people who failed to meet Centrelink requirements due to mental health or drug problems. An example he gave was the requirement that forms be submitted on a regular day every fortnight:

Like, they don’t mind giving you the money every fortnight, but if the person ends up getting into strife and the excuse isn’t good enough, they won’t help ’em, they just turn ’em away, you know...Why not help someone when they’re down and out when you’re gonna help ’em? Like, you tell ’em ‘This is your designated day, you get your money and that’s that’. Like that’s all good and dandy, you know, but some people do have other issues and other problems. And I reckon they should be more sensitive towards issues like that.

Some had difficulty remembering all the requirements, such as Kate, who was ‘scared’ that she would forget to get an Employer Contact Certificate signed (as she had once previously). She felt that Centrelink was ‘trying to get’ her and objected to being breached ‘for breathing too hard’:

I reckon they’re trying to get me now with another employer’s certificate. When they send them to you they’re not due straight away...I have it outside my bed [*sic*], so every day I see it, so I know I’m not going to forget it because I’m so scared. I’ve just come off the breach and then if they breach me again at 18 per cent, it’s going to be again for another six months, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I was talking to one of the guys, you know when you ring up the Centrelink line, he goes, ‘Unfortunately you get breached for breathing these days, breathing too hard’. And that’s true. Honestly it is true.

Kate did not object to having some form of breaching, but did object to payments being stopped completely, as she believed this left people with no alternative but to seek charity. Having had an humiliating experience visiting a charity as a child, she preferred going without food to asking for such assistance:

I don't agree with them stopping the payments. I agree with them breaching you, that's fine because you're still getting some money, but they can't stop your payments. I mean Jesus Christ, how are you supposed to live...your rent gets behind...you can't buy food...You've gotta go to those...places like Lifeline and whatever else to get food...I went once when I was a kid about 11, with me mum...and it was so humiliating it wasn't funny. Some of the times I've had no food now I just go without. I'd rather go without than go to places like that.

There have been mixed findings on community views about the severity of penalties. The 1999 SPRC study found that just over half of respondents thought that the breaching regime was 'about right' and less than one in five that it was 'too harsh'. However, this finding may have been influenced by the lack of information provided about the dollar values of penalties—the survey specified, less concretely, the percentage loss of payments incurred for a breach (Saunders 2002a: 239–41). In contrast, a public opinion poll commissioned by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and conducted by Newspoll in 2002 did specify typical dollar values and found that 'almost two-thirds of people believed that the current penalties for a first breach were unfair'. Median total penalties proposed by respondents were \$20 for a first breach, \$50 for a second breach and \$75 for a third (Ziguras & Flowers 2002: 9).⁶⁸

The current study illustrates the kind of minor, unintentional or non-existent infractions which can lead to Centrelink penalties. Penalties were usually perceived as the result of bureaucratic error or as unreasonable punishments for small mistakes. According to participants, Centrelink often stopped payments without jobseekers having an adequate or even *any* opportunity to present their case. The government has made a number of incremental changes to the breaching regime since July 2001 aimed at addressing concerns, which the overall drop in breaches demonstrates has had an impact. However, the basic system remains in place.

Conclusion

While a substantial minority of unemployed people in this study considered job search requirements to be reasonable, over half had substantial concerns about these requirements. The major concerns were insufficient autonomy in job search and job choice and poor treatment by Centrelink or Job Network providers, which contributed to feelings of

⁶⁸ These contrasting findings illustrate the potential influence of question wording and order on attitudinal survey results. The Brotherhood of St Laurence findings may have been biased upwards by respondents being asked, before being provided information about actual penalties, what they thought the penalties should be.

powerlessness and stigma. Like critics of mutual obligation requirements and the breaching regime, many also had concerns about unfair and excessive payment penalties used to enforce requirements. Fryer and Winefield (1998: 3) highlight the position of recipients by comparing dependence on unemployment payments with working in a very low-quality job:

Unemployed people can...be regarded as involuntary, poorly paid, low-status, insecure, public service workers with virtually no negotiating rights, whose work (persistent hopeless search for nonexistent jobs, managing households on inadequate resources and participating in humiliating bureaucratic rituals) carries massive risk of occupational strain.

As they comment, meeting job search requirements can be viewed as like undertaking very low-paid and repetitious part-time work involving repeated disappointment, low status, and sometimes unfathomable bureaucratic requirements and system errors. And for those undertaking Work for the Dole, a further layer of work-like activities is required, as will be the subject of the next chapter.

Respondents who had suggested penalties below the actual levels could be expected, to appear consistent, to describe the government penalties as unfair.

CHAPTER 8

ACTIVITY, COMPANY AND COMPULSION: THE EXPERIENCE OF 'WORKING FOR THE DOLE'

Introduction

While there is now some research available on participants' experience of Work for the Dole, only one other study has provided substantial qualitative information about that experience (Nevile & Nevile 2003). One aim of this study was to build as representative a picture as possible, given the methodological constraints of the research, of what it was like for participants to take part in projects. This chapter discusses various aspects of participants' experience based on their responses to the stage one survey questionnaire and in focus groups. Survey participants' initial views about joining the project are considered, followed by the benefits they perceived in participating and what they disliked about taking part. In the final section, views about the adequacy of the Work for the Dole supplement are discussed, while issues relating to employment outcomes for the program and participants' views about mutual obligation will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Previous research

To date, information on participants' experience of Work for the Dole has largely been generated by studies commissioned by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB) and the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS); an exception was the independent research undertaken by Nevile and Nevile (2003). The findings of these studies are discussed in this section.

Research conducted for the *Evaluation of the Work for the Dole Pilot Programme* (DEWRSB 1999) concluded that 'the majority of participants...appreciated the opportunity to gain valuable experience in a work environment' and that 'WFD is meeting its objectives of developing work habits in young people and involving the community in quality projects' (DEWRSB 1999: 2). Survey data was separately produced by two researchers contracted to undertake work as part of the DEWRSB evaluation: Lea Waters (2000) and Tony Winefield (1999). Waters (2000) surveyed participants in eight Work for the Dole projects in

Melbourne, Bendigo and Ballarat before they began their project ('pre-test') and again on project completion ('post-test').⁶⁹ The surveys assessed participants' self-esteem, stress during unemployment, job confidence, job search behaviour and employment commitment. The study found no significant differences in levels of stress, self-esteem or employment commitment of participants before and after participating in Work for the Dole. However, participants expressed greater confidence in their ability to undertake a paid job and increased their level of job search after completing the program. Waters comments that:

These findings suggest Work for the Dole does not have an impact upon the more stable aspects of an individual's identity such as self-esteem and employment commitment...However, Work for the Dole does seem to influence the more permeable and job specific aspects of an individual's identity such as job confidence and job search behaviour (2000: 4).

In four focus groups with 20 participants, Waters found that Work for the Dole provided social support for many participants and was useful 'in alleviating boredom and promoting greater activity and time structure' (1999: 8). However, many participants wanted to do a project which was relevant to the type of work they were seeking.

Waters also assessed participants' attitudes about the usefulness and fairness of Work for the Dole at post-test. Attitudes about usefulness were measured on a scale of 7 to 35, with a high score indicating that respondents thought that their project was 'a useful way to spend time and is useful in helping people to find re-employment' (Waters 2000: 4). The mean score for the sample was 26.4, suggesting that most participants found their project to be useful. However, they appeared less likely to consider it fair—on a scale of 3 to 27, the mean score was 14.07.

The Winefield study also involved a pre- and post-test survey. Winefield surveyed 156 Work for the Dole participants just before they commenced their project (Time 1), with 107 followed up between six and nine months later (Time 2). He found that participation in Work for the Dole significantly reduced psychological distress,⁷⁰ and that for women (or possibly for the better educated, as women in the sample had on average higher education levels),

⁶⁹ Of the 224 participants in the pre-test survey, only 51 responded to the post-test survey. Although Waters found no statistical differences between respondents and non-respondents to the post-test, unobservable differences between the two groups may have biased the findings.

⁷⁰ Measured using the twelve-item version of Goldberg's General Health Questionnaire, which has been previously used in a number of UK and Australian studies on youth unemployment (Winefield 1999: 8).

participation significantly reduced negative mood. The program had no apparent effect on self-esteem, social alienation or work involvement (the importance to participants of having a job)—as noted in Chapter 5, ‘the level of work involvement was so high [at Time 1] that there was little room for improvement’ (1999: 3).

Winefield measured attitudes to Work for the Dole on an eight-item scale, with possible scores ranging from 8 to 32. Table 8.1 shows that overall support for Work for the Dole was high, with support being somewhat stronger among men and among participants who had volunteered rather than those who had been compelled to take part. Overall, the studies by Waters and Winefield found that participating in Work for the Dole had some positive effects on psychological well-being, but no effect on self-esteem or employment commitment. Participants were generally supportive of Work for the Dole, but had reservations about its relevance to the work they were seeking.

Table 8.1: Mean scores on attitude to WfD scale by sex and whether voluntary/coerced

Gender	Voluntary/coerced	Time 1	Time 2
Men	Voluntary (n=20)	28.65	27.55
	Coerced (n=22)	26.64	26.55
Women	Voluntary (n=14)	27.64	26.93
	Coerced (n=15)	25.73	23.67

Possible scores range from 8 to 32. *Source: Winefield 1999, p.16*

As part of its evaluation of activity testing of unemployed people, the Department of Family and Community Services also commissioned a survey of unemployed people receiving Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance (Tann & Sawyers 2001). The Wallis Consulting Group surveyed 3,000 unemployed recipients of these payments about their knowledge, attitudes and behaviour regarding activity test requirements. Five focus groups were conducted in metropolitan and regional areas to identify issues for inclusion in the survey, followed by telephone interviews in July to August 2000. As the response rate for the survey was not reported by Tann and Sawyers, the extent to which response bias could have influenced results is unclear.⁷¹

⁷¹ A disproportionate stratified sampling method was used to obtain sufficient representation of people who had been subject to various activity test requirements and who had different durations on payments. Findings for

Table 8.2: Proportion of mutual obligation participants agreeing with statements about mutual obligation activities*

Better than doing nothing	93
Helps establish a work routine	85
Made you feel good about yourself	79
Learnt useful skills	73
Activity was well organised	73
Put you in contact with people who might be helpful in getting you a job	69
Employers look on you more favourably	58

*Includes WfD and other mutual obligation activities. n=262

Source: *Tann & Sawyers 2001 p.21*

As Table 8.2 shows, a very high 93 per cent of the 262 survey participants who had participated in Work for the Dole or another mutual obligation activity⁷² agreed that it was ‘better than doing nothing’, and 85 per cent agreed that it ‘helped to establish a work routine’. Over three-quarters responded that that their activity was well-organised, provided useful skills and that it improved their self-esteem. Most also thought that it would assist their job prospects by providing contacts who help them get work and because employers would view them more favourably. The survey was consistent with Waters’ and Winefield’s research in finding that participants generally viewed Work for the Dole positively; its inconsistent finding regarding self-esteem is likely to be due to the studies’ different methodologies, as discussed later in this chapter.

While the previous research discussed was primarily quantitative, an independent study conducted by Ann and John Nevile in 2002/03 was primarily qualitative. Nevile and Nevile interviewed 101 Work for the Dole participants in eighteen projects, with a focus on the administration of Work for the Dole and participants’ experience of the program. They found that positive aspects of Work for the Dole commonly identified by participants were improved communication and interpersonal skills and the quality of supervision. However, the value of the work experience provided was limited by the program’s restriction to not-for-profit

unemployed people as a whole were then estimated based on weighted survey estimates to compensate for the disproportionate sampling method.

⁷² In the year of the survey—of these, 172 had undertaken Work for the Dole.

organisations, ‘wide variation in the quality of projects’ and ‘the need for participants to make a quick decision when choosing a project’ (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 74).

Overall, research into the experience and views of participants has found that Work for the Dole reduces psychological distress and (among women) negative mood, increases job confidence and provides improved social support and structuring of time, but has no significant effect on participants’ self-esteem or commitment to employment. The studies have found that participants have a predominantly positive attitude towards participating in Work for the Dole. The current research aimed to gain more qualitative information about participants’ experience of Work for the Dole, including differences between ‘volunteers’ and ‘conscripts’ in the program. This will be the subject of the rest of this chapter.

‘Volunteers’ and ‘conscripts’

One aim of the current study was to distinguish between participants who had volunteered for projects and those who had been compelled to participate, and to investigate whether these two groups experienced the program differently. It was expected that ‘conscripts’ would have a less positive experience of and views about the program. For this reason, the stage one pilot questionnaire asked participants if they had volunteered to take part in their project or were told by Centrelink that they had to participate. However, discussion with the pilot group indicated some confusion over who was really a ‘volunteer’, as illustrated by the following comments:

They kept mentioning volunteering, but it didn’t seem like I was volunteering.

Some people volunteered by choice, [others] volunteered because they told you to, because otherwise you’d get cut off.

These comments reinforced those from some project managers about the grey line between volunteering and compulsion (as noted in Chapter 4). Due to the apparent lack of clarity over the meaning of the term ‘volunteer’, the questionnaire was modified to instead ask ‘Did you want to do the project before you started it?’. Most often survey participants said that they had wanted to do the project (45 per cent of participants), although almost a third (29 per cent) did not want to do it, and a further 26 per cent were unsure.

Table 8.3: Reasons survey participants who ‘volunteered’ wanted to take part in their WfD project

	No.	%*
Experience	11	29
Getting out of the house/having something to do	10	26
Interested in the type of work involved	8	21
To learn new skills	5	13
To increase motivation	2	5
Other	11	29
No answer	1	6

*Expressed as a percentage of all survey respondents who wanted to do their project. Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=38

Among those who wanted to do their Work for the Dole project, the most common reasons given were to gain experience (29 per cent), or to ‘get out of the house’ or ‘have something to do’ (26 per cent—see Table 8.3). Typical comments on the survey form included:

Because of the experience that the project gives me. (M, 22, Geelong)⁷³

To learn more skills and to meet more people and to occupy time. (M, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Wanted to do something, needed brain stimulation. Very bored at home. (F, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

I was happy to get out of the house. (M, 21, Geelong)

I need to do something that might get me somewhere. (M, 24, Geelong)

Help to get back into life. (F, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

⁷³ Survey participants are described by their sex, age and Work for the Dole project region only.

Another reason for wanting to do the project was having a specific interest in the type of work involved in the project—21 per cent of participants mentioned this as their motivation:

It was an area I wanted to get into anyway. (F, 22, North-Eastern Melbourne)

Because of my interest in landscaping. (F, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Experience in the field of work I was looking for. (M, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

I wanted experience in the outdoors, that would help the environment. (F, 23, North-Eastern Melbourne)

Overall, most survey participants initially interested in doing their project saw it as a means of gaining work experience or of escaping (at least for a time) the negative experience of having nothing to do. Only one in five participants mentioned a specific interest in the project or the type of work involved, reflecting the lack of focus on individual interests and needs in the program.

Among those who did not want to do their Work for the Dole project, the most common reason was wanting to be involved in another activity—a third provided this response (see Table 8.4). These participants wanted to be involved in activities which would develop their capacities, such as study or community work, and did not think that Work for the Dole would meet their needs:

More interested in further study. (F, 18, Geelong)

I wanted part-time work. (F, 20, North-Eastern Melbourne)

Already doing volunteer work and had asked Centrelink for an approved activity form a number of times but never received one. (F, 23, North-Western Melbourne)

I have done this type of thing and wanted something different. (M, 25, North-Eastern Melbourne)

I've got better things to do to improve my life. (M, 25, Geelong)

Table 8.4: Reasons survey participants who were ‘conscripted’ did not want to take part in their WfD project

	No.	%*
Want to be involved in another activity	10	32
Not interested in project/won't gain anything	7	28
Object to compulsion	3	12
Object to lack of additional payment	2	8
No answer	4	16

*Expressed as a percentage of all survey respondents who did not want to do their project. Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=25

Tuti, an interviewee in stage two of the research, felt that the requirement to do Work for the Dole was sometimes illogical because it did not take into account individual circumstances. He was required to do the program despite having casual IT work which he was sometimes called into when he was at Work for the Dole.⁷⁴ Although Centrelink had told him that he could leave his project on days he had paid work, he found that doing Work for the Dole interfered with his availability for work:

It doesn't make sense...it would be better if, you know, if I'm not doing [Work for the Dole] at all, because sometimes, it's distracting...I'm expecting a call, for instance, on Monday because Monday sometimes very busy but...I have an obligation to do this volunteering job...

Twenty-eight per cent of participants said that they were not interested in the project or did not think that they would gain anything from it:

I'm not into marketing and computers. (F, 22, Northern Melbourne)

I was not given any notice and am not interested in this sort of work. (M, 19, Northern Melbourne)

I thought the project wasn't well thought out, and would be detrimental to my life, also, would not give me any of the skills I need to find a job. (F, 22, North-Western Melbourne)

⁷⁴ To be exempted from Work for the Dole, he was required to have part-time paid work of at least 130 hours over 13 fortnights (Centrelink 2003).

In addition, several respondents did not want to participate specifically because they objected to the compulsion to participate or the minimal payment involved:

Because I was forced to do it by the government. (M, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Because I was forced into it. We were initially told that we could volunteer for it, once we arrived at the meeting we were told that we had to do it or else our pay would be stopped. I would have probably volunteered if I wasn't bullied into the project. (F, 23, North-Western Melbourne)

It was the principle I didn't agree with (Work for the Dole). (F, 20, Northern Melbourne)

Working for nothing. (F, 21, North-Western Melbourne)

I know it's volunteer work but you try working for five dollars a day. (M, 20, Inner North Melbourne)

The one-quarter of survey participants who were unsure whether they wanted to take part commonly felt that they did not have enough information about the project before they started it, or that they did not get the chance to investigate alternatives:

Not sure of what was involved and what good it could do me. (M, 21, North-Western Melbourne)

I didn't know what it was about. (F, 21, Northern Melbourne)

Didn't have much time to decide what I wanted to do. (M, 21, Inner North Melbourne)

I wanted to see if there was any other good projects but I never got the chance... (M, 22, North-Western Melbourne)

To gain an indication of the extent to which survey participants were given options to choose from, they were asked whether they were given a choice of Work for the Dole projects. While most participants (61 per cent) said that they were 'given a choice of projects', about one-third (35 per cent) said 'this was the only project I was told about'. In some projects most participants had not been given a choice of projects, while in others most *had* been given a choice. It appeared that in some regions there were few projects available; Centrelink officers may also have been directing participants to projects which were having difficulty

gaining sufficient participant numbers. In Nevile and Nevile's study, most participants had been offered two or three projects to choose from; a very limited choice considering the range of work experience, skills and interests of the unemployed (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 71).

Clearly, participants had a broad range of attitudes towards and expectations about their Work for the Dole project, with those who were happy to participate working alongside those who wanted to do other things or who objected on principle to being compelled to take part. Participants' attitudes were most often based on whether they thought that the program would help them to get a job or provide them with something interesting to do. Possible other benefits of participating, such as meeting new people or contributing to the community, were rarely mentioned. As we shall see in the next section, however, the social interaction involved in projects did become important to participants once they started a project.

The benefits of participating

To collect information on the perceived benefits of undertaking Work for the Dole, survey participants were asked whether they liked participating, and what they liked and disliked about taking part (the latter questions were open-ended). They were also asked about the effect of their participation on a range of possible factors such as social contacts and self-confidence. This section discusses their responses to these questions.

To provide a broad indication of whether survey participants enjoyed participating in their projects, they were asked 'Overall, how would you rate your feelings about doing the project?' and given a rating scale from -4 to 4, in which -4 meant strongly dislike, 0 neither like nor dislike and 4 strongly like. Over half of the survey participants responded that they liked participating in their project, while substantial minorities disliked or were neutral about participating. Fifty-seven per cent gave a positive rating between 1 and 4, while 20 per cent neither liked nor disliked participating and 22 per cent gave a negative rating between -1 and -4 (see Table 8.5).

Table 8.5: Overall feelings of survey participants about doing WfD project

	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	Total
No.	5	4	5	5	17	7	14	14	14	85
%	6	5	6	6	20	8	16	16	16	100

When asked ‘What do you like about doing the project?’, the most common aspect mentioned—by one in three respondents—was meeting people or working with people. Many participants clearly valued the opportunity to interact with a new group of people regularly, and some specifically referred to new friends they had made through their project. Interestingly, the proportion of survey participants who liked this aspect of their project was very similar to the proportion of participants in a study of the former JobSkills program who identified friendship/communicating with others as a main benefit of undertaking their program (34 per cent compared to 29 per cent—Grieves 1995: 36).⁷⁵ This indicates that increased social contact may be a common benefit of group-based programs for the unemployed.

Other aspects survey participants enjoyed about their project were project-specific activities such as gardening, working with tools or office work (26 per cent of respondents), and learning new skills or gaining experience (23 per cent). Eleven per cent of participants said they liked getting out of the house or doing something different (see Table 8.6).

Survey participants were also asked about the effect of project participation on a range of possible factors such as friendships/social contacts, self-confidence, organisational and communication skills—which were included following initial discussions with project managers about what they thought participants gained from the program. Participants were asked to respond on a scale of -4 to 4, where -4 meant ‘decreased a lot’, 0 meant ‘had no effect’ and 4 meant ‘increased a lot’.

The highest rated benefits of participating were seen as the friendships/social contacts gained, an increased ability to work in a team and communication skills. Seventy-four per cent of

⁷⁵ JobSkills was introduced in 1991 to provide long-term unemployed people with full-time placements combining accredited training and work experience with government and community organisations (DEETYA 1996b). It was abolished by the Howard Government.

survey participants thought that their team-work ability had increased, 72 per cent their friendships/social contacts and 69 per cent their communication skills. Almost two-thirds also thought that their self-confidence, self-esteem and organisation skills had increased (see Table 8.7).

Table 8.6: Aspects survey participants liked about their WfD project

	No.	%*
Meeting/working with people	30	34
Project-specific activities	23	26
Learning new skills/gaining experience	20	23
Getting out of the house/doing something different	10	11
Using computer/internet facilities	4	5
Contributing to the community	4	5
Improving job prospects	3	3
Being outdoors	3	3
Other	11	13
Nothing	6	7
No answer	5	5

*Expressed as a percentage of all survey respondents. Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=87

Perhaps reflecting the above perceived benefits, just over half (53 per cent) of the survey participants said that their enjoyment of each week had increased due to participation in Work for the Dole, a similar proportion to those who said that they liked taking part in the program (57 per cent). These findings are contrary to predictions by some critics of Work for the Dole that the program would harm participants' morale and self-esteem (for example, ACTU 1997; Bessant 2000: 29). However, a substantial minority of participants did not enjoy doing the program—29 per cent said that it had had a negative impact—and the views of people who had left the program because they disliked it were not captured in this study. In particular, the experience of the program was less positive for the 29 per cent of survey participants who did not want to do the program when they started it, as will be discussed in a later section.

Table 8.7: Perceived benefits for survey participants of undertaking WTD*

	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	Total
Enjoyment of each week	5	2	4	7	29	11	13	18	12	100
Friendships/social contacts	1	0	2	2	22	6	24	22	21	100
Self-confidence	1	0	4	1	31	14	18	10	20	100
Self-esteem	1	1	2	0	30	16	19	13	17	100
Ability to work in a team	1	1	0	0	24	14	20	20	19	100
Communication skills	0	1	1	1	27	14	15	20	20	100
Organisational skills	1	2	0	1	31	18	16	15	16	100

*Expressed as a percentage of all valid responses, where -4 = decreased a lot, 0 = no effect, and 4 = increased a lot. Rows may not total to exactly 100%, due to rounding. n = 83-85

The findings concerning the perceived positive effects of Work for the Dole on friendships/social contacts, self-esteem and self-confidence are consistent with previous studies of unemployed people which have found that social activities help unemployed people to cope with the negative effects of unemployment (as discussed in Chapter 6). Participants' responses in the current study indicated that for the majority, the social and purposeful aspect of Work for the Dole had positive effects on well-being.

The findings were also generally consistent with previous studies of Work for the Dole participants conducted by Nevile and Nevile (2003), Winefield (1999) and Waters (2000). However, while both the present study and the Department of Family and Community Services survey found that participants believed that Work for the Dole had increased their self-esteem, both Winefield and Waters found no significant increase in self-esteem. The different methods used by the various studies may explain these divergent findings. The former studies asked participants at one point in time whether participating had increased their self-esteem, leaving participants to themselves define what constituted an increase in self-esteem. In contrast, Winefield and Waters measured self-esteem using previously tested psychological scales, and compared participants' responses before they had started the program and near their expected completion.⁷⁶ It is possible that the concept of self-esteem used by participants differed from the concept measured by the scales or that the scales were less sensitive to changes than participants' perceptions. Alternatively, participants may be inclined to overstate the program's impact on their self-esteem. Regardless of these specific differences, the research has consistently found that for most participants the program improves at least some aspects of psychological well-being.

In summary, most survey participants liked participating in Work for the Dole—mainly because they liked meeting new people, gaining new skills or experience and undertaking activities particular to their projects. Almost three-quarters felt they had benefited from working with others in a Work for the Dole project, which is consistent with previous research on the benefits for unemployed people of engaging in social activities. Most thought that their self-esteem, self-confidence and organisational skills had also increased. However, this study does not provide information about whether these perceived benefits were lasting or only short-term—it may be that such gains would dissipate after leaving the program unless

⁷⁶ This method could not be used in the present study because the research design did not enable a survey of participants before they started the program.

participants moved into work, training or another program. Nor does it capture the views of those who had left or refused to participate in Work for the Dole. And in addition to identifying the benefits of program participation described above, many participants disliked aspects of the program. The following sections discuss these concerns.

Dislikes about participating

Survey participants were also asked what they did not like about their projects. The most common responses referred to problems with project organisation, disliking particular tasks or thinking that their project as a whole was boring or pointless. In addition, some participants objected to others not contributing to their project (see Table 8.8).

Fourteen per cent of respondents commented that there was insufficient work to do at times or that their project was poorly organised; concerns which were also noted by some participants in Nevile and Nevile's study (2003: 58–9). Examples of such comments in the current study included:

Some days I come in and there is nothing to do. (M, 22, Northern Melbourne)

There wasn't a lot of work for us at times...A lot of things weren't organised properly. (F, 24, North-Eastern Melbourne)

Engaging in 'time-filling' work. (M, 23, North-Eastern Melbourne)

The unco-ordinated group and people who aren't motivated to help complete [the project]. *Wasted time doing nothing.* (F, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

I have no working printer for the computer due to not enough funds. So I find it hard to do the work I'm supposed to be doing. (F, 20, Geelong)

There's no sense of order in the entire program...it's like no-one runs it. (M, Geelong, focus group)

Table 8.8: Aspects survey participants disliked about their WfD project

	No.	%*
Poor organisation	12	14
Project-specific tasks	11	13
Boring/pointless	10	11
People who don't contribute/other participants	9	10
Lack of financial reward	5	6
Doesn't help to find work	4	5
Early start	4	5
Other	26	30
Nothing	10	11
No answer	16	18

*Expressed as a percentage of all respondents. Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=87

At one project several survey participants indicated that they were very unhappy with their supervisor/project coordinator:

Getting yelled at by [supervisor]. Calling strangers and being abused for six hours a day. Being looked down upon by [supervisor]. Having no choice but to do what [supervisor] says. (F, 20, Northern Melbourne)

Treated like children. Given same 'jobs' to do again and again even when that task is complete. (F, 23, Northern Melbourne)

Project coordinator does not have the skills/knowledge to run the project. Project coordinator assumed that work for the Dole people already knew [the skills involved] and became annoyed when we were unable to work on our own. Project is designed to help us create and run our own business—which is totally inappropriate for low-income, low-skilled, low-capital unemployed people. (F, 22, Northern Melbourne)

This project appeared to be an exception, however, as in other projects the only major concerns about supervision related to project organisation. In Neville and Neville's (2003) study there were only complaints about one project supervisor. Of course, the findings of both studies with regard to supervision may have been influenced by concerns among participants that the researchers would not treat complaints confidentially—some participants may have restrained their comments about supervisors due to the latter's power to report participants for non-compliance. In addition, Community Work Coordinators arranged for participants to be interviewed for Neville and Neville's study (unlike for the present study), and perhaps would not have encouraged people to participate who they thought had complaints.

Many of the other complaints from participants appeared to result from compulsion to take part in projects, with respondents either expressing a lack of interest in the project themselves or objecting to other participants' lack of contribution—which often resulted from a lack of interest. For example, 11 per cent of survey participants said they found the project work pointless or boring. For some participants, this was because they were not interested in the type of work involved in the project or were not learning anything new, while others expressed the more general concern that their project was not useful to the community:

It can be very boring. (F, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Things we have to do over again and too much of. (M, 21, Northern Melbourne)

Because I've done an [industry] course before, I'm learning nothing new whatsoever. Why did I choose this project you ask? I thought we'd be getting work experience or something. I don't like the attitudes of just about everyone in this class...but if I leave the class, I'll be docked once again! (M, 22, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Irrelevant, pointless work. (F, 18, Geelong)

The things we have to do seem pointless. (M, 21, Northern Melbourne)

Waste of time as we are not achieving anything. (F, 20, South-Eastern Melbourne)

At two projects in particular there was strong criticism of the social utility of the projects, with some survey participants providing considered reasons why they felt that their project had little value. In other projects—involving production of publications about local

businesses—some appeared to view the project as a series of repetitive tasks and were unclear about what end product would result.

Another criticism, expressed by 10 per cent of survey participants, was the lack of contribution of some other participants. It appeared that some participants were ‘passively resisting’ compulsion to take part by attending but doing minimal work:

...some participants do not do their share of the work. (F, 22, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Some people in the class do almost nothing at all. (M, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

The people who won't work as part of a team. (F, 24, Northern Melbourne)

According to Work for the Dole guidelines at the time of the survey, where a participant's ‘progress appears to be unsatisfactory’ and the issue persists after discussion with the participant, ‘the sponsor should forward documentation to Centrelink for action’ (DEETYA 1998: 25). The Handbook notes:

Should participants be deemed to be in breach of the activity agreement and depending on the circumstances, the result may be a reduction in or complete loss of unemployment payment and subsequent ineligibility for the project. These participants will be removed from the project.

However, it may be that supervisors did not wish to notify Centrelink about instances of ‘passive resistance’ given the likely reductions in payments for participants that would result. While this issue was not specifically discussed with project managers, most commented that they did not support the compulsory nature of the scheme; given this view, they may have been reluctant to enforce participation requirements.

Thirteen per cent of survey participants said they disliked some project-specific tasks, in particular weeding and ‘cold calling’, and 30 per cent mentioned some other aspect of participating which they disliked. In addition, several participants (6 per cent) said that their main dislike about participating was the lack of financial reward.

Survey participants also disliked the name of the program, which many considered stigmatising. When asked what they thought about the program name, most participants

objected to it—54 per cent thought it should be changed and only 20 per cent thought it should stay the same, while 26 per cent had no opinion. In the subsequent focus groups, participants often commented that the name was demeaning; for example, a Geelong group found it ‘degrading’:

Facilitator: I was wondering what you think of the name ‘Work for the Dole’?

Anna: Hate it.

Kylie: Oh, they should be changing it.

Tony: Yeah.

Anna: It’s degrading.

Dale: It is.

Kylie: I get embarrassed, telling people ‘Oh yeah, I do Work for the Dole’, it’s embarrassing...

Similarly, a participant in a North-Eastern Melbourne focus group did not tell people that he ‘worked for the dole’:

Facilitator: What do you think about the name ‘Work for the Dole’?

Kim: Well you wouldn’t go up to someone and say ‘Oh, I work for the dole’, you know. People talk about their jobs—‘I work for the dole’—yeah, yeah great.

While the above participants did not explain why they considered the name to be degrading and embarrassing, their negative reaction was not surprising given the association of the term ‘dole’ in Australia with ‘bludgers’ and dependence on ‘hand-outs’ (Beder 2000). They may have seen the name as an unwelcome reminder that they were not engaged in ‘real work’, given they were not receiving wages and remained dependent on income support.

Overall, the main things that survey participants disliked about Work for the Dole were problems with project organisation, disliking project-specific tasks or the project in general, and the presence of ‘passive resisters’ who did not want to participate. Some respondents saw their projects as boring or pointless or were frustrated by organisational or supervision problems. Participants also expressed dislike for the name of the program, viewing it as

demeaning. The next section considers another common criticism about the program—the level of payment for those taking part.

Supplement level

A major difference between Work for the Dole and earlier labour market programs for jobseekers—and a frequent source of criticism of the program (for example, ACOSS 1999; ACTU 1997; McLelland 1997)—is that Work for the Dole participants are paid only a minimal supplement of \$20 a fortnight in addition to their existing income support payment. The number of hours participants are required to work was initially set at the level at which their unemployment payments notionally equated to averaged National Training Wage Award rates (DEWRSB 1999, 2000a), with the supplement added ‘in recognition of the unavoidable costs of working’ (DEWRSB 1999: 6). In contrast, previous work experience schemes such as New Work Opportunities, JobSkills and the Landcare and Environment Action Program (LEAP) were full-time and paid participants a training wage or a training allowance set at a higher rate than unemployment payments.⁷⁷ To investigate participants’ views about this issue, the survey asked participants what they thought about the Work for the Dole supplement.

Overall, three-quarters of survey participants thought the supplement should be higher. Participants who expressed this view were given a list of five possible reasons for this and asked to circle as many reasons which applied.⁷⁸ Most respondents (62 per cent) nominated ‘to cover the costs of participating’, indicating that many participants considered that they were financially worse off from doing the program. During focus group discussions, several participants who lived a considerable distance from their project site said that the supplement did not cover their transport costs. Participants also commented that they bought lunch and/or drinks when they attended their project and that the supplement did not cover this adequately. Similarly, the DEWRSB evaluation of the pilot program found that:

⁷⁷ For example, in December 1993 Jobskills participants received a training wage of \$300 a week, and LEAP participants a training allowance of \$125 a week for those aged 15 to 17 and \$150 for 18 to 20 year-olds. This compared to maximum weekly rates of \$64.90 or \$107.15 for under 18 year-olds, depending on whether they were assessed as dependent or independent, and \$78.05 or \$118.50 for those aged 18 to 20, depending on whether they were living at or away from home (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993: 100, 164).

⁷⁸ Respondents were also given the option of providing their own reason.

Many participants in the case studies considered that the Supplement did not cover the costs of transport and other incidentals, particularly in rural areas. They also reported that they had incurred other costs as a result of participating in WFD, eg, clothing damaged on the job by paint and food (DEWRSB 1999: 20).

In addition to concerns about the cost of participating, 48 per cent of respondents who thought that the supplement should be higher nominated ‘because unemployment payments are not enough to live on’ and the same proportion nominated ‘because people who participate should be paid more than people who aren’t working at all’. These findings suggest that many participants believed that income support payments were set at an inadequate level, and/or saw it as unfair that they did not financially benefit from participating in Work for the Dole.

Differences between groups of participants

Cross-tabulations were produced to investigate whether survey participants differed in their survey responses depending on their age, sex, whether they wanted to do their Work for the Dole project and whether they saw it as relevant to the jobs they were seeking. The findings of this analysis are reported below.

There was little difference between the sexes in terms of liking participating and perceived benefits from doing their project. To investigate whether there were any differences in responses associated with age, the sample was divided into three age groups (under 21, 21 to 24 and over 24). There was a moderate, statistically significant association between age group and effect of doing the project on enjoyment of each week (Cramer’s $V^{79} = 0.406$, sig < 0.05⁸⁰): participants aged 21 or over were more likely to enjoy participating than those aged under 21. There was also a moderate association between age group and overall feelings

⁷⁹ Cramer’s V is a measure of association based on the chi-square test statistic, which compares the differences between the *observed* frequencies of variables in a cross-tabulation and the *expected* frequencies if there was no differences between the compared groups. It ranges between 0 and 1, with 0 meaning there is no association between the variables and 1 meaning a perfect association (Vogt 1999: 39–40, 62; Fielding & Gilbert 2000: 210–12). This statistic can be used when one variable is nominal and one is ordinal (as is the case for some of the reported cross-tabulations) or for higher-level data variables (de Vaus 1995: 194; de Vaus 2002b: 40–5). Nominal variables are those in which the response categories have no inherent rank order (for example, sex), while ordinal variables can be ranked from high to low, but the difference between each category cannot be precisely measured (for example, age group, as ‘we cannot specify precisely the age gap between people in different categories’ (de Vaus 2002b: 41)).

⁸⁰ This result is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That is, there is a less than one in 20 probability that, due to sampling variability, there was no association between the variables in the population from which the sample was drawn (de Vaus 2002b: 166–70).

about doing the project (Cramer's $V = 0.385$, ns^{81}), with older participants expressing a stronger liking for doing their project.

Not surprisingly, participants who did not initially want to participate in their project had different responses than those who did want to take part. There were moderate, statistically significant associations between initially not wanting to participate and disliking doing the project (Cramer's $V = 0.438$, $sig < 0.05$), thinking that the training was not useful (Cramer's $V = 0.400$, $sig < 0.05$) and that their friendships/social contacts had not increased (Cramer's $V = 0.386$, $sig < 0.05$). There were also moderate associations between not wanting to do the project and thinking that participating would not increase their chance of getting a job (Cramer's $V = 0.342$) and that their organisational skills had not increased (Cramer's $V = 0.374$), although these were not statistically significant. These findings were consistent with the Winefield study of Work for the Dole participants, which found that 'volunteers were significantly more favourable to the scheme than the coerced participants' (1999: 27).

In summary, while the analysis revealed few differences in views between the sexes, older participants were somewhat more likely to enjoy participating in Work for the Dole. The one-third of participants who had not wanted to participate in their project at commencement were more likely to object to participating and believe that they were gaining little or nothing from their project.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in this chapter lend some support to the government's claim that participants benefit from Work for the Dole, as most participants believed they gained at least some benefits from their involvement in the program. Prominent in many participants' responses were the positive aspects of taking part in a group activity and the belief that they were gaining useful work experience and learning new skills. Contrary to the predictions of some critics of Work for the Dole, very few participants reported a decline in their self-esteem from being made to take part and many instead reported an increase in self-esteem. Previous studies have also reported predominantly positive responses to the program, although this study provided more qualitative information about participants' experience.

⁸¹ Not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That is, there is a higher than one in 20 probability that there was no association between the variables in the population from which the sample was drawn.

Despite the perceived benefits for the majority, more than four in ten respondents did not enjoy doing the program and a fifth actively disliked taking part. For these participants, the common experience was one of boredom or frustration. Some responded with a strategy of ‘passive resistance’: maintaining attendance to avoid being ‘breached’ but doing minimal work. This generated tensions on some projects, as those not contributing were resented by some other participants. Other notable criticisms of the program related to project organisation and the level of the Work for the Dole supplement. Participants commonly thought that the supplement they were receiving did not cover the cost of participating.

Overall, the picture gained is of young people with diverse aspirations brought together in quite untargeted work experience projects which provided a basic level of skill development. For many, their experience on the project had a number of benefits when compared with the common alternative of having little to do. However—given participants’ strong desire for work—the real test of program outcomes is whether the project experience was sufficient to assist a disadvantaged group into sustainable employment. The next chapter considers this issue.

CHAPTER 9

'AFTER I'VE DONE THIS, IT'LL BE JUST THE SAME AS BEFORE': EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FROM WORK FOR THE DOLE

Introduction

As we saw in Chapter 5, participants in this study commonly had substantial experience of work, but had a work history of insecure and/or part-time employment alternating with periods of unemployment. Based on this experience, participants generally had considered views on the kind of work which they were seeking and what would help them to obtain it. This chapter investigates whether Work for the Dole provided the assistance that participants sought and whether they subsequently obtained work. The chapter discusses participants' views on a range of issues related to the employment outcomes of Work for the Dole, including the relevance of their project to the work they were seeking, the usefulness of training and whether the program had improved their job prospects. It then looks at whether survey participants had actually gained work some five months after doing the program. The final section compares these findings to previous research about the outcomes of Work for the Dole.

Relevance to work goals

One question asked in this research was whether participants whose project was relevant to their job aspirations would have a more positive experience of Work for the Dole. To examine this issue, survey participants were asked 'How relevant is the work you're doing in the project to the kind of job you want?'. In response, the great majority of participants questioned the relevance of the project to the kind of work they were seeking: 40 per cent said it was 'not relevant' and 30 per cent 'slightly relevant', while 15 per cent thought it was 'quite relevant' and only 11 per cent thought it 'very relevant'. In many cases, participants considered themselves unsuited to the type of work involved in the project or believed that there were few job opportunities in related occupations.

While survey participants were not asked to provide a reason for their response concerning the project's relevance, responses to other questions in the survey showed that many participants were not interested in the type of work involved in their project. When asked

whether Work for the Dole would improve their job prospects, some participants thought that lack of relevance was the main impediment to the program helping them to get work:

Project and skills obtained from the project is not relevant to the field I'm interested in. (F, 22, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Not my line of work. (M, 24, South-Eastern Melbourne)

It's not a field where there are lots of job openings. (M, 25, South-Eastern Melbourne)

It has nothing to do with what I am hoping for. I have gone through most of this with my previous jobs. (M, 21, Northern Melbourne)

If it was related to what you wanted to do, to help you get a job, because after I've done this it'll be just the same as before. (F, focus group, North-Eastern Melbourne)

Comments in several focus group discussions suggested an additional reason why projects were not considered relevant—some participants thought that a 'regular' or 'real' workplace would provide more relevant experience. This was consistent with Neville and Neville's (2003: 65) finding that 'those working in group projects appreciate work sites and projects that resemble real work environments'. The following comments from a Geelong focus group discussion highlight this issue:

Dale: I reckon it's probably better working for a profit organisation...you might get a better chance of picking up work, I feel.

Tony: More experience as well, in the workforce.

Dale: Yeah, that's right, you know what's going on in the workplace. Like here, you can go out and have a smoke, do whatever you want, but if you're working somewhere that's a real place, you can't do it...here if you get back late no-one's on your back.

Anna: They can't do anything.

Dale: It's just not like a work situation...

Some participants in other focus group discussions expressed similar views:

It's not work for the dole—it sounds too good for this...it makes it sound like it's a workplace. (M, Northern Melbourne)

While—as the previous chapter indicated—many survey participants had positive views about the social contacts and structured activity provided by their project, its relevance to gaining work was also clearly a major factor for participants. There were strong, statistically significant associations between participants' perceptions of the relevance of the project to the work they sought and their overall feelings about doing their project. There were also strong associations between perceived project relevance and the perceived usefulness of training and perceived effect of participating on self-esteem, organisational skills and the likelihood of getting a job (see Table 9.1). Participants who thought that their project was not relevant or only slightly relevant to the type of job they wanted were substantially more likely to dislike doing the project and to think that doing the project would not effect their ability to get a job, that the training was not useful and that they had not improved their self-esteem or organisational skills. By contrast, participants who thought that their project *was* relevant to their job aspirations were substantially more likely to view their participation in Work for the Dole positively.

Table 9.1: Association between perceived relevance of WfD project and perceived benefits of the project

	Gamma ^{82*}	Sig.
Effect on likelihood of gaining work	0.671	$p < 0.05$
Usefulness of training	0.626	$p < 0.05$
Overall feelings about doing project	0.589	$p < 0.05$
Effect on self-esteem	0.546	$p < 0.05$
Effect on organisational skills	0.526	$p < 0.05$

*0 means there is no association, 1 a perfect association

⁸² Gamma is a PRE (Proportional Reduction of Error) measure of association which 'calculates how much you can reduce your error in the prediction of a variable by knowing the value of another variable' (Vogt 1999: 220). It can be used when both variables are ordinal, or one is ordinal and one interval-level (De Vaus 1995: 195).

Overall, most survey participants (70 per cent) thought that their project did not have much relevance to the kind of work they were seeking. They were often interested in doing a very different type of work or thought that Work for the Dole was not like ‘real work’. However, as was discussed in the previous chapter, most participants considered that participating in the program had increased their generic skills such as communication and organisational skills. The next section discusses the extent to which the limited training provided in the program contributed to this perceived skill development.

Training: One size fits all?

The government describes Work for the Dole as a work experience and not a training program, with potential sponsors in the pilot round being specifically advised:

Work for the Dole is a work experience initiative, therefore, projects should not be structured so as to require vocational training as part of the project. The need for training will be considered on the merits of the application (DEETYA 1997: 17).

This advice was omitted from the *Sponsor Handbook* for the first round after the pilot round, which instead advised potential sponsors that they were responsible for providing:

training in the areas of occupational health & safety to ensure participants are working safely, and other essential training required to undertake the duties specified in the project (DEETYA 1998: 17).

While this advice indicated that sponsors were now specifically required to provide training judged *essential* for the project, they were encouraged to provide only this minimal level of training. At the time that interviews took place in 2002, guidelines stated that Community Work Coordinators (CWCs) and sponsors could spend up to 12 per cent of their fee for each place on training: from \$198 to \$252 depending on the region (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 41).⁸³ In the current study, accredited training was provided in some projects, but these were generally sponsored by organisations which were accredited training providers. According to project managers, there was insufficient funding available to provide such training unless the sponsor could provide it ‘in-house’.

⁸³ The ‘work experience fee’ paid to the Community Work Coordinator or Sponsor was \$1,650 in metropolitan areas, \$1,800 in regional areas and \$2,100 in remote areas.

Nevile and Nevile's survey of some 125 CWCs and 126 independent sponsors across Australia—conducted in 2002/03—found widespread concern among providers about the low level of training funded. Overall, 58 per cent of CWCs and 66 per cent of sponsors said that less than a third of their participants received any formal training other than in occupational health and safety, and 23 per cent of CWCs and 13 per cent of sponsors said that between one-third and two-thirds of participants received such training. Ninety-four per cent of CWCs responded that they would 'provide more formal training if the Government was willing to pay for it'. Further, 63 per cent that they would 'provide more formal training even at the expense of other things in the budget' if it were not for the program guidelines restricting training expenditure (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 105). CWCs believed that under the guidelines projects with a substantial training component were unlikely to be approved (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 78).

The survey conducted for this study included questions about the usefulness of the limited training that *was* provided. Survey participants were asked 'How useful for you yourself is the training you've done on the project?' and the reason for the rating that they gave. Overall, the responses indicated that half the participants found the training quite or very useful, while almost half found it only slightly useful or not useful—16 per cent said the training was 'not useful', 31 per cent 'slightly useful', 32 per cent 'quite useful', and 18 per cent 'very useful'. The most common aspects of the training which participants found useful were gaining (unspecified) new skills, knowledge or experience, improving team-work/communication skills, learning occupation-specific skills such as woodwork or horticultural skills, and gaining computing skills (see Table 9.2).

Among those who thought the training was not useful or only slightly useful, the most common comment was that it did not give them skills for the type of work they were interested in (11 per cent of all respondents):

It gives me some skills but not the skills I require for employment or training. (M, 26, South-Eastern Melbourne)

For the kind of job that I want it is very irrelevant. It doesn't give me experience in what I want to do. (F, 24, Northern Melbourne)

Personally I'd be interested in more office oriented training. (F, 20, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Table 9.2: Aspects of WfD training survey participants found useful

	No.	%*
Gaining (unspecified) new skills/knowledge/experience	14	16
Improving team-work/communication skills	9	10
Learning occupation-specific skills	8	9
Learning computing skills	7	8
Relevant to job sought	7	8
May lead to/be helpful for employment	3	3
Learnt first aid	3	3
Skills learnt useful outside of work	3	3
Other	8	9

*Expressed as a percentage of all respondents. Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included. n=87

Seven per cent of all respondents said that the training was not useful because they already had the skills required for the project work:

It's just using everyday skills that I knew before coming. (M, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

If you've already got skills, it's irrelevant. (M, focus group, Geelong)

Little training due to running of the timeline of the course, using skills I have already learnt (more successfully) somewhere else. (F, 22, Northern Melbourne)

The project really is teaching me nothing about the way the [industry] operates. Unlike the [industry] course I did. (M, 22, South-Eastern Melbourne)

I've done this work before. (M, 19, South-Eastern Melbourne)

In addition, several respondents commented that the training was not useful because it would not help them to get work, which was commonly attributed to a lack of accredited training or new skills gained:

Doesn't lead to a job! (M, 21, Geelong)

Some of the computer skills and first aid training was helpful. But I don't know how much the rest of the project work will help me to get a full-time job. (M, 25, South-Eastern Melbourne)

The experience gained has no qualifications, while able qualified traders have no work either. (F, 18, Geelong)

You don't learn anything or do anything here. (M, 19, Northern Melbourne)

The reason I'm here is because I've only got a Year 10 pass—now if I go to get a job, what qualifications have I got...What's this doing for me?—It's not really work experience, it's not giving me a direction towards a job...It doesn't lead to any jobs (M, focus group, Geelong)

Overall, it appeared that training provided often did not meet participants' needs. This was not surprising given the limited amount of training provided, the lack of focus on individual needs in the Work for the Dole program and the large proportion of participants who were not undertaking projects related to their work interests. It appears that perceived benefits from the program mainly derived from the experience of undertaking a project, rather than the specific training provided—which was consistent with the government's emphasis on work experience and clear restriction on the amount of training provided as part of the program. However, many participants indicated that they wanted more access to training than Work for the Dole provided, as will be discussed in the following section.

Access to other training

As noted in Chapter 3, the limited availability of training for unemployed people was identified as a major weakness of the early Job Network arrangements. For example, departmental evaluations found that only 18 per cent of Intensive Assistance clients reported receiving any vocational training (DEWRSB 2000c: 79–80). In response to these concerns, from July 2002 'Training Credits' of up to \$800 were introduced for unemployed people who had completed Work for the Dole or approved community work (Australian Government 2004c). The interviews in stage two of this study took place shortly after that change.

Interview participants were asked if they wanted to undertake further training, and whether they needed assistance to do so. Three-quarters said that they did want to train, but the cost of

training was a major issue. Half of those who wanted to train said that the cost of training was a barrier to their participation, and 60 per cent of all interview participants said that more assistance was needed with training costs or income support while training. In addition, a third thought that more training programs were needed. Participants also criticised the Training Credits initiative for requiring unemployed people to wait six months for assistance with training costs.

Gary—who had failed Year 12 and whose only qualification was a forklift driving licence—was frustrated by the lack of training and work experience assistance targeted to individual needs. He also objected to having to spend six months doing Work for the Dole before gaining access to Training Credits. Similarly, Serena—who was in her early 30s and had a diploma in community services—thought that it was counterproductive to require people to do Work for the Dole for six months before assisting with training costs:

I'd really like to do a computer course...it would be ideal if I could go and do a course now...But no, I've got to spend the next six months looking for work, if I don't get it, then I get to do the course. So either I fund myself or I wait six months—which by then, you reach that point of feeling shit again, I guess...You know, don't...try and lift someone when they've hit the bottom, get 'em while they're up.

Karen, aged in her 40s and with a business degree, wanted to do accounting training rather than Work for the Dole but could not afford the \$300 fee for an introductory TAFE course. She objected that the standard hours for Work for the Dole participants aged over 40 (six hours a week) were insufficient to qualify them for any Training Credits—they would have to work a further three or four hours a week to gain access to the credits.

Tuti, aged in his early 40s and with a degree in engineering, also wanted to do further training but could not afford the \$700 required to gain a cabling licence. Similarly, Phil, an IT worker also in his 40s, wanted to do a private database programming course but could not get financial assistance:

when I originally became unemployed, I wanted to do a particular course which would have updated my skills in a database environment, and...I would have got into a high-paid position, and I would have had employment—very, very relevant in the industry, and I could not get any support for that whatsoever.

Like Serena and Gary, Phil thought it was counterproductive to require people to wait for six months before they could access training support, as motivation and employment prospects declined during months of unemployment:

one big thing I found very frustrating about the whole system, is the fact that people who are freshly unemployed, want to get straight back into the workplace, can't get training. Six months down the line, when they've lost their edge and their enthusiasm, they can suddenly get training...

Phil thought that a more flexible, targeted approach to training assistance which supported high-level training where appropriate would be more effective than a 'basic skills' approach:

they need to be a bit more flexible in that there are lots of other things aside from TAFE...and if a person knows specifically what they want to do, and they've got the relevant background and skills to be able to take advantage of that type of training, why force them to go through years and years of useless bits and pieces of training that get them nowhere, when they could have taken on a six-month dedicated course and been out there, you know, as a useful employee in the industry from there on?

Nathan, aged in his late 20s, was also trying to do IT training but could not get assistance from the Job Network:

I thought, hey, they could help me with the courses and stuff. That turned out to be a fallacy, because the only way they can help you with the course is if you can guarantee 100 per cent a job in writing, before they pay for the course. Employers don't do that, because they're not stupid.

Nathan believed that the money spent on Work for the Dole projects should instead be spent on training in recognised qualifications:

I dread to think how much [the Work for the Dole sponsor] are getting paid to have me here...whereas that could have been put into an actual legitimate course which gives you legitimate qualifications, recognised by everyone. That would have been useful.

Some interviewees were concerned about the impact on their payment levels if they started full-time study. Kate, who had left school in Year 9 and was aged under 21, had been unemployed for eight months. She had considered going to TAFE and was aware of the

TAFE fee concessions for Youth Allowance recipients, but was worried her income support payments would drop if she began full-time study:

I was going to take up one of [the TAFE] courses for 56 bucks instead of paying 500. But to be completely honest, I'm scared to do it, because if you do it more than 20 hours a week you get exited from here, and Centrelink will breach my payments. They'll take all my money, and give me Austudy and I'm afraid Austudy might be a lot less than what I'm getting.

Kate was unaware that under Youth Allowance changes introduced in 1998, payment rates are the same for full-time students and unemployed people aged 16 to 21 (DFaCS 2002). Her priority was not to risk any reduction in payments, as she described her current payment rates as 'basically like your parents givin' you pocket money, it's not enough'. If she had been informed about the identical rates she may have returned to study and improved her prospects of gaining ongoing employment.

Louise, who was in her early 20s and had finished Year 11, wanted to train for a trade but was also concerned that her payments would be dramatically reduced if she started study:

Interviewer: Would you like to do any training?

Louise: Yeah [*emphatic*]. But see, I wanted to do a course like, for some kind of tradie training, but they actually pay you less to do that...

...

Interviewer: So, you can't afford to do training because you'd get less money, is that what you're saying?

Louise: Yeah. Like I want to do training, or like a course or something, but I think it's in half, your payment gets cut.

Despite the changes to youth payments to reduce disincentives to study, major disincentives remain for those aged over 21. Full-time students aged over 21 continue to receive substantially lower payments than unemployed people of the same age: for example, full-time students aged 21 or over were paid \$204 a fortnight in September 2003 if they were living at home and \$310 if living away from home, compared to fortnightly payments of \$385

for an unemployed person whether living at or away from home.⁸⁴ Louise, who was living at home, would have faced a fortnightly cut in income support of \$181 (47 per cent) if she started studying full-time.⁸⁵

Information about training

In addition to concerns about the cost of training, several interviewees said that they needed more information about the training that was available and where it could lead. Paul, who was aged in his 40s and long-term unemployed, felt that there was a lack of guidance for unemployed people trying to work out what to do:

that's one area where I think case managers probably should get themselves a little bit more educated, just in what courses are available and what they lead to, because I think people are...not aware of the different courses and you know, they're probably not aware of jobs out there that...are possibly, easy to get into...

He felt very unsure about what kind of work to pursue:

Interviewer: And what kind of work do you want to do now?

Paul: Well, that's where I'm totally lost...people my age haven't been catered for by the government. There's a lot of new work around or new, you know, computer type jobs, for instance, new technologies and stuff like that, where...I don't think the people my age have been allowed to transfer their skills, to be able to fit into that area.

Richard, also in his 40s, commented that 'we have a rust belt in Melbourne of unemployed middle-aged people, who were trashed in the middle of their life, because the old society is changing, rapidly'. He observed:

when the monster of technology reared its head, years ago...everyone said, 'Oh, yeah, but we can retrain the unemployed'. That was the great panacea. I don't see a lot of it going on. There is this sort of stuff [*Work for the Dole*], the problem is this isn't an accredited training course. All the factory workers who were 45 and lost their jobs, who's retraining them?

⁸⁴ Rates for single people with no children. Both unemployed people and full-time students living away from home may also qualify for Rent Assistance.

⁸⁵ If she qualified as long-term unemployed she would have received a higher full-time study rate of \$251—still 35 per cent less than her current payments.

Carlo—a former railway worker in his 30s who had finished Year 12 but done no accredited training—also felt unclear about what direction to take. He was pessimistic about his prospects of getting into courses and the benefits of doing them:

Interviewer: Is there any individual in the [Job Network] agency that you talk with much?

Carlo: Oh, I could talk to one of the ladies there I suppose, if I wanted to, but they're always busy. There's nothing—like they've got pamphlets for courses, but where's the courses going to lead to, you know, they're only basic courses, sort of thing. I don't think I'd be able to get into them, for some reason...I don't know what to do, that's the thing. I don't want to do a job and then just it falls through...

Some interviewees clearly needed more guidance about appropriate training they could do. Others had identified specific training which suited their experience and goals, only to find they could not get any assistance with costs. Given their minimal incomes, this was an insurmountable barrier for many. This situation was a source of particular frustration for those who believed that they would probably have gained a job if they had been able to train.

In 2003, Jobseeker Accounts were introduced for jobseekers receiving customised assistance (formerly Intensive Assistance), at an average of \$900 per jobseeker. Job Network providers can access these accounts to fund training or other costs associated with assisting clients to gain work. However, in 2004 press reports indicated that Jobseeker Accounts were being dramatically underutilised, with Job Network agencies arguing that the transaction costs of the paperwork required to access funds often outweighed the amount agencies could access (Karvelas 2004). Accounts were not in any case available to Work for the Dole participants, who were not deemed sufficiently disadvantaged to be eligible for this assistance.

In summary, participants in this study had significant criticisms about their access to useful training. Many found their Work for the Dole training to be of no or minimal usefulness, and the cost of accessing other training was often a barrier. Despite changes aimed at improving access for those who had finished Work for the Dole or were receiving customised assistance, the lack of support for those deemed to be less disadvantaged remains. The 'waiting game' criticised by participants continues—training is often only provided once an unemployed person has become significantly disadvantaged in the labour market, and is likely to be depressed and demotivated.

Perceived effect on job prospects

As we saw in Chapter 3, Work for the Dole is often criticised for not doing what critics believe should be the major aim of a work experience program for the unemployed—improving job prospects. This section considers participants’ views about the effect of the program on their job prospects; the data available on apparent actual outcomes will be considered later in this chapter. Participants were asked about their own views on this issue because such views were expected to be an important factor in their evaluation of Work for the Dole.

Despite concerns among many participants about the relevance of their project and the usefulness of training, most survey participants thought that undertaking Work for the Dole would help their job prospects at least to some extent. Participants were asked ‘What effect do you think doing the project will have on your likelihood of getting a job?’, and were asked to respond on a scale of –4 to 4, in which –4 meant ‘decrease a lot’, 0 ‘no effect’ and 4 ‘increase a lot’. Two-thirds of participants responded that participating would have a positive effect on their job prospects—43 per cent gave a rating of 1 or 2, and 22 per cent a rating of 3 or 4. One-quarter thought that participating would have no effect on their job prospects, and 9 per cent thought that it would have a *negative* effect (see Table 9.3).

Table 9.3: Perceived effect of WfD on job prospects (survey participants)

	–4	–3	–2	–1	0	1	2	3	4	Total
No.	1	2	5	0	22	13	24	8	11	86
%	1	2	6	0	26	15	28	9	13	100

The most common reason given for thinking that job prospects would improve was that it was evidence of motivation. Many participants believed that employers would view their participation in a community project positively, although some said that they used their project’s specific name in job applications and interviews instead of the term ‘Work for the Dole’, as they considered the latter to be stigmatising:

At least it shows the employer that you want to actually get out and do something, instead of sitting at home. (M, 19, North-Eastern Melbourne)

At least it shows bosses that you're able to stick with something for a period of six months. (M, 21, North-Eastern Melbourne)

It shows you are willing to work, even if it is for nothing. (F, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

It shows you are willing to participate in a scheme and are genuinely looking for work. (F, 24, Northern Melbourne)

Others believed that the work experience or increased self-confidence gained through the program would improve their job prospects, or that a reference from the program coordinator would be useful:

It will give us more confidence within ourselves. Also the experience in a wider variety of areas. (F, 20, Geelong)

The course provides us with a basic knowledge and experience which employers may look for. (F, 23, North-Eastern Melbourne)

I have gained knowledge in the basics of what I would like to get a traineeship in. (F, 22, North-Eastern Melbourne)

Good references—hard copy evidence to show future employers what I am capable of completing. (M, 20, South-Eastern Melbourne)

I guess it is something to put on my resume to fill in the blanks and we can always use a teacher as a referee. (F, 23, Northern Melbourne)

However, as discussed in previous sections, some thought that participating in the program would not improve their job prospects because the project was not relevant to the type of job they sought or there were not many relevant jobs available. Others thought that a lack of accredited training, new skills or contact with employers meant that job prospects would not improve. An interview participant, Hürriyet—a psychology graduate unemployed for twelve

months—did not believe the government’s claim that Work for the Dole would assist job prospects:

Interviewer: And do you think doing this project will help you to get work at all?

Hürriyet: No. I reckon it’s just...a story...since you’re not employed we’ll just try and make life hard for you, or don’t just sit around the house at least get up and do something. They’re using the excuse like this will help you get work. I don’t think it will. I don’t think it’s relevant.

Only a minority (37 per cent) of survey participants thought that participating had increased their contacts with people who might give them a job. This may reflect the ‘community project’ nature of most of the projects, in which there was little prospect of gaining an ongoing job with the sponsor organisation due to the limited number of paid positions available. However, even participants doing projects in which they were required to contact local businesses (for example, in preparing community or business directories) did not usually think that their contacts with people who may give them a job had increased. It may be that participants found that the context of such tasks (in which they were asking often reluctant staff or managers to provide information for the directory) was not conducive to asking about jobs.

Nine per cent of survey participants thought their job prospects would actually decrease due to participating. The reason commonly given was that participating took time away from other activities aimed at improving job prospects. Comments included:

I could be focussing on looking for paid work instead of working my life around this work project. We don’t really do anything of value except bludge and make phone calls. (F, 20, Northern Melbourne)

Time spent on Work for the Dole reduces time I can look for work...Depressed state of mind from being here, you don’t feel confident in yourself. (F, 22, Northern Melbourne)

Because I’m studying. (M, 21, Northern Melbourne)

In addition, a small number of participants thought that employers would not view participation in the program favourably because it was stigmatising. This view contrasted with the more common view among participants, discussed above, that employers would view participation as evidence that they were motivated:

An employer may...think [he/she] is a 'dole bludger' because they are doing this project, they must have been on it for quite a long time. (F, 24, North-Eastern Melbourne)

As the 'official' title of the program is 'Work for the Dole. (F, 23, Northern Melbourne)

Telling a prospective employer that you are currently/have done WFD is a negative thing—ie you can't even get part-time work to avoid it. (F, 22, Northern Melbourne)

Overall, most participants believed that doing Work for the Dole was better for their job prospects than doing no program at all, but many expressed reservations about its effectiveness. While two-thirds of survey participants thought that participating in the project would increase their chance of getting a job at least to some extent, lack of relevance to jobs sought, accredited training or contact with employers were commonly cited as reducing employment outcomes. These criticisms were similar to those made by many critics of the scheme (for example, ACOSS 1999; Bessant 2000; McClelland 1997; Pike 1997), although participants seemed more positive than such critics about possible outcomes from the scheme. The extent to which the program *does* affect job prospects will be examined in the following sections.

Findings of follow-up survey

As described in Chapter 4, this research included a follow-up telephone survey of Work for the Dole participants a median five months after they left the program. The main aim of this survey was to track employment outcomes for the participants involved in the initial survey and to investigate whether those who had gained work thought that Work for the Dole had helped them to get that work. Thirty participants from the initial sample participated in the follow-up survey—a third of the original sample—and the differences in the characteristics of the initial and follow-up samples (outlined in Appendix A) suggests that post-program employment outcomes for the total initial sample may be higher than that indicated in the follow-up survey. In particular, those in the follow-up sample had a longer average period of

unemployment than the total sample. Nevertheless, the findings proved to be similar to research subsequently released by DEWRSB.

The results suggest that the employment outcomes of participating in Work for the Dole were minimal. Six participants, or 20 per cent of the sample, reported having a paid job at the time of the follow-up survey, and a further three participants had undertaken some work since finishing Work for the Dole. Of these nine participants, only two (7 per cent) thought that doing Work for the Dole had helped them to get work. The remainder thought that their Work for the Dole project had no relevance to their new job, or had gained the job through their family or contacts they had before doing the program. Further, of those who were unemployed at the time of the follow-up survey, only two were undertaking a training or employment program through a Job Network provider or Centrelink. This was despite the fact that twelve wanted to undertake training in the field of work they were seeking.

Overall, while two-thirds of survey participants were hopeful when taking part in Work for the Dole that it would positively affect their job prospects, an average five months after project completion very few of the follow-up group thought that it *had* actually assisted them to gain work. Further, 80 per cent of the sample were still unemployed. The contrast between expectations and outcomes could perhaps be explained in terms of the increased self-confidence most survey participants felt they had gained through participating, and their attempt to maintain some optimism about gaining work. Unfortunately, for many this optimism did not translate into a job.

Other outcomes research

Three large-scale studies on the outcomes from Work for the Dole have now been undertaken: a net impact study by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB), a study by Jeff Borland and Yi-Ping Tseng of the Melbourne Institute using Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) longitudinal data, and a study by Linda Richardson of the ANU which also used DFaCS longitudinal data. These studies will be discussed below.

In August 2000 DEWRSB released its *Work for the Dole: A net impact study* (DEWRSB 2000b). The report compared outcomes for 2,100 participants who left their Work for the

Dole placement during August 1999 with a matched group of Newstart and Youth Allowance recipients who had not been referred to or participated in Work for the Dole. 'Off-benefit' outcomes were derived from the Department's administrative systems, while employment, education and training outcomes were obtained from a survey of Work for the Dole participants and non-participants.

The study found that three months after leaving their placement 30 per cent of participants had left benefit, and that about 80 per cent of these participants were working or in education/training (the specific proportion who were working was not provided).⁸⁶ By comparison, 17 per cent of the control group had left benefit, an estimated net impact of 13 percentage points. Piecing together the limited data provided in the report, it appears that three months after taking part in the program only a quarter of participants had left income support for employment, education or training.

However, Dockery and Stromback (2000), the OECD (2001: 220), the Productivity Commission (2002: Appendix E) and Borland and Tseng (2004) have all argued that DEWRSB's net impact studies suffer from several methodological problems. Most notable are 'selection bias' and 'lock-in' or 'attachment' effects. Selection bias occurs when entrants to a program differ in unobserved ways from the matched 'control' group of payment recipients who did not participate in the program, so that the employment outcomes of the two groups would differ even if neither group did the program. For example, the Work for the Dole group and control group in the DWERSB net impact study are likely to differ because Work for the Dole is a 'default' for those who do not find alternative activities which meet Centrelink requirements (such as part-time work, training or voluntary work). For this reason, Work for the Dole participants may on average be more disadvantaged in the labour market and less motivated than non-participants, which would downwardly bias the estimated employment outcomes from Work for the Dole.

By contrast, 'lock-in' effects are likely to upwardly bias estimated employment outcomes. 'Lock-in' means that program participants are less likely to gain work while undertaking the program than are matched non-participants. Critics of DEWRSB's methodology have argued that to capture this effect a matched control group should be selected at the start of a program,

⁸⁶ While DEWRSB acknowledged that some departure from benefit would have been due to breaching, it commented that 'the vast majority of breaches are reduced rate breaches which do not remove jobseekers from benefit'.

not at program exit. As Dockery and Stromback argue (2000: 21), it is more meaningful to compare outcomes from the start of a program because ‘while participants are on a program, non-participants continue to leave unemployment’; if non-participants leave unemployment at a higher rate than participants during the program period this will affect overall outcomes.⁸⁷ DEWRSB acknowledged these problems in its submission to the Productivity Commission’s Independent Review of the Job Network, and said that subsequent studies would measure program effects from commencement in programs (Productivity Commission 2002). These methodological issues cast substantial doubt on the DEWRSB net impact findings discussed above.

As part of her evaluation of mutual obligation, Richardson used a different data source—the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) Longitudinal Data Set—to analyse the outcomes of participation in Work for the Dole (cited in Borland and Tseng 2004: 5–6). She compared a sample of 23 and 24 year-olds who participated in Work for the Dole between July and December 1998 with a matched control group who had not participated in the program. In contrast with the DEWRSB study, she found that there was no significant difference in their receipt of income support during the twelve months after they left Work for the Dole.

By contrast, the Borland and Tseng (2004) study modelled outcomes from program commencement and obtained very different findings from both the DEWRSB and Richardson studies. Borland and Tseng used the DFaCS Longitudinal Administrative Data Set to investigate the effect of the Work for the Dole pilot program on exit from unemployment payments and duration of payment receipt. They compared 802 payment recipients who participated in Work for the Dole at any time between October 1997 and June 1998 with 802 matched recipients who did not participate in the program.⁸⁸

The study found that participation in Work for the Dole was associated with ‘a large and significant adverse effect on exit from unemployment payments’ (Borland & Tseng 2004: 2).

⁸⁷ Further, some program participants would have exited the program because they had got a job. In contrast, all of the control group were receiving unemployment payments when selected for the study, thus upwardly biasing employment outcomes (Dockery & Stromback 2000).

⁸⁸ Participants were matched with non-participants of the same sex, age group (18–20 or 21–24 years), indigenous status, country of birth (Australian-born, English-speaking background immigrant, non-English-speaking background immigrant), and marital status. They were also matched on their Centrelink activity type in previous fortnight (for example, job search), rate of employment in their ABS labour force region, and their unemployment payment history over the previous twelve months.

Six months after commencing Work for the Dole, program participants were 12.1 percentage points *less* likely to have left unemployment payments than the matched non-participants—only 28.4 per cent of participants had left payments, compared to 40.6 per cent of non-participants. At twelve months after commencement, program participants remained 10.5 percentage points less likely to have left payments.⁸⁹ In the twelve months after commencing the program, participants spent on average 2.2 fortnights longer receiving income support than non-participants—this was associated with the period of program participation, with ‘partial catch-up’ by participants after finishing the program (Borland & Tseng 2004: 14–15). Further, there were larger negative effects for participants who lived in areas of higher unemployment or had been receiving unemployment payments in three or more quarters in the previous twelve months.

Borland and Tseng suggest that stigma from participating in the program may have contributed to the poor outcomes and that ‘the minimal scale of intervention through the WfD is a reason why positive effects from the program would be unlikely’ (Borland & Tseng 2004: 22). However, they argue that the probable main reason for the *negative* outcomes was that participants became ‘locked in’ to the program—that is, they reduced their job search activity while taking part. This would explain why the effect was partially reversed at the end of the program, and is also supported by evidence from some international studies (Borland & Tseng 2004).

There are a number of reasons why participation in Work for the Dole may reduce job search effort and consequent employment outcomes during the program. Program participants have less time to look for work than non-participants, and several participants in the current study commented that Centrelink had reduced the number of required ‘job contacts’ a fortnight in recognition of this fact. If they are enjoying their project (which this study suggests most do) or believe that they are learning useful skills, they also have less incentive to seek work during its duration. Further, the 2002 introduction of Training Credits is likely to have increased the ‘lock-in’ effect, because participants need to complete their project to obtain the maximum \$800 in credits.⁹⁰ There are also disincentives for Work for the Dole sponsors and Community Work Coordinators to assist participants to gain work, as this requires the

⁸⁹ Results were also tested for any biasing effects from breaching or a ‘referral effect’ (that is, recipients leaving income support on referral to Work for the Dole), but these were found to be negligible.

⁹⁰ About half of the Community Work Coordinators surveyed by Nevile and Nevile (2003: 91) believed that the introduction of Training Credits had increased completion rates.

replacement of participants and has negative effects on project operation, costs and timely completion.⁹¹

Borland and Tseng argue that the period of the pilot program was ideally suited to obtaining a random sample, as funding constraints meant that a limited number of payment recipients were referred to the program (thus reducing selection bias), and that there did not appear to be significant differences between participants and non-participants to bias comparison of the two groups. In an attempt to downplay the Borland and Tseng findings, the government countered that the program has substantially changed since the pilot program, increasing its effectiveness (Brough 2003; Dutton 2005). However, the methodological problems in the DEWRSB net impact study means that there is a lack of evidence for the government's claims. In addition, DEWRSB has not published any further net impact studies in the four years since its initial study. Given all of this, it is surprising that Nevile and Nevile (2003: 51) concluded—after adjusting the DEWRSB net impact study to attempt to account for various sources of bias—that ‘Work for the Dole certainly has a positive net impact on employment’.

However, there is some evidence that *referral* to a mutual obligation activity (rather than undertaking the activity itself) may be associated with a higher exit rate from unemployment payments (Richardson 2002). Richardson compared exit from benefits for four groups of unemployment payment recipients: individuals aged 23 or 24 in the first six months of 1997 and of 1998 (the latter group was subject to mutual obligation requirements), and those aged 25 or 26 in the same time periods (neither of which were subject to the requirements at that time). She used a 15 per cent random sample of all relevant recipients taken from the DFACS Longitudinal Data Set.

Richardson found that the group subject to mutual obligation requirements were more likely to exit payments during fortnights 12 to 15 of payment receipt—the time period leading up to and including the imposition of mutual obligation requirements, which could be imposed from fortnight 15 on. She found that 4 per cent more women and between 1 and 2 per cent more men left unemployment payments by the end of 15 fortnights than would otherwise have been expected. She concludes that ‘these findings provide some support for the hypothesis that individuals respond to the threat, or “stick” aspect of the policy’ (Richardson 2002: 420).

⁹¹ These disincentives are however being countered by a program change from July 2003 which pays Community Work Coordinators a ‘job placement fee’ when they match a participant with a job (Nevile & Nevile 2003: 21).

Unfortunately the data set used for the analysis does not include information on the destination of those exiting—such as whether they had gained employment, started full-time education, left the labour force or already had undeclared work. This information, as well as data on the extent to which exiting recipients subsequently return to payments, would be valuable in gaining a greater understanding of the ‘referral’ effect of mutual obligation.

Conclusion

We saw in the previous chapter that, consistent with the claims of supporters of Work for the Dole, many participants gain benefits from the program while taking part. By contrast, the findings discussed in this chapter provide support for critics who argue that it does not adequately address individual needs, provide useful training or significantly improve job prospects. The lack of focus on tailored assistance is reflected in the large number of participants in the current study who did not consider their project to be relevant to the work they were seeking, and in criticism of the usefulness of the work experience and training provided. Most participants considered that they gained some generic skills from the project such as communication and organisational skills, and two-thirds thought that their job prospects had improved. However, many participants expressed reservations about whether the gains were sufficient for them to obtain work.

Both the present study and other studies indicate that the great majority of Work for the Dole participants remain unemployed after participating in the program, while Borland and Tseng found that participants were actually *more* likely to remain unemployed than non-participants. These findings call into question the claims by new paternalists such as Mead that compulsion to participate in Work for the Dole is justified by good employment outcomes from the program. They also call into question the value of a scheme for unemployed people which does not appear to help them meet their primary aim: getting a job. As was discussed in Chapter 3, employment outcomes are not however an official objective of the program, and the government relies heavily on the contractualist argument that unemployed people have an obligation to ‘give something back’ in return for income support. The following chapters will consider participants’ own views about their rights and obligations as income support recipients, moving the discussion to this more ethical dimension of mutual obligation.

CHAPTER 10

'IT'S IMPORTANT FOR EVERYBODY TO WORK': RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS TO WORK AND INCOME SUPPORT

Introduction

The previous chapters examined Work for the Dole participants' orientations towards work and unemployment, focussing on their experiences of employment, unemployment and Work for the Dole. By contrast, this chapter will focus on participants' ethical beliefs regarding work, including their rights and obligations to work and to unemployment payments. The mutual obligation principle posits that any right to payments is conditional on the obligation to work 'in exchange' for income support. By emphasising individual responsibilities rather than structural causes of unemployment, it privileges 'the obligation to work' over the 'the right to work'. Participants' views about these issues will shed light on their views about the mutual obligation principle, to be discussed in the final chapter.

This chapter is based on the responses of the stage two interview sample of Work for the Dole participants. It firstly considers participants' views regarding whether they had a right and an obligation to work, followed by their views on the responsibilities of government, employers and individuals to prevent unemployment. Finally, the chapter considers whether participants believed that they had a *right* to income support, and the conditions they placed on such a right.

The right to work

According to Article 23 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 'Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment' (cited in Dean 2002: 100). Although none of the interview participants referred to the UN Declaration, they overwhelmingly believed that they had a right to work, with only three saying that they did not have such a right. However, many participants were unused to talking about the right to work and some had difficulty explaining their belief. A number commented that it was not something they had thought about before, or indicated that they found the question odd because the answer was self-evident. An example was Louise, aged in her early 20s:

Interviewer: Do you think you have a right to work?

Louise: Yeah [*emphatic*].

Interviewer: Why is that?

Louise: Because everyone should be able to work [*laugh*]. Did I get the question...I don't understand the question...

The statement that people 'have a right to work' can be interpreted in different ways, adding to the complexity in discussing the issue. It can be interpreted for example to mean that we inherently or naturally have a right to a job, that we *ought* to be granted such a right by society or that society *has* granted us such a right. It also can be defined as merely a 'negative' freedom to not be prevented from working if a job is available (Berlin 1969). Most interviewees appeared to use the first or second interpretation in their response, although some used others.

Steve, a hospitality worker in his early 20s, exemplified the belief in a natural right to work. For Steve, it was self-evident that people have a right to work, by virtue of being human. He specifically explained this in terms of human wants and needs:

Interviewer: And do you think you have a right to work?

Steve: A right? [*laugh*]. Yes, definitely. Yeah.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Steve: Why?...I suppose that's like saying do you have a right to life, you know? Of course. I'm a human, you know and I have to do something productive with my life. Of course I've got a right to work, you know.

Interviewer: So it's part of being human?

Steve: Yes. It's part of being productive, wanting to be part of a team, wanting to be part of a social structure.

In contrast, for Joe—a labourer in his late 20s—the right to work was connected to social norms and obligations:

Interviewer: ...do you think people in general have a right to work?

Joe: Yeah. Why not?

Interviewer: And why do you think people have that right?

Joe: Because it's the norm. Just the normal thing, how society has taught us to grow up. You know, you go to school, finish school, find a job that you like...it's just society I think pushes that towards us or onto us.

Richard, who was in his early 40s and had previously worked in advertising, initially interpreted having a right to work as meaning 'being owed a job'—which he rejected. He then contrasted the right to work with work being viewed as a privilege, which he also opposed. For him, the right to work meant the right to 'expect to be able to earn a living', but individuals only had such a right if they made a substantial personal effort to gain needed skills:

Richard: Who says I'm owed a job?...At the end of the education system, do you deserve a job? Interesting question, the logical one is of course you are, that's what you got an education for....There's always more people than jobs, but have I right to expect to be able to earn a living in my life—yes, of course.

Interviewer: What's the difference, the distinction you make between owed a job and having a right to work? What's the difference between those two things?

Richard: Being owed a job infers that you haven't got to look too much to get one, that one will fall in your lap, when we know that's not the case...the—feeling you have the right to expect to be able to earn a living, is very different to expecting that living to come easily, in that I don't have to get too much education, I don't have to get too much training, I don't have to look too hard. I don't sort of agree with all that....yes, we all have a right to work, or else what are we doing here?...what are we all supposed to do if we don't work?

Interviewees provided a variety of reasons for why they had a right to work. The most common responses were that that work met human needs or wants (30 per cent of interviewees), that they had the capacity to work (16 per cent) or that they had a social right to work (that is, that the right was socially granted—11 per cent). While four interviewees aged 25 or over provided the latter response, this was mentioned by no-one under 25—suggesting that work as a social right is not a part of general discourse, especially for younger people. Young lower skilled workers were the most likely to find it difficult to explain why they had a right to work, reflecting the challenge of responding to a conceptual question which is not widely discussed. Lower skilled workers most often said that they had a right to work because they had the capacity to work or that everyone deserved an opportunity to work—suggesting they had as much right as others to work, regardless of their education level.

Cathy, who had left school after Year 10, believed she had a right to work because she had the capacity to do so and deserved ‘a chance’. Her response alluded to the wasted potential of people unable to get work:

Cathy: I think everyone’s got a right to work. *[Pause]* Why have I got a right to work? *[laugh]*. I’m capable of working. I think I can do whatever I set my mind to, so I should be able to get out there and work.

Interviewer: And why do you think everyone has a right to work in general?

Cathy: Everyone needs a chance, I suppose.

Similarly, Marwa, who had left school after Year 11 and mostly been unemployed, focussed on the economic contribution she could make despite her low skill level:

Interviewer: Yes...Do you think that you have a right to work?

Marwa: *[Softly]* Yes. I do.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Marwa: Everybody has a right to, I think, because I can do good for any business that I go in. I can help them, get ‘em far, I can get far.

Interviewer: Uh huh. So you mean that you have something to contribute?

Marwa: Yes I do. I commit myself 100 per cent, and as I said I can bring a difference to the company. I can build *myself* up and build *them* up.

Those with higher skill levels more often responded that work met human needs or that the right to work was socially granted, suggesting that they viewed the question less in terms of their individual status than in terms of society as a whole. For example, Serena—who had alternated between community services work in Australia and living in a religious community in Asia—felt that as a citizen she had a right to work to help the ‘wheel turn’. However, like many others, she commented that she had not thought through the issue:

Interviewer: Do you think that you have a right to work?

Serena: ...That’s a bit of a trick question, isn’t it? Yeah, I do have the right to work. I am a citizen of this country, and I have the right to work, yes [*laughs*].

Interviewer: How do you mean by it being a trick question?

Serena: I know I had to think about it in my head. I’ve never really been asked that, whether I have the right to work, or whether it’s a privilege. But it’s a right, it is a right.

Interviewer: And why do you think that?

Serena: Because I’m a member of this society, and...the people need to go out and work to make the...wheel turn, and...as a member of it...it’s my right to be one of those cogs.

Some lower skilled workers also believed in a social right to work. For example, Paul—in his 40s, long-term unemployed and a lower skilled worker—took the social democratic view that socio-economic arrangements should benefit ‘the people’ instead of companies:

Interviewer: ...do you think you have a right to work?

Paul: Yes, yes, I think it’s up to the government to put...the people first, instead of the companies. Simple as that.

Interviewer: And why is it that people have a right to work, do you think?

Paul: Because it's our—it's ultimately the people's country. The philosophy of thinking that companies should have people just there to work for them is just totally opposite to the way I think...companies should have a lot to provide to the community...

For Lisa, a former apprentice in her early 20s, the right to work was clearly tied to individual needs. While she referred to the need for money, she also viewed work as developing individual capacity:

Interviewer: And do you think that you have a right to work?

Lisa: Yes I do. Yes I do.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Lisa: Well [*sigh*], I need money. And I'm not going to be slaving off the government for the rest of my life, and I don't intend to be doing that. But I think that it's important for people, not just men, but it's important for *everybody* to work...it just gets you back into the workplace, gets you motivated. It makes you think a lot healthier and clearer.

Only three interviewees did not believe that they had a right to work. For Nathan, a higher skilled worker in his late 20s, people did not so much have the right to work as the 'negative' freedom to not be prevented from working. He expressed a Darwinian view of society as involving 'the survival of the fittest':

Interviewer: Do you think you have a right to work?

Nathan: See that's a definition that I don't know about. [*Pause*] I think everyone really has a right to work if they want, or at least the ability to go out and try and find work. I wouldn't say it's something that the government has to provide or the public service has to provide, there's a certain element of the survival of the fittest...

Similarly, Stefano, a psychology graduate in his early 20s, appeared to take a market liberal view that the only human right was the right to freedom. He clearly rejected the concept of a right to work, which he interpreted as meaning that we have a natural or innate right to a job:

In the sense that you are sort of owed a job by some authority or some force or some mystical sense or force or something—no-one really is owed anything, apart from their freedom, I guess. To say that you deserve a job is saying too much.

Khoa, a refugee from Vietnam in his early 40s, also rejected the concept of a right to work. Apparently influenced by his experience of a country with a far lower standard of living than Australia, he believed that the opportunity to work should be seen as a privilege rather than a right. From his perspective, a right must apply world-wide, and as there was no right to work in many countries this condition was not met:

the right to work, I've heard about that, and [pause] I really, I think that it is a privilege. It's a privilege in this country, rather than a right...It's not [in all countries] we would have that sort of right, believe me.

With the above exceptions, the unemployed people in this study overwhelmingly believed in their right to work, although for most it was an unexamined, taken for granted belief that was not part of their normal discourse. There was also a marked dissonance between the unquestioned right many people felt that they had to work and the reality of a widespread lack of job opportunities. The strong connections made between 'the right to work' and human needs reflected interviewees' negative experience of unemployment and their strong desire for work (as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6). Having experienced the debilitating financial, personal and social effects of unemployment, many viewed having the opportunity to work as a human need and the right to work as a recognition of this need. Some older interviewees explicitly tied the right to work to social rights or norms which *did* recognise such a need.

We will turn later in this chapter to interviewees' views about the responsibility of government to uphold the right to work by preventing unemployment. Firstly, however, we will consider the question of whether interviewees associated the *right* to work with a parallel *obligation* to work. To investigate this question, interviewees were also asked whether they believed that they *should* work. Their responses are discussed in the next section.

The obligation to work

Like the issue of the right to work, some interviewees had not previously considered the issue of whether people *ought* to work, and just took it for granted that they should. For example, the question struck Hürriyet—who had migrated from Turkey to Australia as a child—as ‘weird’:

Interviewer: And, do you think that people...in society in general should work?

Hürriyet: I didn't even consider this question, it's weird. Yeah [*pause*] they should. I mean, they should do something with their lives...Like I was surprised when you asked me this question, should people work, or should they have the right to work.

She commented that the expectation that everyone, including mothers, should work was so widespread that she had accepted it without thought:

Interviewer: So when you say you're surprised, do you mean it's something that everyone would agree with, or—?

Hürriyet: I don't know...Like we're all raised up, like your father works here, your mother works here...And nowadays both parents work, and they have like little children and babies that they put in day care...So the society we live in, we've been brought up like this...everyone's expected to work...

While some interviewees—like Hürriyet—based their belief that they should work on social expectations, more often they focused on obligations. These were of two main kinds: obligations to oneself and obligations to others.

Obligations to oneself

When asked whether they believed that they and people in general should work, the most common response—given by half the interviewees—was that people should work because they benefited from working. Notably, this was the same reason some interviewees had given for having the *right* to work. This response indicated that many interviewees did not perceive a conflict between their preferences and their obligations, or in other words that they *wanted* to seek work rather than seeking work out of a sense of social obligation. They did not have a

desire to ‘opt out’ of employment, as feared by some members of the government and community. For example, for Con—a Greek-Australian in his late 20s who had worked in hospitality and real estate—there was no real alternative to working:

Interviewer: Do you think that people in general *should* work, if there’s work available for them?

Con: ...You have to do *something*, you can’t just do nothing. You know, unless there’s a reason for it, unless you’re retired, or you have some sort of a handicap or disability that doesn’t allow you to work...Why shouldn’t you work—what are you gonna do? You can watch TV, I guess, but hell, you’re gonna get sick of that. You can just try to enjoy life...walk around in the parks, go the movies, go to shows...you get sick of everything, so you might as well work, give yourself something to...make you hungry and appreciate what you get at the end of it.

Similarly, Steve felt that he should work because working was preferable to ‘sitting at home’. Unlike most other interviewees Steve said that he preferred to work even if he was unhappy in a job, as he expected that he would eventually gain a better job:

I think I should work...even if I’m not happy with the job, stick to it, you know, even if it is a kitchen hand job, and I’m taking out the trash, and it doesn’t matter, because I know...that I will eventually get the job that I desire. There’s nothing wrong with doing a job that you don’t like. I’m sure everyone has done that before, because it sure beats sitting at home.

In contrast, Dan—a gardener in his 40s—focussed on the social status which individuals gained from earning an income instead of being dependent on income support. As was discussed in Chapter 6, Dan felt embarrassed to ‘admit’ that he was unemployed:

Interviewer: And do you think that people should work if there’s work available for them?

Dan: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Dan: Oh, it’s good for people to work...it gives them status, they’ve got a job, they’ve got an income coming in, you know, they’re not getting sponsored by the government or whatever, they’re doing it on their own, there’s a lot of pluses for it.

Elena, aged under 21 and with only a few months experience of working, was also anxious to escape dependency—but in her case on her parents. When asked whether she ought to work, she responded:

Yes. Well I believe you got to look after yourself. No-one can look after you all your life. I can't just depend on my parents for anything. That's why I want to have my own life and eventually get my own house and everything, so I do need a job, to save up for that.

Elena's beliefs about her obligation to work were focussed on the income gained from work. In contrast, for Kelly—also aged under 21 and with limited experience of employment—working developed individual potential. Kelly's focus on the importance of work for self-development was similar to Lisa's, discussed early in this chapter:

Interviewer: And do you think people in general should work, if there's a job available for them?

Kelly: I think they should. I think that [*pause*] in a lot of people it really does change the way people are towards the world....Yeah, it just brings them to like a wider variety of things that are out there and lets them know what they are comfortable with, what they can do, and how strong they are with certain things as well.

From the perspective of these participants, individuals primarily had an obligation *to themselves* to work. This belief perhaps helped to motivate them when faced with the temptation to 'give up' the frustrating and discouraging search for work. They may have also thought that they had an accompanying obligation to *others* to work—but their obligation to themselves appeared to be uppermost in their minds.

While young interviewees were equally as likely as older interviewees to believe that people should work and to object to people who received payments without looking for work, they more often explained this in terms of obligations to themselves such as self-development or achieving life goals. Interviewees who were aged under 25 were *least* likely, and those aged over 35 *most* likely, to say that people should work to contribute to the community. Young participants' attempt to achieve independent adulthood and their relative lack of work experience may have given them this focus—although older participants felt that they benefited from work, they less often referred to a need for self-development. The literature on

youth unemployment has indeed focussed on the difficulties young people face in achieving an adult identity when unable to gain secure ongoing work (Bessant & Cook 1998).

The emphasis of some participants on their obligation to work to develop their capacities or to achieve self-reliance had echoes of the new paternalist discourse about the need for income support recipients to ‘escape dependency’ (as we saw in Chapter 3). However, as will be discussed in the final chapter, many such participants did not support new paternalist claims that compulsion to participate in Work for the Dole would help them to achieve self-reliance. Instead they supported a right to autonomy as income support recipients, believing that the government should assist them to meet their work goals, not compel them to undertake activities with little relevance to such goals.

Obligations to others

Other participants responded to the question of obligation primarily from the perspective of obligations to others—about a third of interviewees said that people should work because they should contribute to the community or economy. This view was in keeping with the historical restriction of unemployment payments in Australia to those who meet a work test, as was discussed in Chapter 1. It is also shared by supporters of mutual obligation or workfare (such as Mead), as well those social democrats who argue that citizens have both the obligation and the right to work (Langmore & Quiggan 1994).

While Matthew—a graphic designer in his early 20s—was reluctant to judge other people’s decisions, he felt that income support recipients had an obligation to try to ‘repay’ the support they received. His responses indicate his uncertainty about the issue:

Interviewer: And do you think that you should work if there’s work available?

Matthew: It’s up to the person. Well, to a certain degree...that’s a prickly one...some people make their life of just living on the dole and I don’t believe that is right. Yeah, but I don’t like judging people like that. They could have personal problems.

Interviewer: When you say you have a feeling that it’s not right, why do you think that is?

Matthew: ...it all comes down to if they’re getting money from the government, that’s when it becomes wrong, I think. In a way if they don’t try and repay in some way, I don’t

think that's right—I've got too many mixed views. In some way I think, yeah, they could have their own reasons that they can't work. I suppose you're saying if they can work.

Interviewer: If they can work, yeah.

...

Matthew: Yeah, I don't like to [*pause*] personally, I don't like receiving benefits all the time, without repaying something to society...if you're taking you should be able to give something.

Similarly, Khoa believed that he had an obligation to society, as well as to his family, to work. He felt 'useless' and uncomfortable about receiving unemployment payments:

Interviewer: Do you think that you should work if there's work available for you?

Khoa: It not I *should* work, I *must* work.

Interviewer: *Must* work?

Khoa: Yeah, I *must* work, rather than stay on the dole. I think it's *useless* that way, even with society or my family, if I don't work. Put it this way, I don't feel comfortable to get it, the dole money, because I never get that sort of feeling while I'm working for the last 17, 18 years. I just got it in the last couple of months, and...I don't feel comfortable with that. I try to get out of that, as quickly as I can.

Paul also believed that individuals should work and pay taxes to contribute to the community, although he was uncertain, as he thought that everyone—including the unemployed—contributed to society in some way:

at the end of the day someone's got to pay, we've got to pay taxes ...*[sighs]* gee, no, I suppose we all add to the community in some ways, the taxes we pay add to the community, the money we spend adds to the community...I think it's just a matter of what hours we should work...but yeah, people should work.

Most interviewees who spoke about obligations to others expressed opposition to people ‘bludging’ off the government or taxpayers. For example, for Kate—aged under 21—the public narrative about dole bludgers accorded with her opinion of her step-father:

people like my step-dad, hasn't worked for seven years. Lays on the couch (or he used to, he's not with my mum any more) and watches TV and he gets the dole. Gets paid for sitting on his arse. That's not fair. All it is, is taxpayers' money. People that are working their arses off out there, are paying for us to be on the dole. Now I agree with this system, you get help, unemployment benefits. But I don't agree with these people, that just don't look for work at all.

Joe also believed that people should not be a ‘burden’ on the taxpayer:

Australia doesn't need any more burdens on their, y'know, social security system. I mean if you can get a job, why not? Why sponge off the government for it?—unless you are an invalid or something...I don't see why everyone shouldn't work, if there's work available.

These participants placed emphasis on their obligation to make an economic contribution to the community. Again, this did not preclude them from wanting to work for other reasons—most also wanted to work for their own benefit. Their views were consistent with the work test for unemployment payments, but should not, however, be equated with a belief in the principle of mutual obligation. The latter requires a belief that unemployed people should work ‘in exchange’ for unemployment payments, a separate issue from whether they should take up a waged job.

An individual choice

While most interviewees believed that they had an obligation either to themselves or the community to work, a small minority—four in total—thought that the decision to work was a personal choice. These participants wanted a job but did not feel morally obliged to work. For example, Lisa believed that people should work if it helped them to meet their needs, but that this was an individual decision:

Interviewer: Do you think that people ought to work, if there's a job available to them?

Lisa: It all depends on really the person. It all depends on how they've been brought up and...yeah, yet again the circumstance...I mean there's certain people that I do know

that don't want to work...Where I would prefer myself to [work]. So yeah, I think some people should work and some people shouldn't. It's up to them.

Similarly, Louise believed that the decision to seek work was a 'personal choice': 'It doesn't bother me if someone else doesn't want to work. That's their business'. Jason, who was aged under 21 and had worked intermittently in casual labouring jobs, also thought individuals had a right to choose not to work. However, he thought that it was generally an undesirable option for the individual, as 'really it's no fun being on the dole':

Interviewer: And do you think that unemployed people in general should work, if there's a job that's available for them?

Jason: That's really up to them...if you don't want work you know, that's their choice. You know it's a pretty shitty choice, but that's their choice.

These participants were an exception, however. Most interviewees believed that they should work and viewed this obligation as consistent with their own desire to work, not as an obligation which conflicted with their own preferences. In many cases they felt that they should seek work because this would improve their lives or assist their personal development. Such participants had an Aristotelian focus on the requirements for leading a successful, happy life (Barnes 1986)⁹²; in their view, paid employment was an important component of such a life. By contrast, a minority of interviewees placed primary emphasis on their duty to the community which supported them; their focus was on the concepts of obligations or duties to others. However, regardless of whether they focussed on their obligations to themselves or others to work, the great majority of interviewees did not feel obliged to accept a job which they expected to strongly dislike (as we saw in Chapter 5). In their view, their obligation to work did not require them to become unhappily employed. They did not view work as a Kantian duty which must be borne regardless of its unpleasantness,⁹³ but instead as something which they valued for the benefits it brought them—provided they could choose suitable employment.

⁹² In his *Ethics* Aristotle argued that achieving such a life is the highest human good. Displaying 'moral virtue' was a part of such a life, but not its chief end (Barnes 1986).

⁹³ Kant argued that an action only had moral worth if it was motivated by duty; an act performed '*in conformity with duty*, but not *from the motive of duty*' such as those solely motivated by 'immediate inclination', 'self-interest' or 'sympathy', did not have moral worth (Kant 2000: 63).

The current research located no comparable Australian studies on community opinion about the right to work. However, interviewees' support for an obligation to work—with a choice of employment—were similar to the views expressed in a recent British qualitative study of 49 adults of working age on a wide range of incomes. In the latter study, 84 per cent of participants agreed that people 'have a responsibility to work', but over half of these 'qualified their agreement, emphasising, for example, that the benefits of work should outweigh the costs, and that people should have a choice of employment' (Dean & Rogers 2004: 75). Consistent with this study, Dean and Rogers noted that 'very few insisted that people be allowed not to work', although exceptions were made if people were raising children, incapacitated or unable to find work.

We have seen that the great majority of participants believed that they had both a right and an obligation to work. These beliefs imply an associated belief that someone or something is responsible for providing the conditions in which the right to work can be realised and the obligation to work discharged (Sumner 2000). The next section considers interviewees' views about the extent to which government, employers and individuals are responsible for preventing unemployment.

Who is responsible for preventing unemployment?

The language of mutual obligation suggests that unemployed people and the government (on behalf of the community) each have obligations or responsibilities with regard to the provision of income support. Some of these obligations involve the attempt to gain work: the unemployed are responsible for undertaking specified job search, while the government is responsible for providing job search assistance through the Job Network and other agencies. These arrangements imply a shared responsibility between government and unemployed individuals to address unemployment—but what were interviewees' views on these responsibilities? To investigate this issue, participants were asked whether they thought that the government was responsible for preventing unemployment and whether they thought any other individuals, organisations or companies were also responsible.⁹⁴ Their responses indicated that the great majority of interviewees held the government primarily responsible for addressing unemployment, while less than a third considered employers to have some

⁹⁴ To reduce complexity, the question did not distinguish between different levels of government.

responsibility for addressing unemployment and only one in five attributed responsibility to individuals.

Government responsibility

Three-quarters of interviewees believed that the government had a responsibility to prevent unemployment.⁹⁵ This was markedly higher than the 47 per cent of Australians in the 1999 SPRC survey, discussed in Chapter 3, who agreed that ‘solving unemployment is the government’s responsibility’—perhaps because those who are currently unemployed see a greater need for government action. Of those in the current study who attributed responsibility to government, half said that the government should increase the number of jobs available either directly or by providing industry assistance to enable companies to employ more people, and many expressed concern about factory closures and companies moving their production overseas.

Almost all higher skilled workers (92 per cent) believed that the government had at least partial responsibility for reducing unemployment, while there was somewhat less support for this view among lower skilled workers (70 per cent). This suggests that, in keeping with their views on the right to work discussed earlier in this chapter, those with higher education levels were more likely to view unemployment in terms of social arrangements or structures rather than individual behaviour. It was also consistent with Graetz’s (1987) finding, discussed in Chapter 3, that blue collar and clerical workers were more likely to attribute unemployment to individual characteristics of the jobless such as their motivation or skills than were government, business and trade unions leaders. Graetz suggested that this could be attributable to the former having less knowledge about the structural causes of unemployment. In contrast, there were few substantial differences between men and women and different age groups on this issue, although those aged 21 to 34 were somewhat less likely to consider that government had a responsibility to address unemployment and conversely more likely to think that employers and individuals had such a responsibility (see Table 10.1).

⁹⁵ Excluding four participants who were not questioned about this, due to time limitations requiring their interviews to be shortened.

Table 10.1: Attributions of responsibility for preventing unemployment by sex, skill level and age (interviewees) (%)

	Total	Male	Female	Lower-skilled	Higher-skilled	18-20	21-34	35+
Government	76	74	79	70	92	78	73	83
Employers	30	32	29	25	42	22	36	33
Individuals	21	26	14	25	17	22	27	17
Don't know	6	0	14	10	0	22	0	0
<i>n</i>	37	23	14	23	12	9	15	13

Does not total to 100% as multiple responses included.

Hürriyet, a psychology graduate who had been unemployed for over a year, believed that the government should stop privatising government-owned companies and try to prevent the movement of production offshore. In her view the government needed to change policies which were causing unemployment, instead of compelling the unemployed to ‘work for the dole’:

Interviewer: Do you think that the government is responsible for preventing unemployment?

Hürriyet: Yeah...factories are closing, they’re moving to Asia...And the government doesn’t do anything...[even] Telstra they’re planning on selling it off, privatise this, privatise that...a lot of people are going to lose their jobs. And now you’re having a lot of full-time work lost, and you have so much part-time and casuals, where you won’t even probably get enough money to meet...your mortgage, and your bills and everything and secure your future...So the government—they’re letting companies...they have sold off, close...So they’re creating this unemployment, and they’re still...making things like Work for the Dole [*laughs*]. As if there’s so much work out there.

She thought that unemployment and company closures had led to widespread economic insecurity, and believed both government and industry were responsible for preventing job losses but were failing to fulfil their obligations:

I’m really frustrated about the government. Like even overseas, back in my country [*Turkey*], they try to actually create jobs...But because there are unemployment benefits here, companies don’t care, it’s like ‘Oh, I can sack all the people and they can go on the dole’. And the government doesn’t care, it’s like ‘Go to Centrelink’, and what does Centrelink do? You know, ‘Do this and do that’...A lot of people’s lives are...turned upside down, with companies collapsing, people losing their work...It’s not stable and people are really like panicky.

Several interviewees commented that the government had a responsibility to directly create jobs. For example, Lisa believed that the government should create jobs instead of Work for the Dole places, and suggested that employment at Centrelink would be a start:

the government should be making jobs, but not in this situation that I’m in at the moment with this Work for the Dole...If they can’t find work then don’t chuck them on a program like Work for the

Dole...why don't they give people that are unemployed jobs at Centrelink? You know, why don't they do things like that?

Stefano had a similar view, arguing that 'real jobs' should be provided instead of Work for the Dole, which he believed mainly benefited sponsor organisations:

with that many jobs, in the public sector...surely they can offer some paid jobs in exchange for those bogus funding projects they have. Scrap the funding and create new jobs. You know, deliver honest wages...just scrap the dishonesty, with all these organisations with their hands out, and with that they should offer real jobs, in exchange for real work.

Several interviewees linked the government's responsibility to reduce unemployment with its ability to do so. Matthew was an example:

Interviewer: Is it up to the government to make sure there are enough jobs for everyone to do?

Matthew: Well, they've got the power to do that. Yeah, they've certainly got the most power to make jobs, than probably anyone. If they want to help their country, then they should do that...

However, some thought that the government's ability to reduce unemployment was limited. Khoa believed that the government's ability to *prevent* unemployment was restricted by world economic conditions, and at best it could *minimise* unemployment:

I think the government should prevent [unemployment]—well, I shouldn't say prevent, I should say minimise...if the economy goes down in the world, we can't expect Australia can do much, much better. We have to be dragged down with them. But I believe every government should try their best to get everybody have a job.

Khoa thought that to prevent the 'brain drain' from Australia and create jobs, the government should direct more resources to infrastructure investment in industries such as IT. Richard also thought that the world economy and large corporations limited the capacity of individual governments to prevent unemployment:

Interviewer: Do you think the government is responsible for preventing unemployment?

Richard: It can't prevent it. They can just help to alleviate it. We all know...that the world economy is the world economy...I'm not naïve enough to think that John Howard can run this economy. Come to that, more and more people are aware that big business runs our society, our governments don't, and people aren't happy about it, because why do we have elections? If Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch are running my society, why do I bother elect a fucking Prime Minister? More and more people are certainly coming to that realisation.

But he believed that the government could *reduce* unemployment by fostering industries to meet world economic demand, and had a duty to do so:

Interviewer: When you say the government's responsible for alleviating unemployment, what do you mean by alleviating?

Richard: Well, its duty to the populace is to take care of the society. You know, if they can't foster new industries, take care of its people, that's its primary function...If we fostered industries, there wouldn't be any unemployed...You can't leave it up to the profit motive, or else there wouldn't be any infrastructure. They'll all go and manufacture in Taiwan, you know...Society can't run like that. It's the government's job, yes, it is.

Rod believed that by making promises to the electorate concerning unemployment the government had taken on (partial) responsibility for addressing it:

Interviewer: Do you think that the government is responsible for preventing unemployment?

Rod: They have a responsibility towards it. I don't think they're completely responsible.

Interviewer: And why do you think they have a partial responsibility?

Rod: ...that's their job, or part of their job, part of their charter to look after the people who voted them in, or the people that they've *said*, we'll look after you...if you vote us in...It's part of what they're supposed to do.

Overall, three-quarters of interviewees thought that the government had at least some responsibility to prevent unemployment. This responsibility was variously attributed to the government's obligation to meet the needs of citizens, its ability to at least reduce unemployment, and commitments made to the electorate. In contrast, there was far less agreement that employers had a role in reducing unemployment, as will be discussed below.

Business responsibility

Views on the responsibilities of business varied quite markedly between participants. Some believed that businesses were responsible for the social consequences of their business decisions, while others rejected this view. Only a third of interviewees thought that employers had a responsibility to prevent unemployment, with most of these ascribing a shared responsibility to government and employers. This proportion was somewhat lower than the 43.8 per cent of Australians in the 1999 SPRC survey who agreed that 'businesses should be required to create more jobs' (Eardley et al. 2000: 13). Higher skilled workers in the current study were more likely than lower skilled workers to believe that employers had a responsibility to prevent unemployment (42 per cent compared to 25 per cent—see Table 10.1), consistent with their greater focus on structural rather than individual causes of unemployment. The fact that the unemployed people in this study had a lower average skill level than the general population may explain this difference.

Several interviewees commented that the company drive for profits conflicted with employers' social responsibilities to address unemployment. These interviewees often drew on the public narrative about amoral large corporations with only one goal—to increase their profit-share. For example, Karen—a project manager in her early 40s—objected to the focus on cutting staff as a means to increased profits:

Interviewer: And do you think that any other individuals or organisations or companies are responsible for preventing unemployment, aside from the government?

Karen: Yeah, I just think business in general...the first thing, they don't reach their two billion dollar profits, they reduce the workforce. The first thing they think of, let's get rid of the jobs...

Similarly, Louise believed that employers were ignoring their social responsibilities when making staffing decisions. She was concerned that large corporations were over-working their employees instead of expanding employment:

Interviewer: ...who else do you think's responsible for preventing unemployment? Are there other organisations?

Louise: For preventing?...I don't know, big corporations that want to save money by using as least people as possible, but pushing them the most.

Khoa saw the moral issues as more complex, with companies having to balance their legitimate pursuit of profits with their moral obligation to maximise employment as much as possible. Nevertheless, he considered that companies had swung too far towards profit maximisation and were neglecting their responsibilities to the community:

Interviewer: And do you think that any other individuals or organisations or companies are responsible for preventing unemployment, as well as the government?

Khoa: It's hard, because the company, the way they work is, they try to maximise...the profit. That's always the principle and another one, they [have a]...moral obligation with the Australia people [to] maximise their staff, as much as possible. Unfortunately that not the case...Well, I understand that they maximise—everybody doing that, okay, and there's nothing wrong with that, but...the moral obligation [to] the community, well...I prefer them to show a bit more [of] that as well...

Interviewer: I see. So do you think that there's a bit of a conflict, between the two?

Khoa: Yeah, it is a conflict, it is a conflict. We don't live in...the perfect world, and they have to be juggling between the maximise profit, and...the moral obligation to the community. Unfortunately, we don't have 50/50 [*laughs*]. We tend to be more on profit, yeah. What can we do?

Richard also thought that companies had a responsibility to address unemployment, based on their reciprocal obligations—society provided infrastructure to industry (via government funding) and in exchange industry had an obligation to society:

Interviewer: And do you think that anyone else is also responsible for preventing unemployment?

Richard: Well, the industries themselves...Poor old government can't just be handed the whole job...industry is only interested in getting the maximum amount of profit, for the minimum amount of input...And that's when they use the word, responsible citizens. If I'm a government and I give an industry infrastructure, I build roads and water supply out to its factories. It agrees to employ people for x amount of years and not to piss off to Taiwan...Industries have people who make money out of a society, have a responsibility to that society.

A few interviewees commented that businesses should have the freedom to make their own decisions about staffing levels. For example, while Matthew thought that companies should do what they could to reduce unemployment, he did not believe that they should be 'forced' to do so. Like Khoa, he thought that large companies had become distanced from their moral obligations; however, he thought that in the long run it was in the best interests of companies to contribute to conditions of high employment:

I think companies should always try their best to try and help that. I don't think companies should be obligated...but the problem is the larger companies, the more out of touch they seem to get with...what they should be doing as far as, yeah, being human...I don't think they should be forced...I think they should take it upon themselves, to try and help in any way they can. It's going to be in their interests, maybe in the long run, if they're in a country that's got a better economy...

Similarly, Nadja—who had previously run a small business—believed that companies can 'do what they like' with regards to employment decisions and should not be told 'what to do' in this respect. However, if they received government employment incentives then this generated obligations on their part to assist in reducing unemployment:

I don't think we can tell private companies what to do really...[there are] incentives for companies...and they get some money if you train someone, or apprenticeship or things like that, so that's obviously good, and companies do use that, because it helps both...if a company gets something back from the government, then they've got to give something back, but if it's a company that just employs people...and they get nothing, whatever, well they can do what they like.

In contrast, several interviewees commented that businesses *should* accept responsibility for training new staff, rather than only taking on those with previous training. For example, Jen—who had completed Year 12 and a child care certificate—thought that companies should train new employees who did not have experience in specific aspects of a job, commenting ‘they should actually give you a try before they say “no” to you’. Paul, aged in his late 40s, contrasted current requirements for trained job applicants with a previous greater willingness to train staff. He believed that the government had inappropriately shifted the responsibility for training workforce entrants from employers to the education and training system:

looking at the jobs where you’ve got to be qualified for this or qualified for that...the whole scenario’s changed, in the sense that companies were prepared to train people before. Now, for some reason the government’s just jumped on the bandwagon and said, ‘Well, companies shouldn’t have to train their employees’, and they should be, you know, fully skilled and all that when they enter the place...the companies think they should have everything put on for them...

In summary, participants expressed quite varied views about the role that employers should play in reducing unemployment. Some thought that employers had an ethical responsibility to maximise employment where possible—drawing on the public narrative about the social damage caused by the amoral corporation—while others thought that employers’ only responsibility was to maximise company profit. Even fewer ascribed primary or partial responsibility for gaining a job to individuals, as will be discussed below.

Individual responsibility

Only one in five interviewees said that individuals were responsible for preventing unemployment, and an even smaller proportion—15 per cent of all interviewees—believed that this responsibility fell to individuals alone. While many participants believed that unemployed people should be seeking work and undertaking training (as will be discussed in Chapter 11), most appeared to place primacy on the government’s role in preventing unemployment. Perhaps they believed that unemployed people were largely doing what they could to gain work or that government action would make the most difference in reducing unemployment. It is also possible that the wording of the relevant questions influenced participants’ responses. They were asked whether ‘any other individuals or organisations or companies are responsible for preventing unemployment’; the range of actors in the question may have resulted in incomplete answers.

Those who did place primacy on individual responsibility commonly thought that there was little further that the government could do about unemployment and that individuals had to take responsibility for their joblessness. For example, Meg—who was in her late 30s and had been unemployed for most of her adult life—thought that gaining employment depended on individual motivation and self-confidence:

Interviewer: Do you think it's up to the government to make sure there are enough jobs for everyone to do?

Meg: No, I don't think it's up to the government. I think it's up to the individual...the person who's actually looking for work...I suppose it's how motivated they are to actually want to work...it comes down to the confidence thing, you know, how much confidence they've got in themselves, and stuff like that...

Meg's comments echoed some of the views expressed by unemployed participants in Peel's study of entrenched poverty in Australia (2003: 79); as he describes it, such comments reflect 'an understanding of poverty in which the first question is what you did to cause your own suffering'. McDonald (1999: 54) suggests that the use of this kind of individualist model—'you can do anything if you are committed'—is a means of countering the experience of exclusion. Meg needed to feel that she was not 'locked out' of the labour market—if only she could be sufficiently motivated and confident, she could overcome the barriers. Yet Meg's personal experience did not appear to fit with this belief, as she had been unable to get work for long periods despite being strongly motivated to work and regularly applying for jobs. She continued to seek feedback from employers, despite years of discouragement:

I would love to work, yeah. It's strange because there's a lot of people out there on the dole...don't apply themselves...and they get the job, but me, who wants to work, you know, and I apply...Sometimes I get interviews and stuff. A lot of the time...a letter comes through the post, unfortunately...But I always ring up and ask 'em why...Because then I know that the next time I apply, I know...what to say and what not to say...

Con, who had been unemployed for six months, also thought that individuals were responsible for their unemployment. He appeared to take a Darwinian approach to the issue, believing that the unemployed did not have right to assistance and referring to the 'survival of the fittest'. His views may have been influenced by his Greek family background, given the limited provisions for the unemployed in Greece (Sissouras & Amitsis 1994, Kleinman 2002).

Interviewer: Do you think the government's responsible for preventing unemployment?

Con: No.

Interviewer: And why do you think that?

Con: Because I think people are responsible for their own situations. Work that the government does is an aid—I mean you get countries all around the world, that unemployment's *laughed* at. If you're unemployed, you're unemployed, it's *your* fault, do something about it, you know, survival of the fittest. So, we're *lucky*, we've got all this.

He had left a real estate job after three years because he had 'had enough of dealing with customers' and was trying to move into an administrative role. He was also applying for temporary real estate work 'just to keep me going'. As noted in Chapter 6, he commented: 'I find that I don't have the same self-esteem, as when I am employed, until I get a job...not having strong goals, is the main thing', indicating that he blamed a lack of self-direction for his own situation.

Like Con, John appeared to believe that the government and society was not going to do any more for the unemployed and that it was up to the unemployed to 'help themselves':

Basically you've got to help yourself pretty much. Like if you don't look for a job you are not going to find anything. You can't expect someone to go out of the way and help you, pretty much...So I think what the government is doing is pretty good, like they could do more, if they wanted to, but they can't afford to do more, or they choose not to do more.

For the minority of participants who believed that individuals were responsible for addressing unemployment, individual behaviour drove employment outcomes—echoing market liberal concepts of the centrality of individual motivation and self-reliance.

In summary, the great majority of participants interviewed in this study ascribed responsibility for preventing or minimising unemployment to government, sometimes together with employers or individuals. The primary responsibility they attributed to government did not appear to accord with mutual obligation concepts of a *shared* responsibility between government—on behalf of society—and the unemployed. Although

many participants believed that unemployed people had a responsibility to seek work and to undertake training, they primarily emphasised the responsibility of government. This appeared to reflect participants' common belief that the government was not fulfilling its side of the 'social contract' in its mutual obligation arrangements, as discussed in the next chapter.

Another premise of the mutual obligation principle, as we saw in Chapter 3, is that rights to income support are conditional upon work or other activities undertaken 'in exchange' for payments. This study asked interviewees whether they believed they had a right to payments and whether conditions should be attached to such rights. Their responses are discussed below.

The right to income support

When interview participants were asked whether they thought that unemployed people had a right to get unemployment payments, the overwhelming majority (all but three) responded that they did. They most often justified this right on the grounds of need: about half commented that unemployed people could not survive or would become homeless without payments. Somewhat fewer (about a third) focused on the motivation of the unemployed person, arguing that unemployed people who were 'genuinely' looking for work deserved support. However, when questioned later about the obligations of the unemployed, over half—including those who initially focused on the needs of the unemployed—commented that people who were not looking for work should not receive payments. Clearly, while almost all participants believed in a right to income support, most viewed this as conditional on their continuing to seek work.

There were some notable differences between men's and women's views on the right to unemployment payments. Some men discussed the right to income support in broad social and economic terms, such as the need for income support to prevent crime and the capacity of the Australian economy to fund unemployment payments, whereas no women spoke in these terms. Men were also more likely than women to say that people receiving unemployment payments should not have to meet job search requirements: almost a third of the men said that it should depend on individual choice or circumstances what they did to receive payments, whereas only one woman expressed this view. In contrast, women were more likely than men to talk about individuals earning the right to payments by looking for work or

meeting other Centrelink requirements. These differences suggest that male participants were more likely than female participants to view the right to unemployment payments as meeting the needs of society as a whole, and not being conditional on the behaviour of individual jobseekers.

The differences between male and female responses may be at least partially attributable to the different average education levels of men and women in the sample—three-quarters of men compared to half of women in the sample had completed Year 11 or higher, and all but one of those who believed that unemployment payment recipients should not have to look for work had completed this level of education. Those with higher education levels appeared to have more awareness of systemic issues surrounding unemployment, and placed less emphasis on the behaviour or motivation of individual jobseekers.

There were also differences between those of non-English-speaking migrant background and other respondents: none of the former indicated that individual choice or circumstances was a factor in whether they should be looking for work. First or second generation migrants from countries which provided less support for the unemployed tended to take a less ‘rights-based’ approach to income support.

Survival and employment search

About half the interviewees explained the right to unemployment payments in terms of the need for a subsistence income to live. This rationale justifies the provision of income support only to those with no other means of support, in keeping with Australia’s historically residualist income support system (as discussed in Chapter 1). Although many participants tied the right to income support with an *obligation* to seek work, it was rarely connected with the *right* to work. In other words, most participants viewed unemployment payments as a right subject to a means test, not as a right to compensation for everyone unable to find work.

Participants often connected the right to income support with the consequences of not providing such support—most often for the unemployed themselves, but also for society. For example, when asked whether she thought that unemployed people had a right to unemployment payments Hürriyet responded:

Yeah. I mean what else are they going to live off on? [*sic*] You know, how are they going to support themselves or their family?

Carlo, a former railway worker in his late 30s, apparently viewed the idea of not having payments as absurd. When asked why he thought unemployed people had a right to get payments he replied:

Why, well otherwise they'd starve and die [*laugh*]. Or they wouldn't be able to afford their rent and would be living on the streets or in public parks.

Similarly, Joe appeared to find it self-evident that unemployed people had a right to a subsistence income:

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Joe: Yeah. [*Laughs*] 'Course.

Interviewer: ...why do you think they have that right?

Joe: Because they're unemployed. And, yeah, they still have to live too, you know. You don't have to give them a lot, but don't let them sit out on the streets in the cold...

Four interviewees also connected the right to income support with the need for an income to look for work. For example, Tran commented 'If they didn't have no money coming in, how are they gonna go look for a job?'. Similarly, Kelly argued '[they are] looking for a job, they are trying their best to go and get somewhere in life, and they can't do that unless there are some payments'.

A few interviewees commented that although some people 'bludged' on unemployment payments, the advantages of providing payments outweighed this problem. For example, Gary—aged in his early 20s—believed that not providing payments would be counterproductive: while it might increase unemployed people's *motivation* to gain work it would reduce their *capacity* to do so:

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Gary: Yeah, there's no reason why they shouldn't, but it's the thing of you get a lot of people who bleed the system, so it's a catch 22...They say 'No, we're not going to give you no more money', what's going to happen then they're just going to sit around on the couch even more, because they can't go out nowhere, they can't do nothing.

Nathan also thought that the social problems generated by not providing income support outweighed the problem of 'bludging' on payments—and that lack of income support would undermine jobseekers' capacity to 'improve themselves':

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Nathan: Yeah, to a level, because otherwise society falls in a heap and that would be very ugly, and look at the rest of the world. Okay, it's better that people bludge and can live in a house, than we start having slums and everything that goes with that, and also people that are living in a house are likely to be able to improve themselves as opposed to worry about where food is coming from.

Four men partially justified the right to income support as a means of reducing crime. These respondents viewed income support from a utilitarian perspective—as necessary to promote the welfare of society as a whole—rather than as an inherent human right. For example, Steve thought that a lack of income support would lead to homelessness and higher crime levels:

Well you know, people who are unemployed, who need to be on welfare, I think do have a right to it, or else we would just have a really high homeless rate, you know. That would be no good, and then you'd have a high crime rate.

Paul also believed that denying payments weakened society as a whole:

Interviewer: And do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Paul: Oh, yeah, absolutely...why increase the crime in the whole community without it. In any team situation, you're only as strong as your weakest chain...

When asked whether unemployed people had a right to unemployment payments regardless of whether were looking for work, Paul responded that in the context of high unemployment he supported such a principle:

the whole point is, there's always 6 per cent unemployment, or 8 per cent or 10 per cent, or whatever...it's always there...you can't have people starving, and you don't want to increase your crime rate...So get away from Americans' type of thing, where you kick 'em off after 20 weeks or something and survive the best you can [*laughs*], yeah.

Similarly, Richard argued that Australia should not copy the United States' approach to welfare provision. Like Paul and another interviewee, Phil, Richard believed that the United States' welfare system exemplified the social disorder which resulted from a 'tough on welfare' approach:

if they don't go on unemployment payments, some percentage of the society are gonna steal from you...and to the right wing I say, unless you buy these people off, they will steal your video recorder. Look at North America. They cut off your welfare payments after eight weeks, so some of the poor, uneducated, and some of the detritus in society, steal from you.

In summary, for about half the participants the right to income support while unemployed was necessary to meet basic survival needs and to prevent the negative social consequences of not meeting such needs. For some an appeal to the rights of those without work to a subsistence income was sufficient, while others appealed to the self-interest of those in employment, arguing that without the provision of unemployment payments the community generally would be worse off. However, most believed that the right to payments was conditional upon seeking work, as will be discussed below.

Seeking work

Over half the interview participants did not support an unconditional right to income support, believing that unemployed people should be actively looking for work to qualify for payments. Fifty-seven per cent expressed this view, and four in ten specifically objected to people receiving payments if they did not want to work. This views were broadly in keeping with the requirement to seek work which has always been attached to unemployment payments in Australia. Only one in five recipients—all but one of whom were male—thought that it was a matter of individual choice or circumstances whether unemployment payment

recipients should be looking for work. A further three participants thought that doing community work instead of job search should be a requirement of receiving payments.

For example, Karen believed that payment recipients should look for work and take other steps to improve their job prospects:

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Karen: Yeah, providing they're genuinely looking for work. Not necessarily take the first job that comes along, 'cause I don't agree with that...generally that they're looking for work, and they're doing things about it, like taking some courses or doing something else...

Nadja, an office worker in her late 40s, specifically tied the right to payments to looking for work and doing Work for the Dole:

[Unemployed people] have a right to get unemployment payments, yeah, providing they are looking for work, and providing that if they can't get work, because the work is not there, then they're willing to do Work for the Dole. But if they don't want to do Work for the Dole, and they want to get full payments, I wouldn't allow it, no.

A few interviewees commented that they had a right to payments because it was not their 'fault' that they were unemployed. This implied that those who *were* 'at fault' by not trying hard enough to get work do not have such a right, linking the right to payments with perceptions of individual responsibility for unemployment. For Louise, however, the fact that many people experienced unemployment through no fault of their own meant that the unemployed in general should have a right to payments:

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Louise: Yeah.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Louise: Because, like I know from first hand experience, I know a lot of people that do look for work, and do try like myself, but they can't find any work, and they've got debts.

And a lot of the times people are retrenched or like lose work, even if it's just casual work and things like that, and it's not really their fault.

While initially saying that everyone had a right to unemployment payments, Jeffrey—a former fast food manager in his early 20s—then appeared to link this right with not being individually at fault for being unemployed:

Everyone has a right [to unemployment payments]. Like I don't know everyone's problem. But me personally, it's not my fault. I apply for them, but because I have got too much experience, because I was good at my job it is not my fault that I can't get a job...

Luke, a former chef's apprentice aged under 21, felt many unemployed people had no right to payments because they were not making sufficient efforts to look for work:

A lot of them do [have a right to unemployment payments], but then I reckon a lot of them don't, because a lot of them are just after the money. Just want the money and not even bothering going out looking for jobs or anything. Just sit at home and do whatever.

Luke said he did not know any people personally with this attitude, but based his assessment on people he saw at the Centrelink offices, saying 'they don't look very clean at all really, a lot of them *[laughs]*'. He commented:

You can tell just by looking at the people in the lines if they're genuine and then you got one's who, just go to hand in their form, go home, friggin' sit in front of the TV, do nothing.

Similarly, Meg believed only those 'genuinely' looking for work should get payments:

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Meg: *[Sighs]* Um, that's a curly one *[laughs]*. I suppose...I would say if they're ...genuinely looking for work, genuinely wanting to work...yes. But there are people out there that just collect the unemployment benefit...to keep them afloat or, you know, to feed their smoking habits and drinking...

Some also felt that those not looking for work gave the 'genuine' unemployed a 'bad name' through stigma by association. For example, Jason strongly objected to 'bludgers' and 'rich

kids' receiving unemployment payments, believing that all Work for the Dole recipients were put in the same category. He believed that unemployed people only deserved payments 'if they're intending to work':

If they're not like bludgers. You know the typical idea of a bludger sitting at home on their arse, living off the system. But if people are actually...doing something to better their prospects, their chances of a job, you know they deserve it...the rich people, rich kids who live off mummy and daddy, or fucking sell drugs...and who still claim the dole. I'm pretty much put in—all the people who work for the dole—we're put in that real same category, and it's unfair.

While Kelly believed that unemployed people should have to demonstrate that they are looking for work to prevent 'people that cheat the system', she found the issue 'confusing' and thought too much was expected of some groups, such as the disabled. In her view Centrelink was 'blowing things out of proportion' and was 'all over the place':⁹⁶

Kelly: I think sometimes, yeah [people have the right to payments] if they're actually proving that they are actually going to look for a job, if they can actually prove they're meeting the requirements...because I know that there are a lot of people that cheat the system...It's all too far blown out of proportion [though], because there's so many payments that you could be on...like there are disability payments that you can be on, but still be a jobseeker...and it's just confusing—you don't know which ones should have it and which ones shouldn't.

Interviewer: I see. And how do you mean that it's blown out of proportion?

Kelly: Because...now they are even starting to make like those half disabled people—like they are paraplegics and things like that—and they think they can still work. And they're telling them that they have to go on Work for the Dole now, not disability payments...Centrelink's just all over the place. They don't know where they're goin', what they're doin' [*laughs*].

Most participants clearly viewed the right to income support as conditional on job search and sometimes on other activities as well, and a substantial minority objected to payment recipients who, in their opinion, were not actively seeking work. Many participants were

⁹⁶ A reference to the proposed extension of mutual obligation requirements to Disability Support Pensioners in the Government's 2002/03 Budget (Commonwealth Government 2002). The proposal was subsequently blocked by the Senate (Wroe 2003).

concerned to present themselves as ‘genuine’ jobseekers in the context of the public narrative about ‘dole bludgers’. There was little support for the concept that income support be provided without conditions attached, as has been proposed by advocates of a basic income or guaranteed minimum income (such as Saunders 1995, 2002a: 257–9). Participants’ support for job search requirements is not surprising given the long history of such requirements in Australia, dating back to the introduction of the Unemployment Benefit in 1945. The requirement to seek work could be considered a social norm; as noted in Chapter 3, the 1999 SPRC survey found that it had widespread support in the community generally. For a minority of participants, however, past contributions rather than current activity justified receipt of payments, as will be discussed below.

Taxation and wealth

A small number of interviewees viewed the right to income support from the perspective of financing, arguing either that their previous taxes had paid for income support or that the country was sufficiently wealthy to provide it. This perspective was in strong contrast to the view that the right was conditional upon the current motivation or activity of the unemployed, instead emphasising past contributions via taxation or the strong economic standing of the country.

Three interviewees explained the right to income support in terms of having paid taxes which now should be returned to them as unemployment payments. For example, Phil—an IT worker in his early 40s—believed that the government was obliged to use taxes to support people it did not provide work for:

When the government can’t supply us with plenty of work out there...then yes, they’ve got to find a way to support people. That’s what they’re paying, you know, phenomenal amounts [of money], as taxpayers...to the government to ensure that we’ve got this type of back-up and support...

Similarly, Richard believed that the purpose of taxation was to provide a safety net:

If [unemployed people have] worked and paid taxes, that’s what taxation’s for, a safety net for our society, whether it’s public utilities, roads, police, ambulances, hospitals, nurses, unemployment benefits. Part of the system. You work and agree to hand over 30 to 50 per cent of your wage, in return for some safety net.

Three interviewees indicated that the right to income support was socially granted and restricted to countries with sufficient wealth to provide such payments. For example, when asked whether he thought there was a right to payments, Rod commented ‘Yeah, I do. I think that the world largely—particularly in our part of the world—is rich enough to sustain it’. Similarly, Con commented ‘The economy supports it, it’s a strong enough country to support that’. These participants appeared to believe in a socially granted right to income support, subject to economic conditions and taxation arrangements, rather than an inherent human right to a subsistence income. In contrast, a few participants went further and did not believe in any right to unemployment payments at all.

Not a right

There were a few exceptions to the overwhelming support among interview participants for the right to unemployment payments—three participants did not believe in such a right. These respondents were first or second generation migrants and may have been influenced in their views by different approaches to social welfare in their own or their parents’ country of origin. Two referred to the need to ‘earn’ payments, contrasting this with the concept of a right to payments. For example, Tran—who was from Vietnam—commented:

I don’t know, I don’t actually think it’s like a right, ‘cause you think about it, you’re not actually working. I think it’s a good thing, but I don’t think it’s a right.

Stefano, the son of Italian migrants, also rejected the idea of a right to payments—as he had rejected the idea of an innate right to work—associating it with communism. He clearly held contractualist views, believing that it was only justifiable to get payments if you were contributing to the community ‘in exchange’:

Interviewer: Do you think that unemployed people have a right to get unemployment payments?

Stefano: *[Pause]* Funnily enough, I don’t think so.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Stefano: I mean, it’s just the simple belief that they’re not doing anything, that’s all...It’s just that concept that people deserve things that they don’t earn. I mean, what’s this, a communist society? You know, just waltz in and receive benefits? I feel bad when I

have to get a prescription on a Health Care Card but, you know...it all works on an exchange I think, so, we're actually putting in to the community now, that's all justified in getting payments.

John, a second-generation Greek-Australian aged under 21, saw the provision of payments as entirely the choice of the government, not as an individual right. He commented that 'The government could stop [providing payments] any time they want basically, they don't *have* to do it'. John thought that compared with Greece, where he had lived for a while, 'Australia is pretty good with the Centrelink and [unemployed people] do get this money from the government'. His experience of living in a country with less support for the unemployed may have made him less inclined to believe in a right to payments. Interestingly, however, the 1999 SPRC survey found that migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds in the general community were *less* likely to support mutual obligation requirements than were the Australian-born. In addition, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the survey in stage one of this study found that those with a mother or father born in a non-English-speaking country were somewhat *more* likely than those with Australian-born parents to oppose compulsion to participate in Work for the Dole, although this finding was not statistically significant. The views of the above interviewees may not have been representative of those from non-English-speaking backgrounds more generally.

Overall, most interviewees' beliefs about the right to unemployment payments reflected the linkage of such entitlements in Australia to material need and to the requirement to seek work. Almost all participants believed that unemployed people had a right to income support, with the most common justification for this right being that unemployed people needed an income to survive and to pay for job search costs. Some participants also used arguments about overall social welfare. However, many drew on the deserving/undeserving distinctions commonly used in popular narratives about welfare provision (Golding, & Middleton 1982; Beder 2000), arguing that only 'genuine' jobseekers deserved support. These views were consistent with general community opinion and with social security policy since the inception of unemployment payments in Australia. In the context of a non-contributory social security system, only a few interviewees responded that making a contribution through taxation generated an entitlement to payments. Although very few rejected the idea of a right to unemployment payments, most premised such a right on the need to meet some type of work test.

Conclusion

Most participants clearly endorsed *some form* of reciprocal or mutual obligation in principle, believing that the government has an obligation to provide income support to those in material need and to prevent unemployment, while the individual unemployed person has an obligation to seek work. They viewed government as primarily responsible for preventing unemployment; few attributed the responsibility to individuals and only a minority to employers. In their view, this responsibility mainly derived from the government's obligation to meet the needs of citizens and its capacity to reduce unemployment. However, they also believed that individuals' entitlement to payments should be conditional on job search, and a minority expressed strong objections to those who in their view were not fulfilling such obligations. The higher skilled were more likely to attribute unemployment to structural causes than to individual motivations and behaviour, perhaps reflecting a higher awareness of structural issues.

Many participants' views could be characterised as individualist and autonomy-oriented: most based their belief in both their right and obligation to work on the value of work to individuals, although some placed more emphasis on their obligations to others. They had an Aristotelian focus on how they were to lead a successful life—with work, in their view, being a central element of such a life. Although most believed that unemployment payment recipients were obliged to seek work, few viewed work as a Kantian duty which must be undertaken regardless of the suitability of a particular job for the individual.

Participants' views about unemployment payments were consistent with (and probably influenced by) the historical character of such payments in Australia. In their view such payments were justified to ensure a subsistence income to jobseekers without other means of support, not as compensation for a lack of available employment or as properly enabling individuals to 'opt out' of the labour market. Even though the government was not fulfilling its obligation to prevent unemployment, the obligation of the individual unemployed person to continue to seek work remained. Participants' belief in a conditional right to unemployment payments was broadly in keeping with mainstream Australian values about work, although participants placed more stress than the general community on the obligation of government to address unemployment.

However, while participants supported a form of mutual obligation between the government (or society more generally) and the unemployed, this did not necessarily mean that they supported the specific form of mutual obligation favoured by the Howard Government. There is a substantial difference between supporting an obligation to *seek* work and supporting an obligation *to* work for unemployment payments. The final chapter will consider participants' views on the latter requirement.

CHAPTER 11

‘THEY TELL US TO JUMP, WE SAY “HOW HIGH?”’: PERSPECTIVES ON MUTUAL OBLIGATION

Introduction

As we saw in Chapter 3, the government combines contractualist and paternalist rationales for Work for the Dole, claiming that unemployed people owe something to the community in exchange for receiving income support and that unemployed people benefit from being required to undertake the program. The previous chapter discussed participants’ general ethical beliefs regarding their rights and obligations to work and income support, finding that participants primarily attributed the responsibility for preventing unemployment to government but believed that unemployment payment recipients had a responsibility to look for work. This final chapter will focus directly on participants’ views about the mutual obligation principle, by examining their attitudes towards compulsory participation in Work for the Dole. It will be argued that many participants believe that compulsion to do Work for the Dole unreasonably restricts their freedom of choice, thus undermining their autonomy; yet the development of unemployed people’s capacities for autonomy is central to paternalist arguments for Work for the Dole.

The chapter will first consider overall participant views on choice and compulsion with regard to Work for the Dole, before considering three specific kinds of participant responses—autonomy-oriented, outcomes-oriented, and disciplinary.

Views on compulsion

As part of the stage one survey, participants were asked a series of questions relating to the compulsion to undertake Work for the Dole. They were initially asked:

Some people think that young unemployed people should *have* to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments. Others think that young unemployed people should *have a choice* about whether they do a Work for the Dole project. What do you think about this? (Question D4)⁹⁷

In response to this question, 46 per cent of participants favoured choice, 33 per cent compulsion and 17 per cent were either undecided or neither clearly supported or opposed compulsion. Participants were then asked to read twelve statements expressing a range of attitudes to Work for the Dole and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Table 11.1 shows the responses to those statements which referred to the obligations of the unemployed.

Table 11.1: Survey participants' views on the obligations of the unemployed (%)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Young unemployed people should have to do a Work for the Dole project, even if they don't want to (S12)	11	24	21	28	16
You should do work for the community in return for getting unemployment payments (S4)	11	22	32	26	9
You shouldn't have to do a Work for the Dole project if it's not relevant to the type of job you're looking for (S7)	23	35	21	16	5
If you're getting unemployment payments, you should have to increase your skills (S6)	9	41	27	15	9
There's too much focus on what young unemployed people owe the community, and not enough on the job opportunities the community should provide for the young unemployed (S3)	37	42	17	1	3

n = 80-1

⁹⁷ The questionnaire did not specify an age range for the term 'young people'. Implicitly it referred to the (then) target age group for Work for the Dole, those aged 18 to 24, however individual respondents may have defined the term differently.

The table shows that responses to the first statement were similar to those to question D4 above: 44 per cent disagreed and 35 per cent agreed. However, participants were equally split in their responses to the statement ‘you should do work for the community in return for getting unemployment payments’: 35 per cent disagreed, 33 per cent agreed and a substantial 32 per cent were undecided. The latter statement did not specifically refer to the Work for the Dole program or to the government requiring individuals to do the program, which may explain the lower level of opposition to this statement than to question D4. However, across all three questions a consistent one-third of participants appeared to endorse compulsory participation in Work for the Dole.

The importance of projects being relevant to jobseekers’ work aspirations is indicated in participants’ response to the statement: ‘You shouldn’t have to do a Work for the Dole project if it’s not relevant to the type of job you’re looking for’—58 per cent of respondents agreed and only 21 per cent disagreed. Thus, when the issue of project relevance was introduced opposition to compulsion rose to well over half of participants, while support for compulsion dropped from one-third of participants to one-fifth. This finding is of particular significance given the high proportion of survey participants—70 per cent—who thought that their project work had no or only slight relevance to the jobs they were seeking, as we saw in Chapter 9.

Participants were more likely to agree that that they should be required to increase their skills than to undertake Work for the Dole, with half of participants supporting the former requirement while only a quarter opposed it. However, participants were not as supportive of this requirement as the general community—the 1999 SPRC survey discussed in Chapter 3 found that 81.8 per cent of the general community thought that unemployed people aged under 25 should have to ‘undergo a training or retraining program’. There was also considerably less agreement between those who had experienced the program and the general community on the requirement to ‘work for the dole’. The SPRC study found that 82.5 per cent of respondents thought that unemployed people aged under 25 should be required to do the program, while the Roy Morgan Research study found that 71 per cent of respondents supported compulsory participation for the unemployed more generally. This compared to only one-third of participants in this study.

Two statements in the questionnaire referred to possible negative effects of compulsory participation in Work for the Dole, with responses to these statements indicating that many participants thought that compulsion had a negative effect on projects. Over three-quarters of participants thought that the presence of people in projects who did not want to participate had a ‘bad effect on the project’, and half thought that Work for the Dole would be better if it was voluntary (Table 11.2). As noted in Chapter 8, some compulsory participants were engaging in ‘passive resistance’ and not contributing to projects, and some voluntary participants disliked working with people who did not want to take part and were not actively contributing to projects. Some participants also commented that there did not seem to be any point in trying to force people to contribute.

Survey participants strongly supported the argument of many critics of Work for the Dole that the government should be doing more to reduce unemployment—over three-quarters of participants thought that the government was not creating enough employment and training opportunities for the unemployed. This response was very consistent across the three statements in the survey relating to labour market assistance for the unemployed, with almost half the participants strongly agreeing with the statements (Table 11.3). It was also consistent with the finding that 70 per cent of interview participants believed that the government had a responsibility to prevent unemployment, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Responses to the two questions which focussed on the motivations of individual jobseekers were mixed. While 44 per cent disagreed that ‘If someone doesn’t want to do a Work for the Dole project, it’s probably because they don’t really want a job’, 35 per cent agreed with the statement. Similarly, 39 per cent disagreed and 35 per cent agreed that ‘if someone doesn’t want to do a Work for the Dole project it probably means they’re not trying hard enough to get a job’ (Table 11.4). The responses indicate that a substantial minority of Work for the Dole participants question the work ethic of those who do not want to take part in Work for the Dole, an issue discussed later in this chapter. Notably, 65 per cent of these who responded that ‘young unemployed people should *have* to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments’ agreed that ‘If someone doesn’t want to do a Work for the Dole project, it’s probably because they don’t really want a job’, including a substantial 45 per cent who strongly agreed. This suggests that participants who supported compulsory Work for the Dole commonly questioned the work ethic of those who did not want to participate in the scheme.

Table 11.2: Survey participants' views on the negative effects of compulsion (%)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Having some people on a project who don't want to do it has a bad effect on the project (S11)	31	48	13	4	5
Work for the Dole would be better if it was voluntary (S2)	12	39	18	19	12

n = 80-3

Table 11.3: Survey participants' views on government-funded employment and training (%)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The government isn't doing enough to reduce unemployment (S5)	47	31	9	7	6
Instead of setting up Work for the Dole projects, the government should give funding for real jobs for unemployed people (S10)	47	30	10	6	6
There aren't enough different training and work experience programs for young unemployed people (S9)	44	33	13	5	6

n = 79-81

Table 11.4: Survey participants' views on work motivation (%)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
If someone doesn't want to do a Work for the Dole project, it's probably because they don't really want a job (S1)	19	19	20	30	14
If someone doesn't want to do a Work for the Dole project, it's probably because they're not trying hard enough to get a job (S8)	8	27	26	23	16

n = 77-81

By scoring and then summing participant responses to the statements in Tables 11.1, 11.2 and 11.4 as well as statement S10 in Table 11.3, a ‘compulsion scale’ was constructed to investigate whether survey participants with different characteristics and responses to other questions had different views on choice and compulsion.⁹⁸ The responses of participants with different characteristics were analysed through comparison of means (de Vaus 1995: 194). As predicted, participants who were more opposed to compulsion included those who disliked or were neutral about doing their Work for the Dole project and those who did not want to do their project before they started it. Participants who thought that their project lacked relevance to the job they wanted or would not assist them to gain work were also more

Table 11.5: Association between support for compulsion and participant attitudes and characteristics

	Eta ^{99**}	Sig
Whether wanted to do their project before commencement	0.399	$p < 0.05$
Relevance of the project to job wanted	0.341	ns
Perceived effect on likelihood of gaining work	0.505	$p < 0.05$
Overall feelings about doing Work for the Dole project	0.424	ns
Highest school year completed	0.353	ns
Highest post-school qualification	0.101	ns
Sex	0.016	ns
Mother’s country of birth*	0.150	ns
Father’s country of birth*	0.254	ns

* Australia, other English-speaking, non-English-speaking.

** 0 means there is no association, 1 a perfect association.

ns = not significant at the 0.05 level.

⁹⁸ The five pro-compulsion items—statements 1, 4, 6, 8 and 12—were scored from 2 to –2, with ‘strongly agree’ scoring 2, ‘agree’ scoring 1, ‘undecided’ 0, ‘disagree’ –1 and ‘strongly disagree’ –2. The scores for the five anti-compulsion items—2, 3, 7, 10 and 11—were scored in reverse, with ‘strongly agree’ equalling –2 and ‘strongly disagree’ equalling 2. Each participant thus received a ‘compulsion scale’ score between –20 and 20, with –20 being the highest possible anti-compulsion score and 20 being the highest possible pro-compulsion score.

⁹⁹ Eta is a measure of association which can identify both linear relationships (those that when plotted on a graph show a straight line) and non-linear relationships between variables. It can be used to measure associations between nominal or ordinal and interval-level variables (Vogt 1999: 99, 161; de Vaus 1995: 194–5). Interval-level variables are those in which the difference between each category can be precisely specified numerically. Scales are often treated as if they are interval-level (de Vaus 2002b: 45), and this approach is adopted here for the compulsion scale.

opposed to compulsion. The associations between participants' views on compulsion and their desire to do their project and perceived effect on gaining work were statistically significant (see Table 11.5).

Participants who had completed Year 12 were also more likely to oppose compulsion, although this finding was not statistically significant. This contrasted with the SPRC findings that those with higher education levels were more likely to support compulsion for the long-term unemployed and that there was little difference between those with different education levels with regard to the young unemployed. It is however consistent with the finding of the Middle Australia Study that lower skilled workers were more likely than the higher skilled to support Work for the Dole for young people (see Chapter 3), and with the findings discussed in the previous chapter that higher skilled interviewees were more likely use structural explanations for unemployment and less likely to support behavioural conditions on payments. The views of the 'educated unemployed' may well differ from the views of the more educated in the community generally, given that the latter would be less likely to see themselves as being vulnerable to unemployment or as needing unemployment payments. Thus the views of the latter may be influenced by their relative 'distance' from the experience of being an unemployment payment recipient. This would be consistent with the findings of the SPRC and Roy Morgan research studies that those with recent experience of unemployment were less likely to support mutual obligation requirements (as discussed in Chapter 3).

There was no difference in support for compulsion between males and females and between those aged under 21 and 21 to 24. There was a weak association between parents' country of birth and support for compulsion: those with a mother or a father born in a non-English-speaking country were slightly more likely to oppose compulsion, although this finding was not statistically significant. The first finding contrasts with the SPRC finding that in the general community women were more likely than men to support mutual obligation requirements. Again, the views of women with experience of receiving unemployment payments are likely to differ from those in the general community.

In summary, just under half of survey participants opposed compulsory Work for the Dole, although a substantial minority—one-third—supported it. Half agreed that young people should have to improve their skills to receive unemployment payments, but appeared to link

this requirement to the work goals of individuals: most thought that young people should not have to participate in Work for the Dole unless it was relevant to the kind of job they sought. The finding that most thought that their Work for the Dole project had little or no relevance to the job they were seeking may have contributed to the much lower apparent support for compulsory Work for the Dole among those surveyed than among the general population.

The smaller stage two interview sample was more evenly split than the stage one questionnaire sample, with 41 per cent supporting compulsory participation and 43 per cent opposing it. As was discussed in Chapter 4, this sample was deliberately selected to provide a cross-section of opinion for the purpose of comparing those with different views, in contrast with the questionnaire sample which was designed as far as possible to be representative of all participants in Melbourne and Geelong. As a consequence, the interview sample was likely to be less representative than the questionnaire sample of Work for the Dole participants more generally. It also, of course, involved participants in a later stage of the Work for the Dole program, in which the age of compulsory participation had been extended upwards; whether these changes had affected the balance of opinion among participants is beyond the scope of this research. However, the kinds of views expressed by questionnaire and interview participants were very consistent, and both are discussed below.

To investigate participants' rationale for their views on choice and compulsion, they were asked why they supported or opposed compulsory participation in Work for the Dole. Analysis of survey responses identified three broad types of response, which were more fully investigated during focus group discussions and the later stage two interviews. Among those who opposed compulsory participation views were commonly autonomy-oriented, while among those who supported it views were commonly disciplinary. A further group, defined as being outcomes-oriented, supported the idea of 'having to do something for your payments' but opposed having to do Work for the Dole specifically. While these were the three main orientations identified, a substantial minority of participants did not provide a reason for their support or opposition or provided a range of other reasons. A further group neither supported nor opposed compulsory participation or did not respond to this question (see Table 11.6). The following sections focus on the three main orientations to compulsion, drawing on analysis of the surveys, focus groups and interviews.

Autonomy orientation

The most common view expressed by participants can be described as ‘autonomy-oriented’—one-quarter of all survey respondents and 58 per cent of respondents who opposed compulsory participation in Work for the Dole expressed such a view. The term ‘autonomy’ here refers to individuals’ ability to ‘formulate consistent aims and strategies which they believe to be in their interests and...to put them into practice in the activities in which they engage’ (Doyal & Gough 1991: 59–60). Participants were characterised as having an autonomy-oriented view if they opposed compulsion to take part in Work for the Dole on the primary grounds that people should be able to make their own decisions about work-related activities. In this, their views accorded with Bessant’s (2000), Yeatman’s (2000b) and Shaver’s (2002) critiques of Work for the Dole on the grounds of participants’ loss of agency and self-determination, as were discussed in Chapter 3.

Table 11.6: Survey participants’ orientations towards compulsion (%)

<i>Oppose compulsion</i>	
Autonomy-oriented	26
Outcomes-oriented	13
Other	5
No reason given	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Support compulsion</i>	
Disciplinary	17
Other	10
No reason given	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Other</i>	
Other response: neither support nor oppose	7
Undecided	10
No response	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>20</i>

Based on responses to Question D4 and the follow-up question ‘Why is that?’ n=87

Participants with an autonomy-oriented view commonly argued that individuals should have freedom of choice and that people's needs differed:

It is unfair to make someone do something. Because different people have different needs. (M, 25, South-Eastern Melbourne)

So people can do what they want, and not what Centrelink wants. (M, 19, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Different reasons for unemployment—a program that may be good for one person may not be helpful to another. (F, 22, Northern Melbourne)

People should always have a choice. That's why people who choose to participate in a Work for the Dole program should be awarded with an increase in dole payment. (F, 22, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Others believed that it was pointless or even counter-productive to try to force people to do something that they did not want to do. As this view placed central importance on individual preferences, it has also been defined as autonomy-oriented:

You are not going to do well if you don't want to do it. (F, 18, Geelong)

Those who are forced will not really put in when participating in the projects! (F, 23, South-Eastern Melbourne)

The more pressure you force on the young, the more problems they face, and they won't enjoy what they are doing. (M, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

An interviewee, Phil—an IT worker who was out of work due to poor health—expressed a similar view:

even when [Centrelink] do try and offer support, the way that comes across is they're jamming it down people's throats, as opposed to offering a service to people to have a choice to take it up...make services available and give them the choice, you're going to find that people do take it up...staff that are manning the centres will not be wasting their time with people who are being forced to go to them, and it would [be] a lot more productive system.

When asked whether people should be required to do Work for the Dole, Joe—a labourer in his late 20s—also thought that it was pointless to compel people to participate:

I wouldn't push no-one to do something that they're not gonna benefit from...I know I'm enjoying this so that's why I come here, but there's a lot of people that I know that don't enjoy it, but they still come just to get the payments. Then what's the good in that...The person's just sitting here wasting a person's time, or a staff member's time, they're sitting talking, he's not taking nothing in.

The Roy Morgan Research study discussed in Chapter 3 found that among the 20 per cent of Australians surveyed who thought that Work for the Dole should be voluntary rather than compulsory, the main reasons given were similar to those given by the unemployed people in this study—that 'people should have a choice' (35 per cent), and that 'forcing someone to do something could have a negative effect on them' (14 per cent) (Roy Morgan Research 2000: 57). However, such views were more prevalent among the unemployed people in this study, who were subject to mutual obligation requirements, than they were among the general population sampled in the Roy Morgan study.

Some participants with an autonomy orientation said that they felt degraded by being compelled to do Work for the Dole. For example, Tran—an interviewee in his early 20s with a diploma in design—felt frustrated by his inability to move to a new stage in his life. He had finished his 'schooling' stage and was trying to move to an autonomous adult stage, but felt that he had now been sent 'back to school':

Tran: [young people are] probably actually looking for job and the next thing you know, they're stuck with the Work for the Dole. It's pretty degrading.

Interviewer: How do you find it degrading?

Tran: Me personally, like I'm out of school...now I'm looking for a job. Now I'm like inside a school campus again, it's like going back to school. You're being monitored, you have to come here. You have three days of absence, they allow you three days, and you have to have [a] medical certificate.

As well as finding the compulsion to participate demoralising, Karen believed that it was creating a 'sub-class' of 'unemployed' workers. Her comments echoed the argument of Peck

and Theodore (1998) that workfare helps to perpetuate structural inequality in the labour market. Karen believed she was being treated as an unskilled worker, despite her substantial skills as a project worker:

I think some of it's just cheap slave labour [*laughs*]...this is just one way of getting projects done on the cheap, and will it undermine, you know, the labour force in the future...it just creates another sub-class of people, unemployed people...who are...basically treated like unskilled workers. And I'm definitely not unskilled...for me, it's demoralising.

Lisa, in her early 20s, also viewed Work for the Dole as 'slave labour'. She echoed the argument of Burgess et al. (1999), discussed in Chapter 3, that the sanctions for income support recipients if they refuse to work for unemployment payments amount to forced labour:

The way that this initiative is...there's a carrot in one hand and there's a whip in the other. You have to go and get that carrot, but at the same time you're being whipped to get that carrot...the way that I see it, it's slave labour...Because you've gotta do it, even if you don't want to do it...You'll be pushed into things that you don't want to do...and you've gotta grin and bear it, basically.

A focus group discussion in South-Eastern Melbourne illustrated the different viewpoints of participants who advocated freedom of choice to participate in any activity and those who thought that 'bludgers' should be made to participate. Adam and Ben took the former viewpoint and Garry the latter—although he also believed that Work for the Dole should involve work alongside regular employees and more choice of projects:

Facilitator: What do you think about being required to do a project...to get payments?

Adam: I reckon it should be more your own choice.

Ben: Yeah.

Garry: I reckon that's fair, but you should actually get people out into little groups and decide what they want to actually do, instead of pushing them into something...it should be actually *work* for the dole...so if you don't want any education or training you can go out and work, you've got the option, it's up to you...

Adam: I think you should have a choice if you want to do it.

Garry: I don't, because there's a lot of bludgers out in the world, and they'll just think 'no I'm not doing it'...

Ben: It all depends on people's circumstances, I reckon they should have a choice for people.

Garry: If we weren't forced into doing this, none of us would have done it.

Sixty-five per cent of those with an autonomy orientation believed that participating in Work for the Dole would have no or minimal effect on their job prospects.¹⁰⁰ This was often because the project involved a type of work which they were not interested in or suited to, or in which there were few jobs available. However, rather than criticising the employment outcomes of Work for the Dole for participants generally (as did those with an outcomes orientation), they expressed reservations about the extent to which it would assist them personally. This was consistent with their emphasis on the diversity of individual circumstances and needs—even if the program assisted most participants to gain work, there would still be individuals for which it had no value.

Some participants with an autonomy orientation also commented that the official language of mutual obligation did not reflect the actual process they experienced. Participants in several focus groups raised the issue of how the words 'mutual obligation', 'volunteer' and 'choice' were used. When asked what they thought about the idea of mutual obligation a number commented that the use of the word 'mutual' was misleading, as they did not have the option to negotiate. Their concerns echoed the argument of critics of mutual obligation that government claims about an 'agreement' are illegitimate given most unemployed people have little alternative but to agree (as discussed in Chapter 3). A focus group discussion in North-Eastern Melbourne highlighted this issue, with two participants (Michelle and Matt) objecting to a lack of mutuality, while another, Jenny, believed that the 'agreement' *was* mutual:

Michelle: The name is misleading—mutual obligation.

Facilitator: Why is that?

Matt: Because it's not mutual, is it?

¹⁰⁰ That is, when asked 'What effect do you think doing the project will have on your likelihood of getting a job?', they answered 0 or 1 on a scale of -4 to 4, in which -4 meant 'decrease a lot', 0 'no effect' and 4 'increase a lot'.

- Michelle: Yeah, you're told to do something.
- Matt: You're under an obligation, but it's not mutual.
- Facilitator: What do you mean by it not being mutual?
- Michelle: Because they tell you you have to do something.
- Jenny: Yeah, but you get to sit down and mutually agree with what you're going to do.
- Nick: I've told them I look through the paper every day.
- Matt: It's a bit of a fucking scam—you either agree to an obligation or you get cut off—it's not mutual, it's take it or leave it... You're already looking for work and doing all these things that they ask you to do, then they put this on top...

Another group in North-Eastern Melbourne discussed similar issues, with two participants arguing that to make 'mutual obligation' mutual in reality, the government had to foster more employment opportunities:

- Facilitator: What do you think about the mutual obligation idea—the mutual obligation requirement?
- Kim: Well, it's not mutual really—we have to do what they say—they don't come back to us and say, if you do this, we'll do that for you.
- Tanya: Yeah.
- Michael: They tell us to jump, we say 'How high?'
- Facilitator: What do you think they should be doing to make it mutual?
- Michael: Basically, trying to fix the unemployment situation...
- Kim: ...instead of the government coming and putting us on projects like this, they should be putting funding into private industries to put us on and give us jobs, instead of sending us here and spending millions of dollars on these things.

Centrelink's use of the words 'volunteer' and 'choice' was also questioned by participants. Some argued that these terms were being used to describe participants in Work for the Dole who were not really volunteers and did not have a real choice about their participation. For example, a group in Eastern Melbourne debated the meanings of these words:

- Mick: They kept mentioning volunteering, but it didn't seem like I was volunteering.
- George: It's taking away your choice of, you know, what voluntary means anyway. Voluntary's the choice to do something.
- Tim: Well, you've got the choice.
- George: Some people didn't get the choice.
- Susie: No, if you didn't do it you lose your money, that's what they were saying.
- Tim: But you've still got that choice.
- [laughter]*
- Facilitator: So you've got the choice, but the choice is between doing it or getting your payment cut?
- Tim: Yeah, you get cut off if you don't want to do it, you had a choice, that was your choice.
- Mick: No money or do it.
- ...
- George: Some people volunteered by choice, [others] volunteered because they told you to, because otherwise you'd get cut off.

Similar sentiments were expressed by a group in Northern Melbourne:

- Facilitator: Did anyone have a choice of projects you could do?
- [Several people say 'no']*
- Leanne: We got threatened: 'You have to do this, or else your dole's cut.'
- Natalie: And then we all got frightened, and then did it.
- Megan: They made out as if it wasn't something you had to do, but then as soon as we got there, it's like 'sign this or'..
- Cameron: ...or else your dole's cut off.
- [Several people agree]*
- Megan: They made us sign an agreement.
- Cameron: They say you get a choice, but if you don't do it your dole's cut off, that's your choice.

Autonomy-oriented participants saw individual jobseeker needs as highly varied and wanted choice in how to develop their own capacities. Contrary to the new paternalist argument that jobseekers need to submit to government direction to develop their own competency, such participants were concerned that blanket requirements to take part in a program would not meet jobseekers' individual needs. Some autonomy-oriented participants were also clearly critical of the 'contractualist' claims for Work for the Dole. Like Kinnear (2000) and Moss (2001), they argued that mutual obligation is not a fair contractual arrangement, as payment recipients are dependent on income support to meet basic needs. Such participants believed that they lacked a real choice to refuse the conditions placed on receipt of income support, and objected to this being disguised by the contractualist language used by Centrelink.

An overview of evaluations of the UK New Deal programs (Millar 2000) also found that young unemployed people placed considerable value on the ability to make their own decisions about appropriate activities.¹⁰¹ Young people reported the highest levels of dissatisfaction with the program when they 'felt that they had not had enough time to explore choices and make an informed decision, and when they felt that they had not been fully involved in the decision-making process'. They responded very positively to working with Personal Advisers when they 'felt that their needs were being identified and met', while those who responded negatively 'felt that Advisers were not meeting their needs or were trying to push them in directions they did not want to follow' (Millar 2000: 23).

In her 'capabilities approach' to human functioning, Martha Nussbaum (1995: 82, 85) has argued that one of the 'basic functional capabilities at which societies should aim for their citizens' is:

Being able to live one's own life and nobody else's. This means having certain guarantees of non-interference with certain choices that are especially personal and definitive of selfhood, such as choices regarding...employment.

Nussbaum describes herself as advocating 'a form of social-democratic liberalism' (2001: xix) and notes that her theory is consistent with the liberal defence of autonomy (Nussbaum 1995: 94–5). As Shaver (2002) and Marston and Watts (2004) argue, the autonomy of the

¹⁰¹ At the time of the study the New Deal for Young People required 18 to 24 year-olds who had been unemployed for six months to participate in a four-month 'gateway' period of assessment and guidance, and then undertake either subsidised employment and training, work experience and training with a voluntary organisation, full-time education and training or self-employment (Millar 2000: 1–4).

individual has long been central to liberal thought, yet is undermined by the mutual obligation approach. The accounts of many participants suggest that the policy prevents many unemployment payment recipients from being able to ‘live their own life’, compelling them to undertake Work for the Dole and to apply for jobs which they do not want. There is thus internal inconsistency in the market liberal advocacy of mutual obligation requirements: in accepting payments, the unemployed are required to relinquish some of their autonomy, yet many lack real alternatives to accepting such payments.

Not all participants in the current study supported a right to autonomy for unemployment payment recipients, however. A minority felt that compulsion to participate was important for disciplinary reasons, as will be discussed below.

Disciplinary orientation

Some participants argued that young people should be compelled to work for their unemployment payments. These participants, 17 per cent of all survey respondents and 52 per cent of those who supported compulsory Work for the Dole, expressed the view that the program works to discipline young people into contributing to society. Participants with a disciplinary orientation appeared to support the Howard Government’s contractualist rationale for Work for the Dole, focusing on what unemployed people ‘owe’ society and on issues of discipline. Many of these participants employed the public narrative of the ‘dole bludger’ to justify their views:

Lots of people don’t want work so make them earn their money and get experience. (M, 25, Geelong)

If they are on the dole they should still be looking for work or trying to do something. (F, 21, South-Eastern Melbourne)

If many people had a choice then hah!!!—No-one would do it and would stay unemployed... (M, 22, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Once they’re on the system, it’s hard to get off, but easy to stay on. Forcing them to work will make it harder for them. (M, 24, South-Eastern Melbourne)

Similarly, Nadja—aged in her late 40s—thought that unemployed people should work in exchange for unemployment payments:

I think people should be made to work for the dole...if they can get up in the morning, and they can catch a bus to somewhere and they can do some manual labour...they should be made to do it. I don't think the cheques should just come in the mail for nobody...

Rob, a labourer in his late 20s who had suffered from low motivation following a head injury, believed that compulsion was also necessary to motivate others:

I mean, you know, everyone's gotta be fair. You can't just sit there and do nothing, so...If it was that way everyone would be there on the dole getting the money [*laughs*].

Participants with a disciplinary orientation had similar attitudes to those sampled in the Roy Morgan Research survey who supported compulsory Work for the Dole on the grounds that 'no-one should get something for nothing' (32 per cent of those who supported compulsion). However, a further 32 per cent of those supporting compulsion in the Roy Morgan survey responded that 'it's good for people to have something to do', 8 per cent that it provided psychological benefits such as increased confidence, pride or motivation and 6 per cent that it 'teaches skills'. Such responses were less often provided in the current study: only 21 per cent of survey participants who favoured compulsion did so on the grounds that it helped the unemployed. Those who did not express disciplinary attitudes were more likely to favour choice to participate, rather than supporting compulsion on the paternalist grounds that it helped the unemployed.

During a focus group discussion in Eastern Melbourne, two participants (George and Julie) stressed the disciplinary and motivational rationale for Work for the Dole, while Susie expressed an autonomy orientation. Julie also felt that some people receiving unemployment payments 'stuffed it up' for others, indicating that she felt stigmatised by stereotypes about unemployed people—while believing that there was a real danger that unemployed people would become the stereotypical 'dole bludger':

George: Something's got to be done, because otherwise we get into a pattern, and then it's hard to break out of that pattern.

- Mick: Yeah, I agree with you.
- Facilitator: *[To Julie]* What do you think...?
- Julie: I think we *should* have to, like for those who've just left school...otherwise you're just going to sit at home, and you're gonna get used to being lazy...you're going to turn around and say I'm not going to get a job today, because I can't be stuffed doing anything.
- George: Your confidence just goes through the window.
- ...
- Susie: I agree with Julie, but at the same time I don't think that people should be dictated to by a bureaucratic bunch of idiots, because that's what Centrelink is, basically. I mean what she's saying is all very valid, and I agree with it, but I don't think that people should be dictated to either, because sometimes I think they *are*.
- Julie: Some people just take *advantage* of it though, like they're getting money and they know they don't *have* to work if they're going to get that money...and it stuffs up for like a lot of other people that are unemployed. Like we have to suffer because of some other people...
- Mick: It's really crap money though.
- Julie: Yeah I know, it's not much money, but a lot of people do take advantage of it, and they stuff it up for us.
- Facilitator: How do you mean they 'stuff it up'?
- Julie: Oh, like all the things that the government's doing, stuff they say...

Some participants experienced a tension between their belief that the unemployed should 'have to do something for their money' and their belief that people's autonomy should be respected. They thought that unemployment payment recipients should make a contribution to society, even though the standard means of doing so—paid employment—was denied them. In this sense, their values appeared to be consistent with those advocating the principle of mutual obligation. However, they also considered that government enforcement of this principle was denying jobseekers any real choice. The ambivalence of these respondents is expressed by the following member of an Eastern Melbourne focus group, who—like Julie—experienced a stigma attached to receiving unemployment payments. This participant felt that taking part in Work for the Dole meant that people could no longer accuse him of being a 'freeloader':

I reckon, if you've been on the dole, then fair enough, you should have to do something for your money...if you're actually doing work for your money, then people don't hassle you any more...Like, they go 'You're not sitting on your arse, being a dole bludger rah rah rah, you're not freeloading'. I don't feel like a freeloader if I'm doing my two days a week work, I don't feel like I'm getting something for nothing...

However, he disliked being directed to do a project and believed that government-funded jobs would be a better alternative to Work for the Dole:

you should have a bit of choice in what you do, like if they go 'you've got to work for the money', you go, 'alright what projects have you got that would interest me?' Not just 'you go and do that'...It could be a government-based job, instead of being called Work for the Dole you just get paid to go and do work.

Most participants expressing disciplinary views spoke in terms of others who were not contributing—suggesting that they did not need the discipline themselves—while a few indicated that compulsion helped their own motivation. Some, like Julie above, also feared that some unemployed people were giving others 'a bad name'. These participants were clearly concerned about being stigmatised by the general community:

It's people like that give everyone a bad name, you know what I mean, every unemployed person a bad name, because they're too lazy to get off their arse and do something... (F, Geelong)

So everyone is not called a *dole* bludger. (M, 24, Geelong) [*Comment on why he supported compulsory participation in Work for the Dole*]

Contradictory views about stigma were expressed, however: some participants believed that Work for the Dole *reduced* stigma because they could 'earn' their unemployment payments, while others believed that the program *increased* stigma because participants were viewed as long-term unemployed and/or bludgers.

There were some differences in views about obligations between interviewees with a disciplinary orientation and those who were opposed to compulsion. The former more often said that they had a responsibility to others to work and less often that the choice to work was an individual one. These differences were consistent with the stress that participants with a disciplinary orientation placed on the need to contribute to society through work (see Table

11.7). However, the two groups were almost equally likely to believe that they had to right to at least some selectivity in the jobs that they accepted: about three-quarters of each group expressed this view. They were also equally likely to believe that unemployment payment recipients should be actively looking for work. This suggests that the major points of difference between the two groups was in their views about the *types* of conditions which should be attached to receipt of unemployment payments, not the imposition of conditions per se. While both groups generally supported the requirement to seek work, those with a disciplinary orientation also supported the requirement to do Work for the Dole, while the autonomy-oriented opposed it.

Table 11.7: Views on the obligation to work of interviewees with different orientations to mutual obligation (%)

	Opposed to mutual obligation* (n=18)	Disciplinary (n=12)
Obligation to oneself	44	42
Obligation to others	22	42
Individual choice	17	8
Other	17	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

*Either autonomy-oriented or outcome-oriented

Table 11.8: Views on responsibility for preventing unemployment of interviewees with different orientations to mutual obligation (%)

	Opposed to mutual obligation* (n=18)	Disciplinary (n=11)
Government	78	63
Employers	39	18
Individuals	17	27
Don't know	6	9

*Either autonomy-oriented or outcome-oriented

There were also some differences between interviewees with a disciplinary orientation and those who opposed compulsion regarding their attribution of responsibility for unemployment. Those with a disciplinary orientation were somewhat less likely to attribute responsibility to the government or employers and more likely to attribute it to individuals (see Table 11.8). These differences were consistent with Saunders' comparison of the views of 'collectivists' and 'individualists', as discussed in Chapter 3. Saunders found that collectivists, who viewed the government as responsible for addressing unemployment, were significantly more likely than individualists to oppose mutual obligation requirements.

In summary, participants with a disciplinary orientation believed that compulsory Work for the Dole was necessary to ensure that the unemployed contributed to the community. For these participants—less than one in five—individual choice was not a primary concern. Instead they believed that people who did not want to work could be prevented from receiving payments through the requirement to participate in Work for the Dole, and that those who *did* want to work should 'contribute to the community' in return for their payments. In these beliefs they were generally in agreement with the government and with majority community opinion.

Outcomes orientation

In addition to participants with an autonomy-oriented and a disciplinary orientation towards mutual obligation, there was a third notable orientation, focused on outcomes. Some participants expressed opposition to compulsory Work for the Dole on the grounds that the employment outcomes from the program were negligible. These participants—13 per cent of all survey respondents—did not object to being compelled to undertake an activity, but objected to Work for the Dole being that activity. In their view, unemployment payment recipients should only have to do programs with good employment outcomes, and Work for the Dole did not have such outcomes. Like critics of Work for the Dole such as ACOSS (1999) and McLelland (1997, 2002)—discussed in Chapter 3—they did not object to mutual obligation in principle, but rather to its current application. Instead of drawing on ideas of rights and obligations these participants had a utilitarian focus on overall outcomes. In contrast, while many participants with an autonomy orientation also thought that Work for the Dole had poor employment outcomes, the primary reason they gave for their objection to

compulsory participation was the need for freedom of choice, not poor outcomes from the scheme.

During a focus group discussion in North-Eastern Melbourne, Michael expressed an autonomy orientation, rejecting compulsion, while Kim and Phil expressed an outcomes orientation—supporting compulsion providing that placements were related to employment preferences:

Facilitator: What do you think about this issue of whether you should have to do a Work for the Dole project or whether you should have a choice?

Michael: You should always have a choice.

Kim: If it was related to what you wanted to do, to help you get a job, because after I've done this it'll be just the same as before.

Phil: I reckon it should be that you have to...do work experience with a company—do the work that you want to do—'cause at least then you get practical experience, it shows that you want to actually work.

As we saw in Chapter 9, some participants in other focus groups also expressed concerns about the employment outcomes from Work for the Dole. They thought that the program was not providing 'real' work experience, as participants were not subject to the conditions of an actual workplace. Such participants believed that Work for the Dole programs did not provide comparable experience to working in a mainstream workplace, because they did not strictly enforce work hours, were less organised and offered less training. They also wanted to work for an organisation which could offer them work at the end of their placement, which few community organisations had funds to do. For example, a Geelong group did not object to the principle of mutual obligation in itself, but argued that Work for the Dole would not lead to a job as it lacked the organisation, training and discipline of a 'real' workplace:

Facilitator: What do you think about this mutual obligation idea?

Peter: What is it?

Jim: I've seen it on the dole forms and that.

[general laughter]

- Facilitator: The government says that if you're getting unemployment payments you should be contributing to the community in some way.
- Peter: Oh, sure.
- Karen: Mmm [*in agreement*].
- Jim: Yeah, I agree. But it's what you get them to do, that's the big issue...because if you get them to do just rubbish, like they're doing now, it's a pointless waste of people and resources...what you get and what it leads to is the big issue.
- ...
- Jim: The reason I'm here is because I've only got a Year 10 pass—now if I go to get a job, what qualifications have I got?...What's this doing for me?—It's not really work experience, it's not giving me a direction towards a job.
- Karen: Yeah, that's right.
- Facilitator: Why do you feel it's not really work experience?
- Jim: Because it doesn't lead to any jobs.
- Karen: No, it doesn't.
- Peter: Look, I've had a few jobs, right, and working in the workplace is completely different from working here...It's apples and oranges, two different things.
- Facilitator: How would you characterise the difference?
- Peter: Well, in the workplace you would not get away with standing around talking for starters, you'd get the sack...But if it was unorganised in the workplace like this, the employer would go bust...In the workplace, you do get relevant training for what you're doing, if you are unskilled in a certain area...
- Jim: If this was a course for [*skill area*], and that's the job we all wanted to pursue...and we came here to do a course, then it gives you the experience for that job...What does this teach you, what does this do for us?
- Peter: It's like it's been done by halves, you know, like it's only half a course in my eyes. You get into it, and then what?

To enable participants to comment broadly on government assistance which they thought would help them to gain work, they were asked in focus groups what they thought the government should be doing to help young unemployed people. Some common themes emerged among participants' proposals to assist the unemployed, with many comments

suggesting alternatives to current Work for the Dole arrangements. A common theme was that programs need to combine training and work experience. For example:

You really need to start providing relevant work with relevant training—there has to be a balance...You're gonna have people do the course, six months, big deal, then you have people go back on the streets and go back to what they did before. (M, focus group, Geelong)

I did a retail course, and we sat down in a classroom and they told us everything about retail...and at the end of the week you'd go out and do some work experience, and that's what I really think people here need. (M, focus group, South-Eastern Melbourne)

It shouldn't even be called Work for the Dole, if you haven't got a job, you go and work for the government...They had some working three days a week at the workplace and then two days a week at TAFE...Why don't they still have stuff like that, I'm sure people would be a lot happier working for three days a week knowing there's three days at the site and two days of schooling, and at the end of it you've got some form of qualification or certificate, you've had the relevant experience in the meantime... (M, focus group, Eastern Melbourne)

Similarly, Karen (an interviewee) would have far preferred undertaking a six-month training program to doing a project she was embarrassed to tell employers about:

who wants to go up to an employer and say, I did a Work for the Dole project...it's like humiliation plus *[laughs]* Whereas if I've done, say, a six months training program...I've got six months' book-keeping experience, using MYOB and having got my certification to say I've done my training, that's going to be far better to present to an employer, 'cause I've got the work experience.

Some participants also favoured placements in private enterprises, arguing that this provided 'real' work experience and the prospect of ongoing employment with the company at the end of the program placement. For example:

If they got contracts with companies to put people in, so that they could work for six months or something...it would be better, because at the end, you might get a job, if you're good, but now, where are we going to get a job? (M, focus group, Northern Melbourne)

It would be better if they put you in a program where you're in a business...you'd get to meet people, you'd get contacts, and another thing, you might be lucky and they might say 'Hey, this bloke can work, let's employ him'. (M, focus group, Eastern Melbourne)

Participants with an outcomes orientation clearly wanted to be involved in a program which they thought would improve their job prospects, but did not see Work for the Dole as such a program. Unlike those with an autonomy orientation, outcomes-oriented participants did not oppose compulsion per se, but instead took the utilitarian view that the unemployed should only be compelled to undertake programs which improved job prospects. Notably, many of their suggestions for alternative programs were reminiscent of programs which were abolished by the Howard Government before it introduced Work for the Dole, such as the Jobstart wage subsidy and JobSkills (which combined work placements with off-the-job training). Consistent with participants' proposals, Australian and international research suggests that wage subsidy programs and those which combine structured training with work placements can improve the job prospects of those program participants (Stromback & Dockery 2002; Martin 2000).¹⁰²

Conclusion

The unemployed participants in this study were divided in their views about mutual obligation. A substantial minority shared general community views that unemployed people should be required to 'contribute to the community' in return for payments. These participants focussed on the individual behaviour of jobseekers, consistent with the public narrative about 'dole bludgers'. Further, half of survey participants thought that unemployment payment recipients should have to increase their skills, indicating that many supported arguments that unemployed people need to undertake training of some kind.

However, many participants were concerned that unemployed people were being denied autonomy and were not being provided with work experience and training which would significantly improve their job prospects. Most felt that their project lacked relevance to the work they were seeking and objected to recipients being compelled to work in projects unrelated to their work aspirations. Further, a minority clearly viewed Work for the Dole as hindering them in achieving their work-related goals. These views are supported by the

¹⁰² However, the Australian research findings must be interpreted with caution due to their methodological weaknesses (Dockery & Webster 2002).

evidence, discussed in Chapter 9, that the program has either no or negative effects on job prospects. Such views ran counter to new paternalist claims that the program develops the capacity of individuals for self-reliance.

Participants who objected to mutual obligation were often concerned about a lack of ability to negotiate their activities, with many participants objecting to their relative powerlessness under the mutual obligation arrangements. The metaphor of the contract used to justify Work for the Dole assumes that unemployed people have other alternatives to income support, as they could not freely accept contractual conditions unless this was the case. Yet many unemployed participants in this study had experienced great difficulty in gaining sustainable employment and lacked other sources of basic support—and so had little option but to accept conditional benefits.

The contractualist claim is that by accepting income support funded by the community, recipients have a duty to contribute to the community in return. As we saw in Chapter 3, this argument assumes that society is fulfilling its obligations to the unemployed and that the unemployed need to respond in kind. As Bessant (2000) and Kinnear (2000) have responded, the argument fails to acknowledge the lack of justice in socio-economic arrangements which do not generate sufficient jobs for all citizens. The great majority of participants in this study thought that the government was not creating enough employment and training opportunities for unemployed people. The mutual obligation policy places many obligations on the unemployed, without the government accepting an associated obligation to generate paid work or even relevant training for disadvantaged jobseekers.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to contribute to the literature on the Howard Government's mutual obligation policy by investigating the perspectives of those who are subject to its requirements. To date, research on Work for the Dole participants' perspectives has been limited to a few predominantly quantitative studies, most of which have been commissioned or conducted by government departments. This study has provided a more qualitative and independent perspective on participants' experiences and their views about their rights and obligations as unemployed people. It has considered the extent to which these experience and views are consistent with or conflict with the rationales for mutual obligation. The aim has been to analyse and assess the policy in the light of participants' perspectives.

The thesis has argued that the focus of unemployment assistance in Australia has shifted substantially towards conditional provision of payments and an increased emphasis on the obligations of income support recipients to society. This process has neglected the obligations of society to the unemployed and the need for autonomy on the part of income recipients. Under the Howard Government the increased imposition of requirements on the unemployed has been accompanied by dramatic changes in job search assistance and other programs for the unemployed, resulting in a very limited range of assistance for most jobseekers. Work for the Dole and other mutual obligation requirements have been central to these policy developments.

Unemployed participants in this study had a strongly positive orientation towards work, and many had substantial experience of employment. They viewed work as necessary to fulfil human capacities and needs and often believed that they should work for their own well-being, as much as to contribute to society. Far from expressing any distinctive values of a 'dependency culture', participants shared many of the work values of the wider community. However, many also had substantial experience of unemployment and faced significant barriers to gaining ongoing work. For participants, unemployment was a highly negative experience, with lack of money, boredom, depression and stigma being common problems. Many also felt insufficiently supported by Centrelink or Job Network agencies in their search for work.

This thesis has provided evidence that, contrary to the predictions of some critics, Work for the Dole does provide short-term benefits for many such unemployed people. Most of those who participated in projects (rather than refusing to participate and being breached) enjoyed taking part in a group activity and felt that they gained benefits from participating. They clearly endorsed some kind of work placement and skill development programs for the unemployed, of which Work for the Dole is a low-budget example. Given the Howard Government's abolition of a range of previous programs of this type, Work for the Dole was now the only such program available for many participants and was often preferred to doing no program at all.

However, more than four in ten survey participants did not enjoy doing the program and a fifth actively disliked taking part. Further, the program's impact on employment prospects appeared to be either negligible or negative. This was not surprising given the scheme's focus on the unemployed discharging their 'obligations to the community' and overcoming a 'psychology of dependency'—rather than on job outcomes for participants. However, there is very limited value in a program which provides benefits at the time of participation but does not help in achieving the central aim of the unemployed: gaining work.

The thesis has analysed the Howard Government's three central rationales for the mutual obligation policy: that it ensures that participants fulfil the requirements of the 'social contract', that it deters the unemployed from being 'too selective' about jobs, and that it benefits participants by developing their capacity for autonomy and self-reliance. These three rationales have been assessed in the light of participants' experience and views.

According to the market liberal contractualist claim for mutual obligation, by accepting a minimal income funded by the community, unemployment payment recipients are obliged to contribute to the community in return. Participants largely supported the requirement that payment recipients seek work; most shared the widespread community belief that only 'genuine' jobseekers should receive income support, and many sought to differentiate themselves from the public archetype of the 'dole bludger'. However, many did not share the community's support for the requirement to work for payments. While a third of survey participants supported this requirement, almost half opposed it. Most believed the government was not fulfilling its obligations to the unemployed to provide appropriate employment and training opportunities which were relevant to the jobs they were seeking.

Many viewed the mutual obligation ‘contract’ as a one-way set of directives imposed upon them and believed that the breaching regime which enforced these directives was unreasonably punitive and unfairly administered.

Market liberals also argue that many unemployed are ‘job snobs’ and that reducing the ‘attractiveness’ of receiving unemployment payments by imposing increased job search and other activity requirements will discourage them from relying on income support. However, participants in this study largely rejected an expectation that they should be required to accept any job, and most had substantial concerns about the specific form of the job search regime. They did not agree that ‘any job is better than no job’ and objected to the pressure under mutual obligation arrangements to apply for jobs which they considered inappropriate. While participants had largely realistic job aspirations and knew that their options were limited, they were not willing to be forced into jobs in which they feared they would be unhappy and would soon leave. Rather, they wanted assistance to help them to find sustainable work.

According to the new paternalist claim, workfare schemes such as Work for the Dole develop unemployed people’s capacities for autonomy. Yet many participants in this study believed that compelling recipients to undertake certain activities or apply for unsuitable jobs unreasonably restricted their freedom of choice, undermining rather than enhancing their autonomy. Some also felt demeaned by mutual obligation requirements or their particular treatment by Centrelink staff. As argued by Yeatman (2000b), recipients may benefit from programs which assist them to develop their capacities, but compulsion to undertake activities that are not related to individual needs and goals is likely to undermine capacity-building. The evidence of poor employment outcomes from Work for the Dole adds further weight to this view. The provision of a greater range of program types in place of Work for the Dole—including those which combine work with accredited training and those providing subsidised placement in mainstream jobs—would address many concerns held by participants in this study. However, compulsion to participate in a labour market program would remain problematic in a society which generates far fewer jobs than are needed for full employment.

The mutual obligation principle privileges the obligations of the unemployed over their rights to autonomy and to work. Its associated requirements have further added to the already considerable constraints faced by unemployed people who are attempting to identify and meet their own work-related goals. Ironically, a policy which is portrayed by the Government as

promoting active participation in society, in reality requires many payment recipients to passively obey government directives—instead of actively participating in shaping their own future.

APPENDICES

Table A.1: Explanations for high unemployment (%)

Nowadays machines do more of the work and that means there are fewer jobs	Cheap imports from overseas have destroyed Australian jobs	It's easier to get social security these days	Some people aren't skilled enough to fill the jobs that are available now	People who have jobs are working longer hours, so employers don't have to take on more workers	There just aren't enough jobs for all the people who want to work	Fewer people want to work these days	Trade unions demand wages that are too high, so employers can't afford to take on more workers	There aren't enough jobs because the Government isn't managing the economy properly	Migrants are taking the jobs of -born Australian workers	
Strongly agree	22.8	20.8	21.2	7.9	13.2	12.0	9.8	9.4	10.8	9.2
Agree	53.6	43.1	34.6	46.1	37.6	36.9	34.3	23.8	22.3	17.3
Neither agree nor disagree	8.3	14.6	13.8	15.0	17.7	14.0	16.2	20.4	28.7	19.7
Disagree	8.2	11.5	16.0	20.0	19.3	25.9	25.6	26.5	23.8	32.8
Strongly disagree	1.1	1.5	4.1	2.8	1.8	4.0	6.4	9.1	3.8	12.8
Don't know	0.6	2.9	4.5	2.4	4.8	1.5	1.8	5.3	5.0	2.7
Missing	5.4	5.5	5.9	5.7	5.5	5.6	5.8	5.5	5.6	5.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Unweighted, n=2,403

Source: Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000, p. 11

Table A.2: Views on the responsibility for solving unemployment (%)

	Some people will always be unemployed—we will never get back to full employment	Solving unemployment is the Government's responsibility	Businesses should be required to create more jobs	There's enough work available now—we just have to share it around more evenly	People who are unemployed only have themselves to blame
Strongly agree	17.7	13.0	8.9	4.8	3.9
Agree	58.1	34.2	34.9	24.6	9.6
Neither agree nor disagree	8.7	23.4	26.3	25.3	23.9
Disagree	7.6	22.3	22.6	33.1	44.4
Strongly disagree	2.0	2.3	1.9	4.5	13.4
Don't know	3.0	1.7	1.9	4.7	1.5
Missing	3.0	3.2	3.6	3.1	3.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Unweighted, n=2,403

Source: Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000, p. 13

Table A.3: The role of government in solving unemployment

	%
Give more help to small business	40.9
Provide more training for unemployed people	36.1
Make it easier for people to combine work and family responsibilities	33.2
Give employers subsidies to take on unemployed people	33.1
Improve work incentives in the tax and social security systems	31.5
Reform the tax system	27.1
Make it harder to get unemployment benefits	24.5
Create more public sector jobs	15.1
Expand regional employment policies	13.0
Freeze pay awards	3.9
Deregulate the labour market further	3.1

Expressed as a percentage of respondents. Unweighted, n=2,299

Source: Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000, p.15

Table A.4: Support for activity test requirements (% agreeing with each requirement)

Requirements	Young unemployed (<25)	Older unemployed (50+)	Long-term unemployed (of any age)	Unemployed people with young children < 5	People affected by a disability
Look for work	92.8	53.7	81.2	51.6	33.5
Complete a 'dole diary' detailing efforts to find work	79.9	40.9	71.1	42.7	25.7
Take part in a 'work for the dole' scheme	82.5	38.2	72.3	35.6	24.6
Undergo a training or re-training program	81.8	61.5	80.5	55.5	51.8
Undertake useful work in the community	78.4	62.8	77.0	47.7	46.3
Accept any paid job offered	64.9	32.8	64.5	29.7	18.1
Move to another town or city to find work	49.1	9.4	40.8	11.0	5.3
Change appearance (eg get a haircut)	71.2	33.8	57.6	34.5	25.4
Improve reading and writing skills	83.9	51.1	74.9	53.7	45.4

Unweighted, n=2,373

Source: Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000, p. 19

Table A.5: Support for mutual obligation requirements by respondent characteristics and unemployed group

Unemployed group			
<i>Scores out of 9: A higher score indicates stronger support for activity test requirements*</i>			
<i>Respondent characteristics</i>	<i>Young (<25)</i>	<i>Older (>50)</i>	<i>Long-term unemployed</i>
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	6.8	3.8	6.1
Female	6.9	3.9	6.3
<i>Age</i>			
18-24	6.8	4.1	6.9
25-34	6.8	4.1	6.6
35-44	6.7	4.1	6.7
45-54	7.0	3.9	6.3
55-64	7.1	3.7	6.0
65+	6.9	3.2	4.9
<i>Labour force status</i>			
Employed F/T	7.0	4.3	6.8
Employed P/T	6.8	3.8	6.4
Unemployed	5.8	3.2	5.5
Retired	7.0	3.3	5.1
Studying	6.5	4.0	6.4
Home responsibility	6.8	3.6	6.0
<i>Gross income of family</i>			
< \$400 pw	6.7	3.2	5.5
\$400-699 pw	6.9	3.8	6.4
\$700-1249 pw	6.9	3.8	6.4
\$1250+	7.1	4.7	6.9
<i>Highest educational qualification</i>			
Primary or less	6.9	2.8	4.9
Some secondary	6.8	3.4	5.8
Completed secondary	7.0	4.0	6.5
Trade certificate	6.8	3.8	6.5
Bachelor degree	6.6	4.4	6.5
Postgraduate degree	6.8	5.1	6.7
<i>Total</i>	6.9	3.8	6.2

*The nine requirements included are listed in Table A.4. Unweighted, n=2,417 to 2,373

Source: Eardley, Saunders & Evans 2000, pp. 22-23

Table A.6: Attitudes towards social security and the unemployed

	Per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing		
	<i>1996</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to	39.1	48.8	+9.7
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help	28.2	29.2	+1.0
Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another	19.7	27.0	+7.3
The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor	32.8	42.6	+9.8

Source: Wilson & Turnbull 2001, p. 20

Table A.7: Support for Work for the Dole

		Per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing with Work for the Dole		
		<i>For young unemployed</i>	<i>For all unemployed</i>	<i>Difference</i>
<i>Sex</i>				
	Female	76.9	56.1	-20.8
	Male	70.6	52.9	-17.7
<i>Occupation¹</i>				
	Professional, managerial & technical	69.7	55.0	-14.7
	Manual & lower service	83.9	62.9	-21.0
<i>Education</i>				
	Vocational	84.0	52.0	-32.0
	No higher education	70.2	52.9	-17.3
	University	71.4	61.0	-10.4
<i>All respondents</i>		74.1	54.6	-19.5

Source: Wilson & Turnbull 2001, p. 21

¹ Occupations were combined into two categories: 'Professional, managerial & technical' comprises Higher professionals, higher administrators, technical and lower professionals, and clerical employees; 'Manual & lower service' comprises sales, services, skilled employees, semi-skilled employees, unskilled employees and farm employees.

WORK FOR THE DOLE PARTICIPANTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. The information you provide will be treated as *completely confidential*. The researcher will not provide Centrelink, the organisation running your project or anybody else with information which identifies you.

The first part asks a few questions about you and the education and training you have completed.

A1 What is your sex?

- Circle the number which applies.

- 1 male
- 2 female

A2 How old are you?

A3 Which country were you born in?

B Education and training

B1 What was the highest school year which you *completed*?

- Circle the number which applies.

- 1 year 8
- 2 year 9
- 3 year 10
- 4 year 11
- 5 year 12
- 6 other (please specify).....

B2 Have you *completed* a certificate, diploma, degree or any other qualification since leaving school?

- 1 yes, trade certificate /apprenticeship →
- 2 yes, other qualification →
- 3 no ⇒go to question C1

B3 Please write the full title of the *highest* qualification you completed

now go to question C1

C Experience of project

This section asks some questions about your experience of doing this Work for the Dole project.

C1 How long have you been doing this Work for the Dole project?

.....months ORweeks

C2 Were you given a choice of projects you could do, or was this the only project you were told about?

- 1 was given a choice of projects
- 2 this was the only project I was told about
- 3 other (please state).....
- 9 can't remember

C3 Did you want to do the project before you started it?

- 1 yes
- 2 no
- 9 was unsure

C4 Why was that?

C5 What do you like about doing the project?

C6 What don't you like about doing the project?

- C7 The next question involves circling a number on a scale. The scale goes from -4, which means strongly *dislike*, to 0, which means neither like nor dislike, to 4, which means strongly *like*. For example, -1 would mean *dislike slightly*, and 1 would mean *like slightly*.

Overall, how would you rate your feelings about doing the project?

strongly dislike doing the project					neither like nor dislike					strongly like doing the project
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4		

- C8 How relevant is the work you're doing in the project to the kind of job you want?

- 1 not relevant
- 2 slightly relevant
- 3 quite relevant
- 4 very relevant
- 9 don't know

- C9 How useful for you yourself is the *training* you've done on the project?

- 1 not useful
- 2 slightly useful
- 3 quite useful
- 4 very useful
- 9 don't know

- C10 Why is that?

- C11 What do you think of the *amount* of training you get on the project? Is it:

- 1 too little
- 2 about right
- 3 too much
- 9 don't know

- C12 What would you like more training on (if anything)?

C13 What effect do you think doing the project will have on your likelihood of getting a job?

- Circle a number on the scale.

decrease
a lot

no effect

increase
a lot

-4

-3

-2

-1

0

1

2

3

4

C14 Why is that?

C15 On the following scale, what effect has doing the project had on your:

	decreased a lot	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
					no effect				increased a lot
enjoyment of each week	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
friendships/social contacts	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
self-confidence	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
self-esteem	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
ability to work in a team	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
communication skills	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
organisational skills	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
contacts with people who may give you a job	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4

D Views about the Work for the Dole program

The next questions are about your views on the Work for the Dole program.

D1 Do you think the \$20 extra a fortnight you get for participating in Work for the Dole should be more, less, or is it about right?

- 1 should be more
- 2 should be less
- 3 about right
- 4 other (please state)
-
- 9 undecided

D2 Why do you think it should be more?

• Circle as many reasons which apply.

- 1 to cover costs of participating
- 2 to encourage people to participate
- 3 to make it more like people are paid in regular jobs
- 4 because unemployment payments are not enough to live on
- 5 because people who participate should be paid more than people who aren't working at all
- 6 other (please state)
-

⇒now go to question D3

D3 Do you think the name 'Work for the Dole' should be changed, or should it remain the same?

- 1 should be changed
- 2 remain the same
- 9 no opinion

D4 Some people think that young unemployed people should *have* to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments. Others think that young unemployed people should *have a choice* about whether they do a Work for the Dole project. What do you think about this?

- 1 should *have* to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments
- 2 should *have a choice* about whether you do a Work for the Dole project
- 3 other (please specify).....
- 9 undecided

D5 Why is that?

D6 Please tick whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements

	strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	strongly disagree
If someone doesn't want to do a Work for the Dole project, it's probably because they don't really want a job					
Work for the Dole would be better if it was voluntary					
There's too much focus on what young unemployed people owe the community, and not enough on the job opportunities the community should provide for the young unemployed					
You should do work for the community in return for getting unemployment payments					
The Government isn't doing enough to reduce youth unemployment					
If you're getting unemployment payments, you should have to increase your skills					
You shouldn't have to do a Work for the Dole project if it's not relevant to the type of job you're looking for					
If someone doesn't want to do a Work for the Dole project, it's probably because they're not trying hard enough to get a job					
There aren't enough different training and work experience programs for young unemployed people					

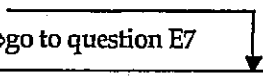
	strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	strongly disagree
Instead of setting up Work for the Dole projects, the Government should give funding for real jobs for unemployed people					
Having some people on a project who don't want to do it has a bad effect on the project					
Young unemployed people should have to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments, even if they don't want to					

E Employment/unemployment

The next questions are about your experience of employment and unemployment.

E1 Have you ever had a paid job of any kind?

- Includes full-time, part-time or casual jobs.

- 1 yes
2 no ⇒ go to question E7
- 

E2 In the last three years, how many months have had a paid job?

- Write the number of months in each year that you had a paid job.

1996.....months

1997.....months

1998.....months

1999.....months

E3 Was the *last* paid job that you had full-time or part-time?

- 1 full-time
2 part-time

E4 Was that job permanent or casual?

- In a permanent job you get paid sick leave and annual leave. In a casual job you don't get paid leave.

- 1 permanent
2 casual
9 don't know

E5 How long did you have that job for?

.....yearsmonths

E6 What was the *main reason* you left that job?

- 1 was a temporary/seasonal job
2 got sacked/laid off
3 not satisfied with the pay
4 not satisfied with the hours/conditions
5 dispute with the boss
6 moved
7 to study
8 to travel/have a holiday
9 pregnancy
10 to stay home to care for a child/family member/partner
11 other (please state)

.....
⇒ now go to question E7

E7 What type of work would you like to do?

E8 Have you ever had an *unpaid* job of any kind, other than Work for the Dole?

• Circle as many numbers which apply.

- 1 yes, voluntary work
- 2 yes, unpaid work in a family business
- 3 yes, other (please specify).....
- 4 no

E9 In the last three years, how many months have you been *unemployed*?

- Write the number of months you were unemployed in each year.
- Don't include any time that you were studying full-time.
- Include any time that you were doing Work for the Dole.

1996.....months
1997.....months
1998.....months
1999.....months

E10 Have you ever done any training or work placement programs for people who are unemployed, other than Work for the Dole?

- 1 yes →
- 2 no ⇒ go to F1

E11. Please write the name of all programs you have participated in

⇒ now go to question F1

F Your parents

The last section asks a few questions about your family background. I am asking these questions to find out whether people from different family backgrounds have different views about Work for the Dole.

F1 Which country was your mother born in?

F2 Which country was your father born in?

F3 Does your father have a job of any kind at present?

- 1 yes
- 2 no
- 9 don't know ⇒go to last page

F4 In the *main* job your father holds, what is his occupation?

- Give full title if known. For example, tanning machine operator, maths teacher, pastrycook.

⇒now go to last page

F5 Why is that?

- 1 unable to work due to health reasons/disability
- 2 unemployed
- 3 retired
- 4 deceased
- 5 other

F6 In the *last* job your father held, what was his occupation?

- Give full title if known. For example, tanning machine operator, maths teacher, pastrycook.

⇒now go to last page

Thank you for participating!

I plan to do short follow-up phone interviews about three months after the Work for the Dole project has finished. If you may be interested in participating, please write your contact details below.

To keep your responses confidential, this page will be detached and kept separately from the questionnaire.

Your name:

Phone:

Address:

In case you move, could you provide contact details for someone who will probably know where you are (for example, a family member)?

Name:

Relationship to you:

Phone:

Address:

Stage 1**FOCUS GROUPS****MAIN ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION (GUIDE FOR FACILITATOR)**

What do you get out of doing this project?

What problems are there with the project?

How useful for you is the training you're doing on your project?

What would you like more training on?

How relevant is the work you're doing on the project to the kind of job you want?

Did you get a choice of projects?

What effect do you think doing the project will have on your likelihood of getting a job?

Should you have to do a Work for the Dole project, or should you have a choice?

What do you think about the name 'Work for the Dole'?

What do you think about the idea of 'mutual obligation'?

What do you think the government should do to help reduce youth unemployment?

Stage 1

**DIFFERENCES IN THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INITIAL SURVEY SAMPLE
AND FOLLOW-UP TELEPHONE SURVEY SAMPLE**

To investigate differences between the initial survey sample of 87 and the follow-up telephone survey sample of 30, they were compared on the basis of the following characteristics: age, sex, highest school year completed, highest post-school qualification, total months unemployed in last three years and months had paid employment in the last three years. They were also compared on whether they wanted to participate in their Work for the Dole project.

The follow-up sample was found to have some differences in characteristics to the initial sample. There was a markedly higher proportion of voluntary participants in the follow-up sample—58 per cent of the follow-up sample wanted to participate in their project and 12 per cent did not, while among the initial sample, 45 per cent wanted to participate and 29 per cent did not. This is consistent with the pilot interview findings that people who wanted to participate in their Work for the Dole project were more likely to volunteer for interviews.

While the sex ratio between the two samples was similar (42 per cent of the follow-up sample was female, compared to 38 per cent of the initial sample), the follow-up sample was on average older (see Table 4). The latter finding is likely to be explained by the higher proportion of voluntary participants in the follow-up sample, as people aged over 25 were not required to take part in Work for the Dole at the time of the survey. Thirteen per cent of the initial sample and 23 per cent of the follow-up sample was aged over 25.

Table D.1: Age of initial and follow-up samples (%)

<i>Sample</i>	<i>18-20</i>	<i>21-24</i>	<i>25 or over</i>
Initial	29	58	13
Follow-up	19	58	23

The follow-up sample had completed somewhat less schooling than the initial sample (27 per cent had completed Year 12, compared to 36 per cent of the initial sample), but a slightly higher proportion of the follow-up sample had post-school qualifications (69 per cent compared to 64 per cent). The follow-up sample had also on average been unemployed for a longer period in the last three years than the entire sample, with 75 per cent having been unemployed for over 12 months in total, compared to 57 per cent of the initial sample. However, they had also on average been *employed* for a longer total period, reflecting the smaller number of recent school leavers in an older sample.

In summary, the follow-up sample was on average somewhat older and less educated than the initial sample, and was more likely to have been unemployed for over 12 months. This suggests that the follow-up sample would have been somewhat less likely to have gained employment after completing Work for the Dole than the initial sample.

Stage 2

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research questions for Stage 2 interviews were:

- What are participants' work aspirations, and what value do they attach to paid work?
- What are participants' values concerning the kinds of paid work and working conditions that they will and will not accept?
- Are mutual obligation requirements affecting the kinds of jobs that participants would consider?
- What do participants believe are the rights and obligations of unemployed people, and what are their views about mutual obligation requirements?
- Do participants think that mutual obligation requirements undermine their personal autonomy?
- What kinds of rights to employment assistance do participants believe that they have?
- How do participants' views vary depending on respondent characteristics, including age, sex, ethnicity, education level, skill level of previous work, and length of unemployment?

Appendix F

Stage 2

WORK FOR THE DOLE PARTICIPANTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. The information you provide will be treated as *completely confidential*. The research is not being undertaken for Centrelink or the organisation running your project, and the researcher will not provide these organisations or anyone else with information which could identify your individual comments and views.

1. What is your sex?

- 1 male
- 2 female

2. How old are you?

3. Did you want to do this Work for the Dole project before you started it?

- 1 yes
- 2 no
- 3 was unsure

4. Why was that?

5. What do you like about doing the project?

6. What don't you like about doing the project?

7. The next question involves circling a number on a scale. The scale goes from -4, which means strongly *dislike*, to 4 which means strongly *like*. For example, -1 would mean *dislike slightly*, and 1 would mean *like slightly*.

Overall, how would you rate your feelings about doing the project?

strongly dislike doing the project					neither like nor dislike					strongly like doing the project
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4		4

8. What effect do you think doing the project will have on your likelihood of getting a job?

decrease a lot		no effect					increase a lot	
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4

9. Why is that?

10. How relevant is the work you're doing in the project to the kind of job you want?

- 1 not relevant
- 2 slightly relevant
- 3 quite relevant
- 4 very relevant
- 9 don't know

11. How useful for you is the training you've done on the project?

- 1 not useful
- 2 slightly useful
- 3 quite useful
- 4 very useful
- 9 don't know

12. Some people think that young unemployed should have to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments. Others think that young unemployed people should have a choice about whether they do a Work for the Dole project.

What do you think about this?

- 1 should have to do a Work for the Dole project to get unemployment payments
- 2 should have a choice about whether you do a Work for the Dole project
- 3 other (please state).....
- 9 undecided

13. Why is that?

Please turn to next page

Thank you for doing this survey!

Would you like to participate further in this project? This would involve me asking you some questions one-to-one about jobs, Work for the Dole, and Centrelink requirements. It would take about one hour and you would be paid \$20 for your involvement.

Your comments would be treated as completely confidential. I would *not* provide Centrelink, the organisation running your project or anyone else with information identifying your individual comments. My research report will not include your name or the name of this project.

If you are interested in participating, please write your first name and phone number/s below. If you do not want to write your name but are interested in participating, please let me know when I collect this questionnaire.

First Name:

Phone no/s:

Stage 2
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PREFACE

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. I'd like to stress that this is a confidential interview. I won't identify your individual comments to anyone else doing this project, the project supervisor, or to Centrelink.

I also want to stress that I'm not aiming to check up on you or whether you are meeting Centrelink requirements. I'm aiming to find out about your experience to do with work and unemployment and what you think about your rights and obligations.

Please tell me at any time if you don't understand a question so that I can explain it more clearly.

The first questions ask about the education you completed and previous jobs you have done. I'll also ask some questions about what's important to you in a job.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

What was the highest school year which you finished?

Have you done any courses since leaving school? Have you done any short courses? What were they?

WORK

Have you ever had a paid job?

[If yes] How old were you when you got your first job? Can you tell me about that job?

What other jobs have you had since then? *[Prompt to ask whether it was full-time/part-time/casual, how long they had each job and why it finished]*

Have you ever had a job that you've liked?

What was the best job you've had?

Have you ever had a job that you've disliked?

What was the worst job you've had?

Is it important to you to have a job? Why is that?

What kind of work do you want to do?

What kind of jobs have you been looking for while you've been unemployed?

What kind of things do you look for in a job? [*Prompt: for example, hours, conditions, pay, work environment, people you work with, location*]

What do you think are the good things about having a job?

What do you think are the bad things about having a job?

What kind of things wouldn't you put up with in a job?

Have you ever turned down a job you were offered because of problems you saw with the job? What were they?

Moving on to questions about rights and obligations, do you think that you have a *right* to work? Why is that?

Do you think you have a right to work that you enjoy doing?

Do you think that you *should* work, if there is work available for you? Why is that?

Do you think that people in general *should* work, if there is work available for them?

The current Government Minister for employment, Tony Abbott, has said that some unemployed people are too fussy about the job they will accept. What do you think of his opinion?

UNEMPLOYMENT AND INCOME SUPPORT

The next questions ask about your experience of being unemployed and what you think about your rights and obligations to do with Centrelink.

In the last three years, how long have you been unemployed?

Why do you think you haven't been able to get work in that time?

Can you tell me what it's like for you being unemployed?

What's it like looking for work, do you find?

How did you come to be doing this Work for the Dole project?

What's it like doing this project?

Do you think that doing this project will help you to get work?

Moving onto questions to do with Centrelink, have you been getting unemployment payments for the whole time you've been unemployed?

Was there a waiting period before you could get payments? *[If yes]* Do you know why that was?

What do you have to do to keep getting unemployment payments?

[Ask about the following requirements if not volunteered by participant: applying for a particular number of jobs a fortnight, Jobseeker Diary, Employer Contact Certificates]

What do you think about these requirements?

[If not already mentioned] What do you think about having to apply for that number of jobs a fortnight? Why is that?

What do you think about having to do a Jobseeker Diary? Why is that?

Do you agree or disagree with having to do Work for the Dole to get payments?

[If agree] Do you think that you should have to do a Work for the Dole project if you're not interested in any of the projects available?

Have you had any problems meeting Centrelink requirements?

Have you had any problems applying for the number of jobs you need to?

Has there been any pressure from Centrelink or Job Network agencies to apply for jobs that you don't want, or has that not been an issue?

Have Centrelink ever cut off or reduced your payments? What happened? *[Ask how money much was lost each fortnight]*

[If yes] How did you cope with losing that money? Did it affect anyone else apart from you, such as your family?

Do you think that unemployed people have a *right* to get unemployment payments? Why is that?

Are there any situations where you think someone shouldn't have a right to get unemployment payments? What are they?

[Prompts: What if they're not looking for work because they don't want a job?

And if they're not looking for work because they've had a lot of knockbacks and don't think that they'll be able to get a job?

What about if they are looking for work but don't come in to do Work for the Dole?

And if they're unemployed if they've chosen to leave a job that they didn't like?]

Some people have suggested that everyone should be entitled to a minimum level of income, regardless of whether they're looking for work. What do you think of that idea?

ASSISTANCE WITH GETTING A JOB

The next questions ask about assistance to get a job.

Do you meet with anyone regularly at a Job Network agency? Did you used to in the past? How often do you/did you meet with them?

Have Job Network agencies ever rung you about jobs that are available?

Have they helped you in other ways?

Do you think that you have a right to assistance to help you get work? What kind of assistance?

Are you interested in doing any training? *[If yes]* Do you need any assistance to do this?

Is there anything in particular you think that the Government should be doing for unemployed people?

Are there any particular kinds of programs you think should be provided for unemployed people?

Do you think that the Government is responsible for preventing unemployment? *[If interviewee needs clarification: Is it up to the Government to make sure that there are enough jobs for everyone to do?]*

[If yes] Do you think that the Government's doing enough to reduce unemployment?

Do you think that any other individuals, organisations or companies are (also) responsible for preventing unemployment?

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Finally I'd like to ask a few quick questions about your family background. I'm asking these questions to find out whether people from different backgrounds have different views about the topics we've been talking about.

What country was your mother born in?

What country was your father born in?

What country were you born in?

Is your father working at the moment? *[If yes]* What job does he have? *[If no]* Why is that? What was the last job he had?

Is your mother working in a paid job at the moment? *[If yes]* What job does she have? *[If no]* Why is that? Did she have a paid job in the past?

[If hasn't already said] Which part of Melbourne do you live in?

Those are all the questions I was going to ask. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the things we've been talking about?

Is there anything you'd like to ask me about the project?

Thank you very much for your time.

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