# Welfare Conditionality in Lived Experience: Aggregating Qualitative Longitudinal Research

## Sharon Wright* and Ruth Patrick**

*School of Social and Political Sciences, the University of Glasgow
E-mail: Sharon.Wright@glasgow.ac.uk

**Social Policy and Social Work, University of York
E-mail: ruth.patrick@york.ac.uk

*Punitive welfare conditionality, combining tough sanctions with minimal self-directed support, is a defining feature of contemporary UK working age social security provision. This approach has been justified by policy makers on the basis that it will increase the numbers in paid employment, and thereby offer savings for the public purse that are also beneficial for individuals who are expected to be healthier and better off financially as a result. In this article, we aggregate two qualitative longitudinal studies (Welfare Conditionality, 2014–17; and Lived Experience, 2011–16) that document lived experiences of claiming benefits and using back-to-work support services. In both studies and over time, we find, contrary to policy expectations, that coercion, including sanctions, was usually experienced as unnecessary and harmful and that poverty was prevalent, both in and out of work, tended to worsen and pushed many close to destitution. Conditionality governed encounters with employment services and, perversely, appeared to impede, rather than support, transitions into employment for participants in both studies. These constitute 'shared typical' aspects of lived experiences of welfare conditionality. We propose Combined Study Qualitative Longitudinal Research as a new methodological approach to extend inference beyond the usual study-specific confines of qualitative generalisation.*

**Keywords:** Welfare conditionality, lived experience, sanctions, qualitative longitudinal research.

## Introduction

Over the past thirty years, a core feature of welfare system change across the OECD countries has been the rebalancing of unemployed people's rights and responsibilities, to reduce entitlements and ramp up behavioural expectations using sanctions to 'condition' individual behaviour towards extensive job-search and the acceptance of low quality and insecure jobs (Knotz, 2018). Although the British social security system has involved forms of behavioural conditionality for several decades (Griggs and Bennett, 2009; Hills, 2015), a 'punitive turn' began in 2010, with its apex at 2012 (Fletcher and Wright, 2018), when the world's second harshest benefit sanctions regime was introduced (Adler, 2018; Immervoll and Knotz, 2018). A distinctive feature of this turn (under-recognised internationally) is that the demandingness of British benefit eligibility is not confined to unemployed people but includes lone parents and disabled people (Patrick, 2011; Whitworth and Griggs, 2013; Manji, 2017; Heins and Bennett, 2018). The 2012 sanctions

regime introduced open-ended penalties and fixed periods of up to three years without benefits (Adler, 2016; 2018; Reeve, 2017; Reeves and Loopstra, 2017) for those who 'serially and deliberately breach their most important requirements' (DWP, 2012).

Since the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013, and within a context of aggressive welfare cuts, the reach of punitive conditionality has become 'ubiquitous' (Dwyer and Wright, 2014) in ways that are globally unique, applied to low-paid workers and partners of claimants. Such widespread application of very harsh conditionality is distinguishable from previous generations and varieties of labour market activation that have been well debated in the international academic literature (cf. Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004; Clasen and Clegg, 2006; Dingeldey, 2007; Serrano-Pascual and Lars, 2007; Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl, 2008; Paz-Fuchs, 2008; Larsen and van Berkel, 2009; Bonoli, 2010; van Berkel *et al.*, 2011; Brodkin and Marston, 2013). Contemporary British social security conditionality is distinct because it can remove financial protection entirely and threatens long-term penalties of extreme poverty and destitution whilst offering almost no support or escape via paid employment (since job search requirements continue for low-paid workers). In this article, we combine two independent qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies of lived experiences of British welfare conditionality for the first time, to ask what does it mean for claimants to live through this radical period of cuts and the punitive large-scale re-writing of citizenship rights and responsibilities? Although we have begun to answer this question separately elsewhere (Patrick, 2017; Wright *et al.*, 2018), what is new and methodologically innovative here is that our focus is aggregative, looking across two QLR studies. We explore the extent to which these experiences are confined to the particularities of unique personal biographies or local research sites and reflect on the wider applicability of commonalities identified across a variety of locations and over several years. Does enough corroboration exist to generalise more widely than is customary in qualitative research (Flick, 2006; Bryman, 2012; Parker and Northcott, 2016), to see the findings of the two studies as constitutive of one coherent big picture, rather than as similar but discrete smaller pictures? Can we begin to use Combined Study QLR as 'a window into instances of the shared typical' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018: 15) that reveal patterns consistent enough to be regarded as a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961: 48) about an era or a set of 'typical constellations of motives' (Mills, 1940: 906) that 'originate not from within but from the situation that individuals find themselves in' (ibid.)?

First, we locate our arguments within the existing substantive and methodological literature. Second, we outline the research methods underpinning the data presented in this article. Third, we present evidence of lived experiences of conditionality, drawing on data generated between 2011 and 2017. Fourth, we discuss the broader implications of finding strong consistencies in the 'shared typical' dimensions of lived experiences of welfare conditionality over time and across locations in two QLR.

## Reframing the analysis of welfare conditionality: from individual behaviour to 'shared typical' motives and experiences

It is customary to ground discussions of Anglo-sphere welfare conditionality (Watts *et al.*, 2014; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018) conceptually by attributing their ideological origins to the American neoliberal paternalists (Murray, 1984, 1990; Mead, 1986, 1992) and communitarians (Etzioni, 1997; Selbourne, 1994) who advocated normatively for the withdrawal of state support under the auspices of promoting citizen self-reliance

(Dwyer, 2016; Gilbert, 2009). However, this convention restricts the contours of academic debate to the remaining negative space, where rejoinders may inadvertently reinforce the very welfare myths they seek to dispel and give false legitimacy to incoherent political constructions of welfare problems (Clarke and Cochrane, 1998; Whitworth, 2016; Wright, 2016). Several analysts have evidenced problems caused by British social security in the austerity era (Daguerre and Etherington, 2014; Edmiston, 2017; Royston, 2017), including increases in poverty (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Snell *et al.*, 2015; Hood and Waters, 2017), street homelessness (Wilson, 2018) and destitution (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018). However, centring the conceptual debate on political ideology and individual behaviour has detracted attention from more sociologically-informed explanations of conditionality and its effects. Theoretically-driven analyses have interpreted recent British social security cuts and reforms from Marxist or governmentality perspectives as autonomy-eroding (Wiggan, 2015), 'criminalising' (Fletcher and Wright, 2018) and 'vindictive' (Grover, 2010). Grover (2018: 4-5) goes as far as to say reforms constitute 'structural violence' and 'social murder' because of the resultant large-scale, extreme and 'avoidable physical and mental diswelfares'.

Here, we bring a wealth of evidence to this growing body of sociologically-informed critical analysis, to offer new empirical and methodological insights for understanding the meanings and inferences of welfare conditionality as lived experience. Drawing on McIntosh and Wright (2018), we argue that focusing more phenomenologically on lived experiences can form the basis of sharp critical analysis. Our aim is not to neutralise what others (above) have presented as a political act of oppression, but to animate the struggle by representing subjectivities of harsh conditionality as a social phenomenon. The aim is to explore whether contemporary British conditionality involves *living through* a specific set of subjective sensations that can be identified as both *shared* and *typical*. This is not self-evident. Establishing such a substantial claim involves extensive and rigorous investigation. Furthermore, we seek to elevate the significance of lived experiences beyond the individual, to argue that consistent shared experiences of conditionality constitute what Raymond Williams called a 'structure of feeling' (1961: 48), which actively characterises a point in history and reflects 'the whole life of the time' (p.78). Williams argued:

> 'Not only is the dominant social character different, in many ways, from the life lived in its shadow, but alternative social characters lead to the real conflicts of the time.' (1961: 79)

Furthermore, by opening 'a window into instances of the shared typical' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018: 15) we aim to reveal a set of 'typical constellations of motives' (Mills, 1940: 906) that are neither individual nor behavioural. C. Wright Mills argues that typical motivations can 'originate not from within but from the situation that individuals find themselves in' (*ibid*). Thus, we suggest that instead of viewing our findings within the usual study-specific confines of inference for qualitative research (Flick, 2006; Parker and Northcott, 2016; Mason, 2017), it is possible to aggregate findings across time and from multiple studies to reveal an underlying essence of broadly-shared lived experience.

## Methods

This article presents original data from two separate studies of different scale and scope: the nine-year (2011-20) ESRC/British Academy 'Lived Experiences of Welfare Reform

Study' (LivedExp) and the five-year (2013-18) ESRC 'Welfare Conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change' (Welcond) project. Both studies employ QLR methods to explore unfolding of lives over time (Smith, 2003; Henwood and Shirani, 2012), focusing on social security and conditionality, with a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct (Neale and Hanna, 2012). The 'Lived Experience' (LivedExp) study is an ongoing sole-researcher study tracking a purposive sample of fifteen single parents, jobseekers and disabled people in Leeds, who were recruited via two local organisations. Four waves of interviews took place between 2011 and 2016 (a total of fifty-nine interviews to date) and were supplemented by written communication. The 'Welfare Conditionality' (Welcond) study is a large-scale collaborative project[1], involving teams of researchers from six universities, investigating the efficacy and ethics of conditionality for 481 welfare service users in a range of circumstances. This article draws on the core fieldwork, which consisted of three waves of qualitative interviews (total 1082), using convenience sampling, conducted between 2014 and 2017 in eleven locations in Scotland and England. Participants were recruited via a wide range of local agencies, including formal service providers and support groups. The studies were designed separately, but both used detailed person-centred interview schedules, which included open questions about current and past experiences of: claiming benefits, conditionality and sanctions, employment and looking for work, income, health, household composition, housing situation, caring roles, coping strategies and support systems (formal and informal). Questions were adjusted after the first wave to include exploration of continuity and change, according to the original themes. Rich data for both studies was managed and analysed separately using QSR NVivo. Detailed coding was conducted for every transcript. The size and complexity of Welcond necessitated multi-level coding, with consistent matrix framework coding (on themes such as sanctions, support and ethics), applied across the whole sample, and topic-specific nodes used to code sub-sets (by policy field, e.g. Universal Credit, Jobseeker, or by circumstance e.g. older worker). The matrix framework created longitudinal summaries for each participant, including all waves, linked to the original transcripts.

In drawing the two studies together, the authors used their respective immersion in their own data as the basis for identifying the strongest common themes, which were selected according to the frequency of cases, volume of coding and/or their affective prominence (i.e. those issues about which participants felt most strongly). For ethical reasons, it was not possible to directly link the two data sets at the time when this article was written. Instead, the authors worked iteratively to identify core themes through discussion and then check these in the coding of their own studies. After themes were identified, the coded selections of transcript were examined by each of the authors, to identify representative cases (avoiding the extreme cases that connected sanctions to rarer phenomenon such as survival crime, suicide attempts, domestic abuse, sexual violence and rough sleeping) that illustrated a prominent dimension of the common lived experience of conditionality. The authors then returned to the data to further mine for longitudinal data on the themes under exploration.

This approach is methodologically innovative in two main respects. First, in directly connecting substantive findings we develop what we call 'Combined Study Qualitative Longitudinal Research', as a rare form 'second order' (Noblit and Hare, 1988) 'qualitative-qualitative' mixed method (Pritchard, 2012), which has never been previously attempted in this field. As such, we offer a new solution to the enduring challenge posed by the

inferential limitations of qualitative research. Generalisation beyond original qualitative cases is formally either rejected as impossible (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) or advised only for building theory (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2006), except for the intermediate form of limited *moderatum* generalisation advocated by Williams (2000). Payne and Williams view the types of generalisations that qualitative researchers make in practice as problematic, performing mainly 'a rhetorical function of dramatizing an issue, rather than establishing true generality' (2005: 310). Until now, cross-study qualitative comparison has been largely confined to the types of 'meta-synthesis' (Thorne, 2008) offered by systematic literature or evidence reviews (Cooper *et al.*, 1994). Qualitative meta-syntheses have gained prominence in health sciences (Britten *et al.*, 2002) and been applied more recently in education (Nye *et al.*, 2016) and social work with the explicit aim of 'developing theory and informing policy and practice' (Aguirre and Bolton, 2014: 279). Meta-synthesis is a 'third order construction' (Noblit and Hare, 1988) that aims to generate new post-hoc interpretations from existing published studies, either to highlight agreement between qualitative studies ('reciprocal synthesis'), to reveal disagreement ('refutational synthesis') or to identify 'lines of argument synthesis', where different studies show 'parts of the whole' phenomenon. Whereas meta-synthesis seeks interpretive novelty, our aim is to explore whether commonalities exist that can be aggregated to indicate prevalence. This is a 'second order construction' (original participants' own experiences are the first order constructions) because we are working directly with original data, rather than the extracts that make their way into publications. Second, by explicitly pursuing commonality, we explore if it is possible to reveal parts of a coherent bigger picture that lurks behind the 'little islands of knowledge' (Glaser and Strauss, 1971: 181) generated by single study depictions. This bucks the trend of establishing difference as the basis for academic originality (Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2006), which may be seriously hampering our collective ability to recognise broadly-held meanings or wide-spread lived experiences that are not easily captured by existing quantitative data sets, but could nonetheless be core to the whole 'life of the time' (Williams, 1961: 78).

In the following section, we share data generated from both studies, focusing on what our engagement with lived experiences of welfare conditionality over time reveals about how conditionality operates, and the extent to which this meshes with the policy presentation of the presumed problem and prescribed solution.

### Findings: identifying a set of 'shared typical' lived experiences of welfare conditionality

This section presents a set of key findings about lived experiences of welfare conditionality from the LivedExp and Welcond studies where there was strong agreement between participants in each study and consistency across the studies. The aim is to demonstrate evidence that lived experiences of conditionality are not wholly individual, but involve:

> 'clusters of commonality and shared intersubjective experiences. These are not so unique and individualised as to be out of the reach of a social policy researcher and can form the basis from where we can find recurring patterns and typical forms of behaviour and concerns.' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018: 12)

These 'shared typical' aspects include: orientations towards employment, prevailing poverty, the way conditionality governs the encounter and the elusiveness of 'the right support'.

### Orientations towards employment

The UK Government's justification for punitive conditionality is articulated in the impact assessment that accompanied the Welfare Reform Bill (2011):

> 'Those who find work benefit from higher income and improved wellbeing. There are also fiscal savings including a lower benefit burden, and wider social benefits. Higher employment levels also lead to reduced adult and child poverty.' (DWP, 2011: 1)

The paternalist assumption is that benefit claimants are 'dependent' and need coercion to change their behaviour to 'speed up entries into employment' (*ibid.*). However, in both studies, most participants were keen to work, and many had previous or current employment experiences, e.g. in-work Universal Credit claimants (Stewart and Wright, 2018; Wright *et al.*, 2018). Mark (Welcond) was aged fifty and single at the start of the study. He had worked throughout his life in heavy manual jobs, which had taken their toll physically and he had to stop working in his last job at a warehouse because of a back injury. At Wave A, he had been unemployed for five months and was claiming Universal Credit. Mark was compliant and was never sanctioned before or during the study, but nevertheless felt vulnerable to destitution:

> *Scared [ . . . ] if I'd been sanctioned for anything I'd have lost my flat.* (Mark, Universal Credit, Welcond, Wave A)

As someone who had strong pre-existing intrinsic motivation to work, evidenced by more than three decades of employment, this intense emotional and psychological pressure was not needed to prompt job-seeking behaviour:

> *They want me to basically use my time to look for jobs . . . I do that anyway. I don't need them to tell me.* (Mark, Universal Credit, Welcond, Wave C)

At Wave B, Mark was on a zero hours contract, working unsociable hours as a transport cleaner. This had started as a full-time position, but reduced to part-time. Under Universal Credit, he was:

> *£40 worse off in work. I was totally skint. [ . . . ] If Universal Credit didn't exist and I'd stayed on Working Tax Credit I would have got more money. [ . . . ] Every time I read that 'better off in work' I feel like tearing it down.* (Mark, Wave B)

Similarly, Tessa, a disabled woman (LivedExp), was resistant to the policy framing, which she felt implied a preference for benefits over work and which neglected the extent to which people who are on benefits have so often previously been in employment:

*602*

> *If you asked me and [partner]. We'd rather be well and working. We didn't say ten years ago: "oh, great, I hope I don't have to work again". I had a good job, I were happy. I had good money – more than I get on benefits – a lot more. And then you just, it just hits you . . .* (Tessa, Disability Benefit Claimant, LivedExp, Wave 1)

Misunderstanding and misrepresenting most claimants' motivations is a central feature (and flaw) in the design of UK welfare conditionality – coercion is unnecessary because most claimants are already highly motivated to look for work (where this is a realistic option) and their existing job seeking behaviour is well matched with that objective. Unfortunately, it was often the case, over multiple waves of both studies, that the intense and time-consuming job seeking behaviour that the current iteration of conditionality demands did not result in sustainable job outcomes. For example, although the Jobseeker's Allowance and Universal Credit recipients in both studies sought work ardently and many moved into work, several subsequently moved out of work for a range of reasons, including the type of work (e.g. flexible, temporary, seasonal), health factors and problems with child care (Patrick, 2017; Stewart and Wright, 2018: 4; Wright *et al.*, 2018: 4). Frustration about public misrepresentation and misjudged intervention worsened the psychological and emotional demands of holding strong intrinsic motivation to work alongside the demoralisation of unacknowledged and fruitless job search. These were frequently repeated emblems in the recurring sequence of 'shared typical' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018) lived experiences of conditionality.

### Prevailing and worsening poverty and recurrent experiences of destitution

Core to the DWP (2011) justification of conditionality (see above) is the promise that it will enable movement out of poverty, with this closely tied to the 'work is the best form of welfare' narrative. However, both studies found that conditionality not only failed to ensure job outcomes (Patrick, 2017; Wright *et al.*, 2018; Stewart and Wright, 2018), but that its punitive edge often further cemented and intensified experiences of poverty. For the majority, the experience over time was of continuing to claim benefits whilst falling deeper into poverty, debt and, for many, extreme hardship. There were also common experiences of moving from out-of-work to in-work poverty. Individuals subject to repeat benefit sanctions experienced long-lasting negative impacts that pushed them near to or into destitution (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018), which has been interpreted as 'by design' (Goulden, 2018). For example, Adrian, a young jobseeker, started the LivedExp study while subject to a benefit sanction, when he was struggling daily to make ends meet. At the second interview, Adrian was still incurring a benefit sanction and reported how he was trying to ration his food to get by, and the impact this was having on his physical and mental health:

> *I've lost a lot of weight because of it. That's really put me down . . . I'm having like one, one and a half meals a day.'* (Adrian, Young Jobseeker, LivedExp, Wave 2)

This experience of extreme poverty persisted for Adrian, and the cumulative experience of trying to manage on a restricted income, and make use of charitable, but limited, emergency food provision impacted upon him in profoundly negative ways. Further, and ironically, given the framing of conditionality (and sanctions) as tools to stimulate

603

transitions from 'welfare' to 'work', Adrian felt his experiences of repeat benefit sanctions adversely affected his employability while also restricting the time he had available to seek employment:

> *Sanctions affect my search for work as you find yourself searching more for food than a job. Then when you do find a job interview I have had to travel there and back on an empty stomach. It is a traumatic experience that has caused some mental issues that I never had before sanctions. No nutrition for the brain is like trying to start your car with no petrol inside. It's not going to work.* (Letter from participant to researcher, 2016)

Adrian reflected on his experiences of conditionality, sanctions and unsuccessful work search over the five years since the study started in 2011:

> *Five years, nothing has changed jobs and benefits wise. Still volunteering. It's ridiculous innit? A little unnerving.* (Adrian, Young Jobseeker, LivedExp, Wave 4)

Adrian's case reveals the harsh consequences of experiencing benefit sanctions, documenting the ways in which sanctions operate to sabotage the physical and psychological foundations of the type of self-presentation that is necessary for gaining paid work. Similarly, Neil (Welcond), a fifty-three year-old Jobseeker's Allowance claimant found that being sanctioned '*hindered everything*' (Wave A) and caused deeper poverty that was long-lasting and difficult to recover from. Neil had worked throughout his life in hard physical jobs, including dirty jobs that he described as '*horrendous*', constantly on the margins of poverty. At Wave A, Neil had been unemployed for eighteen months and was very keen to work, despite an undiagnosed chronic health condition. He and his wife were both claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, whist also providing daily round-the-clock care, including bathing, toileting and cooking, for his housebound father-in-law who lived in the next street. Their income was very tight due to Bedroom Tax reductions, but they were blocked from transferring to a smaller council house because of rent arrears. Despite declaring bankruptcy, they were under threat of eviction. Already on the verge of destitution, Neil was sanctioned without warning for a first 'offence' of missing a Jobcentre appointment whilst at the hospital waiting for a late-running appointment to receive blood test results. He said: '*it never entered my head to leave the hospital until I had seen the consultant*'. Although he phoned the Jobcentre to explain '*they'd already done something on their computer*' and the sanction stood. As a result, Neil and his wife were plunged into deep poverty and had to share bath water and miss meals because they had '*no food, electric's about to go and that's it*'. He found the idea of behavioural change completely alien as a policy goal:

> *It's not in my mind to change [my] behaviour. My behaviour has always been to try and actively [find a job]. Because [ . . . ] if you go to work you want benefits out of it. You don't want to be financially the same as if you were on the dole.* (Neil, Jobseeker, Welcond, Wave A).

By Wave B, Neil had been diagnosed with a serious liver condition and was finding it difficult to prove his identity for work opportunities due to a frustrating glitch that meant he was not permitted to renew his passport. His wife had become a recognised carer for her father, so was no longer required to look for full-time work. They were still repaying rent

arrears that prevented transferring council house to avoid the Bedroom Tax. Their net income was approximately 10 per cent of the Minimum Income Standard (Davis *et al.*, 2018).

> *'I can't remember the last time I bought anything apart from food. I don't buy clothes. We've got no internet. [ . . . ] We've got no savings. We've got no car. [ . . . ] If you've got no money, your whole life changes.'* (Neil, Jobseeker, Welcond, Wave B)

At Wave C, Neil was aged fifty-five and still unemployed. He had physically deteriorated due to his health condition and was no longer able to do manual labour. His father-in-law had died. Neil had received a three-month sanction, this time for failing to attend the Jobcentre for an interview to join a temp agency (unconnected with any specific vacancy). He missed the appointment because he was already a member of the agency in question and could not afford the bus fare. This time, he was very close to destitution, with a household income only 8 per cent of the Minimum Income Standard (Davis *et al.*, 2018). With mounting debt and rent arrears, Neil was angry because he felt the Jobcentre '*were unfair*' in applying the sanction. The deep and long-lasting poverty had accumulated and left him unable to afford to travel to hospital for treatment. He was trapped in poverty and unemployment, locked down by the sanction:

> *[B]y sanctioning me and cutting down on my money obviously leaves me less money to live on and if I've got less money to live on I can't go for these job interviews, I can't put credit on my phone to phone for jobs. [ . . . ] It is hard trying to keep focused on looking for a job when at the same time you're thinking, whoa, hang on, if I go for this interview I've got nothing to eat today.* (Neil, Jobseeker, Welcond, Wave C)

Whilst sanctions are designed to make non-compliance uncomfortable, what both studies show consistently is that this discomfort a) goes far beyond the realms of toleration, often involving acute suffering and sparking unnecessary crises (including suicidal thoughts) that have wide effects for claimants, their dependents and family and friends; b) is long-lasting and accumulating; and c) undermines the ability to look for or secure paid employment. A strong 'shared typical' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018) in the lived experience of conditionality was the extreme and intractable suffering related to experiences of sanctions.

What was also evident, over time, and across two diverse samples of benefit claimants, was the extent to which poverty was a solid motif central to the pattern of 'shared typical' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018) lived experiences of conditionality. The common experience of transitioning from out-of-work poverty to in-work poverty as individuals from both studies entered (and often subsequently left) insecure, poorly paid and temporary employment is a challenge to the legitimacy and popular justifications for conditionality. It casts doubt on the presumption that conditionality improves individuals' monetary circumstances by enabling transitions from welfare and into work. This justification is further challenged when we look at the ways in which conditionality so often operates counter-productively, undermining rather than improving individuals' employability and the likelihood of their viewing their engagement with welfare-to-work providers and Jobcentre Plus advisors as supportive and helpful.

### Conditionality governs the encounter for compliant claimants

Welfare conditionality is designed to ensure compliance (DWP, 2011) by instilling fear in claimants to spur on job search. However, both studies demonstrate this fear is both unnecessary (given existing orientations towards employment) and ineffective. Importantly, though, conditionality governs encounters between claimants and officials and has the perverse consequence of undermining the scope of such encounters to support and aid job search activities. In both studies, most participants were compliant and had not received a sanction (297, 62 per cent, of the Welcond sample and eleven, 73 per cent, of the LivedExp sample had never been sanctioned). Nevertheless, the fear of being sanctioned was widespread amongst compliant claimants over time in both studies. Single parent Susan explained how the threat of being sanctioned sat as a constant backdrop in her engagement with the conditionality regime:

> *I'm always so cautious . . . I've never missed an appointment. I've never missed signing on . . . .*
> *Because I'm thinking, oh my God, if I did [get sanctioned], what do I do with the bills and food*
> *for my daughter?* (Susan, LivedExp, Single Parent, Wave 3)

This pervasive fear of sanctions was similarly experienced by most Welcond participants, highlighting the ways in which conditionality sets up the encounter between claimant and adviser in supervisory ways (with the constant threat of punishment for non-compliance), seeps into every element of these interactions and contributes a further layer to the 'shared typical' of experiences of conditionality.

For example, Robert, a young jobseeker from the LivedExp study, was strongly motivated to secure paid employment. During the period of the study, he had three spells of short-term employment, even taking on exploitative employment (paid at a level below the National Minimum Wage) as he said he preferred this to claiming out-of-work benefits. While motivated to find employment, Robert was resistant to engaging with Jobcentre Plus advisors, partially because he disliked the compulsory nature of the encounters, and the threats that suffused these interactions. He explained how he reacted when told to apply for a set number of jobs, or risk a benefit sanction:

> *It's how she spoke to me about it. Now if she would have said, "would you", not "you have to",*
> *that's where they go wrong. If they say "you have to do it", then no, I won't do it. But if it's*
> *"would you do it", then yeah I would. But I'm not having somebody telling me to do summat.*
> (Robert, Young Jobseeker, LivedExp, Wave 3)

For Robert, the indignity of coercion sparked resistance as part of an active effort to assert his agency in the face of a punitive conditionality regime. Sometimes, though, Robert felt he had no choice but to comply with the demands made of him, given the potential ramifications that a sanction would cause. He described being asked to sign a claimant commitment that laid out strict expectations about applying for a set number of jobs:

> *Robert: [if] I haven't found ten jobs to apply for then they'll sanction my money . . . I don't know how*
> *they can force you to sign a contract for that. Interviewer: Did you sign the contract then? Robert:*
> *Yeah 'cause I had to, otherwise I would've got sanctioned.* (Young Jobseeker, LivedExp, Wave 2)

In this instance, Robert, like most participants in both studies, felt that the demands being made of him were unrealistic and inappropriate, and yet he also felt he had little choice but to comply with them. Being compelled to participate in job search activities that are judged by targeted individuals as ineffective and unnecessary represents the punitive, paternalist bent to the approach taken. Experiencing the loss of agency that this entails can contribute to a weakening of self-esteem and can ironically actively undermine individuals' capacity to seek employment, and to be seen and treated as 'active welfare subjects' (Marston and McDonald, 2008; Wright, 2016). This is inevitably counter-productive and creates a central tension (and inconsistency) with current parameters of welfare conditionality.

What was also notable across both studies was how conditionality often acted as a barrier that prevented people from accessing and engaging effectively with available support, a further example of how conditionality governs encounters in negative ways. For example, LivedExp participants Isobella (disabled benefit claimant) and James (young job-seeker) described avoiding asking for employment-related help at Jobcentre Plus for fear that their engagement in any support would then open up the possibility of being sanctioned. In Isobella's case, even enquiring about employment-related support held the fear of being deemed ineligible for disability benefits. In this way, the presence of punitive conditionality negates and makes less likely the possibility of a more positive engagement with employment support.

### The elusiveness of 'the right support'

Another major component of conditionality logic is that sanctions are justified because claimants are being offered 'bespoke tailor-made support' that 'really is about helping people' (Esther McVey MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 2018):

> The intention of these policies is to speed up entries into employment from benefits for those able to work, and ensure that those who are able to prepare for work at a later date are given *the right support at the right time*. (DWP, 2011: 1, emphasis added)

Both studies interrogated this aspect of the welfare contract and found that although there were some positive examples of empathetic work coaches who helped, the promised support was largely lacking:

> No, [Jobcentre Plus is not encouraging] at all. They just basically say, 'Right, here's your book, get it done. If you don't; I'll sanction you. (Amy, Jobseeker, Welcond, Wave B)

For most participants in both studies, over multiple years, the support offer was very limited and mainly superficial, usually consisting of very short appointments with work coaches (e.g. five minutes once per fortnight) and mandatory self-administered online job-search (cf. Fletcher and Wright, 2018). In both studies, most experiences of 'support' were disappointing. There was a frustration when the promised 'support' was experienced as irrelevant and largely unhelpful. Jobseeker Tony explains:

> It is [frustrating], especially when you've been on long-term unemployed, they're doing nothing to help me at all apart from sending me on stupid courses which are absolutely a waste of time

*but it ticks their box. Yes, this man has been unemployed for the last six months, you'll say, 'We'll send him on this course'. It comes back, nothing happening, send him another course.* (Tony, Jobseeker, Welcond, Wave C)

Susan was a single parent who, at the outset of the LivedExp study, was seeking paid work that could be appropriately combined with her parenting work for her young daughter. She was hopeful that support with her employment goals would be forthcoming when she was referred onto the Work Programme:

*I was happy to go because I'm happy really to try anything that can get me to work because I really, really want to go to work.* (Susan, Single Parent, LivedExp, Wave 2)

However, she became frustrated when the promised help was not forthcoming. She was also upset when her adviser started to encourage her to search for jobs in retail and care work, arguing that Susan's aim to secure work as a teaching assistant was too ambitious, and unlikely to be realised; she explained:

*The Work Programme people were getting impatient with me as I was getting interviews but no job . . . The woman who was running the office told me that I needed to get a job ASAP, that I needed to start looking for any job, especially care work because teaching assistant jobs were very competitive because of holidays. I felt so demoralised, I started to doubt myself and the decision I had made to pursue that teaching assistant job, which I chose to do because of being a single mum. I started getting anxious every time my appointment was coming up. At some point I believed that I was never going to get it.* (Letter from participant to researcher, 2015)

In this way, Susan's engagement with the Work Programme had a negative impact on her job search activities and made her question her decision to pursue employment as a teaching assistant. This job ambition was part of seeking sustainable employment, and – at the same time as taking part in the Work Programme – Susan independently arranged to undertake voluntary work in schools and gained the necessary qualifications to become a teaching assistant. She later secured a job as a teaching assistant, but was adamant that this had happened *in spite* and not *because* of the 'support' from the Work Programme. She summarised her experiences of welfare-to-work 'support':

*The Work Programme didn't give me any help at all to find work; from job search, applications, interviews, I did everything myself. All they did was put me down, asking me why I was not getting jobs while I was getting interviews, to the point where I was feeling scared to attend my appointments whenever I failed an interview.* (Susan, Single Parent, LivedExp, Wave 3)

Here, the 'shared typical' is the unsupported nature of lived experiences of the employment support that underpins welfare conditionality, the sense of being left alone to sink or swim or experiencing 'support' as a negative intervention.

## Conclusion

Combining two separate QLR studies, conducted over several years in twelve different locations within the UK, we find strong consistency in multiple first-hand reports of the

detrimental impacts of conditionality and sanctions. These elements form a discernible repeat pattern of 'lived experience as a typicality' (McIntosh and Wright, 2018: 13) spanning a diverse range of nearly 500 participants and more than 1000 interviews. We have demonstrated that there are a series of contrasts between how behavioural conditionality is presented by political advocates (Bacchi, 1999), that are 'given as givens' (Stack, 1997: 207), and the lived experiences of those subject to it. Rather than producing the imagined social benefits, like an escape from poverty or better health, the threat of sanctions had widespread ill-effects on the mental health of many recipients in the two studies. Sanctions exacerbated poverty to the point of crisis, could threaten destitution and adversely affect encounters between claimants and their work coaches. Similarly, poverty was a common experience for participants who were in work, as well as those who were out of work, while the promise of 'support' with job search and welfare-to-work transitions was illusory. This 'shared typical' details the many shortcomings, inconsistencies and tensions with intensive welfare conditionality, and the extent to which conditionality frames encounters with the welfare state apparatus in ways that negate and prevent positive outcomes in terms of movements into secure, paid employment as well as the likelihood of individuals being able to balance their various responsibilities, and to access appropriate support. These findings present a major challenge to the thinking behind UK welfare conditionality and are particularly important in generating new insight into the impact of the post-2010 punitive turn (Heins and Bennett, 2018). While lived experiences of conditionality depart greatly from the popular representation of this policy mechanism (Manji, 2017; Reeve, 2017), it remains an incredibly dominant and powerful misrepresentation with great purchase. Policymakers continue to press for conditionality despite evidence of its ineffectiveness in enabling transitions from 'welfare' into 'work' (and since 2013, with the advent of in-work Universal Credit conditionality, from 'work' into more 'work'). Furthermore, UK-level policy makers appear reluctant to engage with and learn from lived experiences of conditionality, and the growing academic evidence base surrounding its detrimental impacts (cf. Wiggan, 2015; Reeve, 2017; Royston, 2017; Manji, 2017; Abbas and Jones, 2018).

Conceptually, our contribution is to foreground the subjectivities of harsh conditionality as a social phenomenon. This suggests that academic debate can move forward by shifting from refutation of ideological misrepresentations about individual behaviour to recognise 'typical constellations of motives' (Mills, 1940: 906) that are neither individual nor behavioural, but arise 'from the situation that individuals find themselves in' (*ibid*). Furthermore, we have posited that living through the current British conditionality regime in the context of welfare cuts involves an identifiable set of subjective sensations that may be both shared and typical. They reveal consistencies that may be viewed as 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961: 48), so strong as to actively characterise 'the whole life of the time' (*ibid*. p.78). In presenting the strongest tendencies, we have neglected the fullest range of variation included in the two studies. There were many nuances and subtleties that are not elaborated here. Nevertheless, the set of shared aspects of the situation that we have illustrated reaches beyond the uniqueness of the individual and the particularities of their circumstances to reveal broader tendencies of major consequence. Received methodological wisdom in the social and political sciences dictates that large-scale surveys or randomised control trials are the gold standard method for measuring the impacts of policies, whilst qualitative studies cannot be generalised beyond their own, usually small, unrepresentative sample (Mason, 2017). However, our findings present a

challenge to this thought tradition. We suggest that instead of viewing findings within the usual study-specific confines of inference for qualitative research, it is possible to aggregate findings across time and from multiple studies to explore whether there is evidence of an underlying essence of broadly-shared lived experience that could constitute a coherent big picture.

## Notes

## References

Abbas, J. and Jones, K. (2018) *In-Work Conditionality is Based on weak Evidence – But Will the Policy Sink or Swim?*, LSE British Politics and Policy Blog, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/in-work-conditionality-public-opinion/ [accessed 20.09.2018].

Adler, M. (2016) 'A new Leviathan: Benefit sanctions in the twenty-first century', *Journal of Law and Society*, 43, 2, 195–227.

Adler, M. (2018) *Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment? Benefit Sanctions in the UK*, London: Palgrave.

Aguirre, R. T. and Bolton, K. W. (2014) 'Qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis in social work research: Uncharted territory', *Journal of Social Work*, 14, 3, 279–94.

Bacchi, C. (1999) *Women, Policy and Politics*, London: SAGE.

Barbier, J-C. and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, W. (2004) 'Introduction: the many worlds of activation', *European Societies*, 6, 4, 423–36.

Bonoli, G. (2010) 'The political economy of active labor-market policy', *Politics and Society*, 38, 4, 435–57.

Brodkin, E. Z. and Marston, G. (eds) (2013) *Work and the Welfare State: Street-level Organizations and Workfare Politics*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Britten, N., Campbell, R., Pope, C., Donovan, J., Morgan, M. and Pill, R. (2002) 'Using meta ethnography to synthesise qualitative research: a worked example,' *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 7, 4, 209–15.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clarke, J. and Cochrane, A. (1998) 'The social construction of social problems', in E. Saraga (ed.), *Embodying the Social*, London: Routledge, 13–42.

Clasen, J. and Clegg, D. (2006) 'Beyond activation: reforming European unemployment protection systems in post-industrial labour markets', *European Societies*, 8, 4, 527–53.

Cooper, H., Hedges, L. V. and Valentine, J. C. (eds) (1994), *The Handbook of Research Synthesis and Meta Analysis*, New York: Sage.

Daguerre, A. and Etherington, D. (2014) *Workfare in 21st Century Britain: The Erosion of Rights to Social Assistance*, London: Middlesex University.

Davis, A., Hirsch, D., Padley, M. and Shepherd, C. (2018) *A Minimum Income Standard for the UK 2008-2018: Continuity and Change*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2011) *Conditionality Measures in The 2011 Welfare Reform Bill: Impact Assessment*, https://www.parliament.uk/documents/impact-assessments/IA11-022AI.pdf [accessed 20.09.2018].

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2012) *DWP Explanatory Memorandum to The Jobseeker's Allowance (Sanctions) (Amendment) Regulations 2012*, London: Department for Work and Pensions.

Dingeldey, I. (2007) 'Between workfare and enablement– the different paths to transformation of the welfare state: a comparative analysis of activating labour market policies', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 46, 6, 823–51.

Dixon-Woods, M., Bonas, S., Booth, A., Jones, D. R., Miller, T., Sutton, A. J., Shaw, R. L., Smith, J. A. and Young, B. (2006) 'How can systematic reviews incorporate qualitative research? A critical perspective', *Qualitative research*, 6, 1, 27–44.

Dowler, E. and Lambie-Mumford, H. (2015) 'How can households eat in austerity? Challenges for social policy in the UK', *Social Policy and Society*, 14, 3, 417–28.

Dwyer, P. (2016) 'Citizenship, conduct and conditionality: sanction and support in the 21st century UK welfare state', in M. Fenger, J. Hudson and C. Needham (eds.), *Social Policy Review 28*, Bristol, The Policy Press, 41–62.

Dwyer, P. and Wright, S. (2014) 'Universal Credit, ubiquitous conditionality and its implications for social citizenship', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 22, 1, 27–35.

Edmiston, D. (2017) 'Review article. Welfare, austerity and social citizenship in the UK', *Social Policy and Society*, 16, 2, 261–70.

Eichhorst, W. and Konle-Seidl, R. (2008) *Contingent Convergence: A Comparative Analysis of Activation Policies*, Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labour.

Etzioni, A. (1997) *The New Golden Rule*, London: Profile Books.

Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G., Sosenko, F., Blenkinsopp, J., Wood, J., Johnsen, S., Littlewood, M. and Watts, B. (2018) *Destitution In The UK: 2018*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Fletcher, D. R. and Wright, S. (2018) 'A hand up or a slap down? Criminalising benefit claimants in Britain via strategies of surveillance, sanctions and deterrence', *Critical Social Policy*, 38, 2, 323–44.

Flick, U. (2006) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn, London: Sage.

Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L. (1971) *Status Passage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Gilbert, N. (2009) 'US welfare reform: rewriting the social contract', *Journal of Social Policy*, 38, 3, 383–99.

Goulden, C. (2018) *Sanctions are Going too Far and Causing Destitution*, https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/sanctions-going-too-far-causing-destitution, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation [accessed 07.11.2018].

Griggs, J. and Bennett, F. (2009) *Rights and Responsibilities in the Social Security System, Social Security Advisory Committee Occasional Paper No. 6.*, London: Social Security Advisory Committee.

Grover, C. (2010) 'Social security policy and vindictiveness', *Sociological Research Online*, 15, 2, 8.

Grover, C. (2018) 'Violent proletarianisation: social murder, the reserve army of labour and social security 'austerity' in Britain', *Critical Social Policy*, https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018318816932.

Heins, E. and Bennett, H. (2018) 'Retrenchment, conditionality and flexibility: UK labour market policies in the era of austerity', in S. Theodoropoulou (ed.), *Labour Market Policies in the Era of Pervasive Austerity: A European Perspective.*, Bristol: Policy Press, 225–51.

Henwood, K. and Shirani, F. (2012) 'Researching the temporal', in H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf and K. J. Sher (eds.), *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Vol 2: Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Publications, 209–23.

Hills, J. (2015) *Good Times, Bad Times: The Welfare Myth of Them and Us*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Hood, A. and Waters, T. (2017) *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2017–18 To 2021–22*, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Immervoll, H. and Knotz, C. (2018) *How Demanding are Activation Requirements for Jobseekers?*, Bonn: IZA Institute for Labour Economics.

Knotz, C. M. (2018) 'A rising workfare state? Unemployment benefit conditionality in 21 OECD countries, 1980-2012', *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 34, 2, 91–108.

Larsen, F. and van Berkel, R. (2009) *The New Governance and Implementation of Labour Market Policies*, Copenhagen: DJOF.

Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills: Sage.

Manji, K. (2017) 'Social security reform and the surveillance state: exploring the operation of "hidden conditionality" in the reform of disability benefits since 2010', *Social Policy and Society*, 16, 2, 305–14.

Marston, G. and McDonald, C. (2008) 'Feeling motivated yet? Long-term unemployed people's perspectives on the implementation of workfare in Australia', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 43, 2, 255–69.

Mason, J. (2017) *Qualitative Researching: Third Edition*, London: SAGE Publications.

McIntosh, I. and Wright, S. (2018) 'Exploring what the notion of 'lived experience' offers for social policy analysis', *Journal of Social Policy*, doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279418000570.

McVey, E. (2018) 'Speech: The way forward: personalisation and digitalisation of benefits and support', 18 July, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-way-forward-personalisation-and-digitalisation-of-benefits-and-support [accessed 20.09.18].

Mead, L. M. (1986) *Beyond Entitlement*, New York: Free Press.

Mead, L. (1992) *The New Politics of Poverty*, New York: Basic Books.

Mills, C. W. (1940) 'Situated actions and vocabularies of motive', *American Sociological Review*, 5, 6, 904–13.

Murray, C. (1984) *Losing Ground*, New York: Basic Books.

Murray, C. (1990) *The Emerging British Underclass*, London: Institute of Economic Affairs.

Neale, B. and Hanna, E. (2012) 'The ethics of researching lives through time', in B. Neale and K. Henwood (eds.), *Timescapes Method Guide Series*, Leeds: Timescapes.

Noblit, G. W. and Hare, R. D. (1988) *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*, Vol. 11, London: Sage.

Nye, E., Melendez-Torres, G. J. and Bonell, C. (2016) 'Origins, methods, and advances in qualitative metasynthesis', *Review of Education*, 4, 1, 57–79.

Parker, L. and Northcott, D. (2016) 'Qualitative generalising in accounting research: concepts and strategies', *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, 29, 6, 1100–31.

Patrick, R. (2011) 'Disabling or enabling: the extension of work-related conditionality to disabled people', *Social Policy and Society*, 10, 3, 309–20.

Patrick, R. (2017) *For Whose Benefit? The Everyday Realities of Welfare Reform*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Payne, G. and Williams, M. (2005) 'Generalization in Qualitative Research', *Sociology*, 39, 2, 295–314.

Paz-Fuchs, A. (2008) *Welfare to Work: Conditional Rights in Social Policy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pritchard, K. (2012) 'Combining qualitative methods', in G. Symon and C. Cassell (eds.), *Qualitative Organizational Research*, London: SAGE, 132–48.

Reeve, K. (2017) 'Welfare conditionality, benefit sanctions and homelessness in the UK: ending the "something for nothing culture" or punishing the poor?', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 25, 1, 65–78.

Reeves, A. and Loopstra, R. (2017) '"Set up to fail"? How welfare conditionality undermines citizenship for vulnerable groups', *Social Policy and Society*, 16, 2, 327–38.

Royston, S. (2017) *Broken Benefits: What's Gone Wrong with Welfare Reform*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Selbourne, D. (1994) *The Principle Of Duty*, London: Sinclair Stevenson.

Serrano-Pascual, A. and Lars, M. (2007) *Reshaping Welfare States and Activation Regimes in Europe*, Bern: Peter Lang.

Smith, N. (2003) 'Cross-sectional profiling and longitudinal analysis: research notes on analysis in the longitudinal qualitative study, "Negotiating Transitions to Citizenship"', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6, 3, 273–77.

Snell, C., Bevan, M. and Thomson, H. (2015) 'Justice, fuel poverty and disabled people in England', *Energy Research and Social Science*, 10, 123–32.

Stack, C.B. (1997) 'Beyond what are given as givens: ethnography and critical policy studies', *Ethos*, 25, 5, 191–207.

Stewart, A. B. R. and Wright, S. (2018) *Final Findings: Jobseekers*, York, University of York.

Thorne, S. E. (2008) 'Meta-synthesis', in L. M. Given (ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, London: Sage.

van Berkel, R., de Graaf, W. and Sirovatka, T. (eds.), (2011) *The Governance of Active Welfare States in Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Watts, B., Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G. and Watkins, D. (2014) *Welfare Sanctions and Conditionality in the UK*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Watts, B. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2018) *Welfare Conditionality*, London: Routledge.

Whitworth, A. and Griggs, J. (2013) 'Lone parents and welfare-to-work conditionality: necessary, just, effective?', *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 7, 2, 124–40.

Whitworth, A. (2016) 'Neoliberal paternalism and paradoxical subjects: confusion and contradiction in UK activation policy', *Critical Social Policy*, 36, 4, 1–20.

Williams, M. (2000) 'Interpretivism and generalization', *Sociology*, 34, 2, 209–24.

Williams, R. (1961) *The Long Revolution*, London: Chatto & Windus.

Wilson, W. (2018) *Rough Sleeping (England)*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, London: House of Commons Library.

Wiggan, J. (2015) 'Reading active labour market politically: an autonomist analysis of Britain's Work Programme and Mandatory Work Activity', *Critical Social Policy*, 35, 3, 369–92.

Welfare Conditionality (2018) *Final Findings Report: Welfare Conditionality Project, 2013– 2018*, York: University of York.

Wright, S. (2016) 'Conceptualising the active welfare subject: welfare reform in discourse, policy and lived experience', *Policy and Politics*, 44, 2, 235–52.

Wright, S., Dwyer, P., Jones, K., Mcneill, J., Scullion, L. and Stewart, A. B. R. (2018) *Final Findings: Universal Credit*, York, University of York.