Targeting single mothers? Dynamics of contracting Australian employment services and activation policies at the street level

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Abstract

Activation reforms targeted at single parents simultaneously construct them as a legitimate target for activation policy and subject them to new obligations to engage in paid work or education/training. The social policy literature has established that the work of 'making-up' target groups occurs at the street level as well as in government legislation. The street level has become even more significant in recent years as there has been a shift towards establishing quasi-markets for the delivery of welfare-to-work programmes and organising these around the principles of performance pay and process flexibility. However, what is largely missing from the existing literature is an analysis of how contract conditions, together with individuals' activation obligations, shape how they are targeted at the street level. Drawing on a study conducted over eight years with agencies in Australia's quasi-market for employment services, this paper argues that the changes to the contracts for governing this market changed how Australian single mothers were targeted by employment services. Over time there was a shift away from making-up single-parent clients as a distinct, vulnerable target group and a shift towards viewing them in terms of risk categories described within the agencies' contracts.

Introduction

As in most Western jurisdictions, Australia has in recent decades subjected single parents to new activation policies. Activation reforms simultaneously construct single parents as a legitimate target group for activation policy (Raffass, 2017) and subject them to new obligations to engage in paid work or education/training. The social policy literature has established that this work of constructing single parents as a target group for activation occurs at the street level as well as in legislation (Altreiter and Leibetseder, 2015; Korteweg, 2006, 2003; Brodkin, 1997). The street level has become even more significant in recent years in Australia, and many other countries, as there has been a shift towards establishing quasi-markets for the delivery of welfare-to-work programmes (Finn, 2011) and organising these around new public-management principles of performance pay and process

flexibility (Jordon, 2017; Bennett, 2017; Cowling and Mitchell, 2003; Finn, 2011; Carter and Whitworth, 2015). In Australia this market was called the Job Network (JN) when it was created in 1998 and it was renamed Job Services Australia (JSA) in 2009, henceforth referred to as JSA/JN. A growing literature has focused on the experiences of agencies in these quasi markets, including their contracting experiences and changes over time (Bennett, 2017; Cowling and Mitchell, 2003; Finn, 2011; Carter and Whitworth, 2015). However, what is largely missing from the existing literature is analysis of how these agencies' contract conditions, together with individuals' activation obligations, shape how they are targeted at the street level. An analysis of the intersection of contract conditions and activation obligations is critical because, while legislated activation obligations shape how individuals are targeted, the discourses and actions of those charged with implementing policy are 'proscribed but not completely determined by the policies they implement' (Korteweg, 2003: 453). At the same time, agencies' contracts reward certain kinds of targeting and make others less profitable or financially viable.

To develop our understanding of how contract conditions and activation requirements shape how single parents are targeted, this article draws on a study conducted over eight years with agencies in Australia's quasi-market for employment services. These agencies delivered services to single parents receiving income support who were subject to activation requirements. Our approach extends on the work of social policy scholars working in critical and post-structuralist traditions who have sought to understand how individuals become, and are governed as, targets of public policy (Brady, 2011a; Henman, 2004; Whitworth, 2016). Informed by a growing body of work that uses ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic methods to understand the experience of governmentalities in everyday life, and how situated actors critically 'reflect on, account for, and represent existing practices of government of which they are a part' (Lippert and Brady, 2016: 273), we seek to understand how single parents were, to use Hacking's (1986) term, 'made up' and governed as target groups at the street level in the JSA/JN.

The paper begins by locating our conceptualisation of activation-as-targeting within a synthesis of the literature on social policy and targeting. We then describe the activation and targeting of Australian single parents before outlining the structure and evolution of Australia's quasi-market for welfare-to-work programmes, placing these reforms in an international context and going on to describe the study design. Next we present our two key findings on the targeting and governance of Australian single mothers in JN/JSA: 1) changes made to the contracts used to govern the JN/JSA altered how Australian single mothers were targeted by employment services. Following contract changes, there was a shift away from constructing single mothers as a distinct, vulnerable target group and a shift towards viewing them in terms of the risk categories described within

agencies' contracts; and 2) The financial upheaval generated by the government's new approach to re-tendering contracts appeared to increase agency staff's focus on the financial incentives within their contracts. Staff shifted from seeking to develop deep relationships with clients – so as to transform their 'welfare dependent' mindsets – to instead seeking to move clients rapidly into paid work through any possible means.

Conceptualising targeting in social policy

Activation entails a process of constructing some individuals as suitable targets for activation policy, and developing tools or technologies that enable them to be targeted. Targeting – singling out persons or groups of persons for distinctive treatment – has a long history in the liberal democratic state (Henman, 2004).

Existing critical and post-structuralist research has developed three key conclusions: firstly, target publics are not fixed or pre-existing but are actively constructed; secondly, the nature and impact of targeting is shaped by the moral politics surrounding the specific groups; and, finally, targeting is being extended and transformed by new governance technologies and discourses that emphasise and enable individualised, risk-based governance of subjects. We provide a synthesis of these ideas here and, in the process, outline our conceptualisation of targeting.

Firstly, these scholars have concluded that targeting is a process of subjectification whereby a series of discourses, rationalities and technologies coalesce to render certain individuals appropriate targets of state interventions. A key technology is classification: the development of matrices of categories and definitions and the fitment of persons into those categories (Hacking, 1986; Henman, 2004). As Hacking (1986: 161) argues, a process of subjectification then occurs whereby the categories that people are fitted into 'creates new ways for people to be'. Categories thus become the 'socially reinforced conceptualisation of self that informs action' (Korteweg, 2003: 447). Hacking (1986) refers to this process of fitting people into categories as 'making up people', an idea which he says is indebted to the work of Foucault. Foucauldian-inspired genealogical studies of Australia's income support system have revealed the significant work that has gone into creating single parents as a self-evident target group and replacing older target publics, such as widows (Brady, 2011b). These studies focus on the construction of target publics as a top-down process involving policy and programme designers' schemes and imaginings. As Korteweg (2003), whose work is also inspired by Foucauldian notions of subjectification, noted 15 years ago, less attention has been paid to how frontline welfare system staff are actively involved in subjectification, including how they reflect on and represent practices of government, and this gap in the literature remains (Lippert and Brady, 2016; Blaxland, 2013).

Secondly, some of these scholars have concluded that the tactical politics around the decision to target particular groups is shaped by their moral status (Altreiter and Leibetseder, 2015; Ingram and Schneider, 2015; Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Ingram and Schneider (1993, 2015) conclude that a range of factors (including the moral-political status of the target population and the electoral implications of targeting them) drive policymakers' targeting decisions, including the policy instruments they use. Welfare recipients often have a poor moral political status and are framed as 'undeserving', 'stupid', 'dishonest', and 'selfish' (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). However, some target groups, such as mothers and children, may have weak political power but positive social constructions, leading to complex and variable targeting processes for such ambiguously positioned subjects (Schneider and Ingram, 1993: 336). In recent years, welfare policies have become increasingly paternalistic and procedures for monitoring and documenting recipients' behaviour more intense (Ingram and Schneier, 2015). Schneider and Ingram (1993) concede that the way policy is enacted will depend on the degree to which street-level actors agree with how a group is targeted, and recent literature (Altreiter and Leibetseder, 2015) has applied their framework to analyse how un/deservingness is constructed at the street level. This approach is consistent with Brodkin's (2013) argument that street-level organisations are mediators of welfare state politics and processes.

Thirdly, targeting has been transformed and extended in recent decades via the introduction of new technologies, which increasingly facilitate individualised, risk-based governance (Henman 2004; Henman and Dean, 2010), in part through the embedding of authority in computer algorithms (Henman and Dean, 2010). In the context of unemployment services, new computerised assessment systems with complex algorithms, which are designed to weigh multifarious potential risk factors and produce an aggregate profile of disadvantage, guide service providers' decisions about the allocation of assistance resources. When considered in relation to clients of employment services, such categorised individuals are less likely to receive homogenous service packages or activation requirements but are more likely to be targeted as bearers of socially-defined risks, not as unique persons (Henman, 2004). Street-level research on welfare bureaucracies (Dubois, 2010) contends that such tools function as mechanisms of coercion. The expansion of computerised assessment may also shape street-level bureaucrats' engagement with clients by displacing technical expertise and discretionary judgement, as these bureaucrats have little input into the administrative systems and the judgements they generate (Henman and Dean, 2010). Bureaucrats' engagement with clients may become less personalised as these systems do not capture detailed client information that is unamenable to quantitative categorisation (Henman and Dean, 2010). However, while there is a growing body of work on the new quasi-markets for delivering welfare programmes; research has not explicitly examined how the technologies for managing these

quasi-markets, including contracts and complex algorithms, shapes how clients are targeted and governed at the street level.

Research thus finds that, while targeting has long been core to welfare policies and practices, it is also evolving and intensifying in the context of post-welfarism, and little research has examined how technologies for governing quasi-markets in employment services shape the targeting and governance of individuals subjected to activation policies.

Activation and targeting of Australian single parents

Targeting of single parents within the JN is shaped by the official activation policies they are subject to. Following a broader international trend, Australian single parents in receipt of income support have been the target of activation programmes since the 1980s, with the introduction of the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) programme in 1989 to assist single parents to voluntarily re-enter work through the provision of specialist advisors and childcare supports (Brady, 2011a). As in the UK, US, Canada and elsewhere in the late 1990s, activation policies shifted from supporting voluntary participation in paid work to emphasising the problem of welfare dependency. As in the UK, while the Australian government stressed that 'dependency' was a problem for all welfare beneficiaries, they characterised the 'dependency' of parents as particularly urgent because of the alleged dangers of bequeathing a 'dependency mentality' to their children (Brady, 2011a; Lewis, 1997). Single parents in receipt of income support were characterised as having maladaptive psychologies, evident in a supposed lack of self-esteem, and unrealistic expectations about the kinds of work they could gain (Brady, 2011a). In 2003, JET was supplemented by the new compulsory Centrelink Personal Adviser (PA) programme, which employed proto-professional advisors to assist clients with problems associated with 'maladaptive psychologies' by providing a sympathetic ear and encouragement to plan for the future (Brady, 2011a). Similar to the 2001 UK PA programme, this positioned single parents as dependent and vulnerable (Haux, 2012), and chained to a system that encouraged 'passive dependency' (Department of Social Security, 1998: 2, 9, 19).

Dependency discourse is complex, multifaceted and linked to diverse policy solutions. While one face of dependency discourse is linked with discourses of pastoral care, and positions single mothers in receipt of income support as vulnerable, another is linked to non-liberal discourses and positions them as having maladaptive dispositions that pose a threat to the social fabric (Lewis, 1997). The latter face of dependency discourse promotes a 'tough love' approach to activation involving compulsory paid work and/or training/education obligations and cuts to payment levels. Corresponding with the international shift towards more punitive activation programmes, this 'tough love' variant motivated Australia's 2005 Welfare to Work (WTW) budget measures. The 2005

WTW reforms sought to make single mothers into new category members. They were inscribed as either welfare dependent or at risk of being so. Depending on the age of their child, they were further categorised as required to seek part-time paid work (average 30 hours per fortnight) or not required to do so. Paralleling the international shift towards cutting enabling activation programmes (skills training, childcare provision), the JET and PA programmes[1] were dismantled (Raffass, 2017). Primary carer parents who were categorised as required to work, but failed to engage in at least 30 hours per fortnight of employment, were henceforth referred to the JN/JSA, which previously had overwhelmingly only assisted the unemployed who were not primary carers. Furthermore, parents with school-age children who claimed income support after 2006 were moved to the lower-rate Newstart payment.[2]

Overview of Australia's contractualised employment system

It is to the structure and evolution of Australia's JN/JSA that we now turn. Much has been made in the international literature of Australia's pioneering initiative in creating the JN and outsourcing to it the provision of government-funded employment assistance for the unemployed (Struyven and Steurs, 2005; McDonald and Marston, 2008). The JN was inspired by new public-management principles of devolving decision making to the frontline, while holding service agencies accountable for outcomes (Cowling and Mitchell, 2003). Using arguments that would later be used to justify reforms in the UK, the Australian government promoted the quasi-market on the grounds that increased front-line discretion and market incentives would increase service delivery innovation and creativity, resulting in activation programmes more appropriately targeting individuals' needs (Struyven and Steurs, 2005; McDonald and Marston, 2008; Bennett, 2017; Jordon, 2017).

To create the quasi-market, the Government removed the separation between the benefits office (Department of Social Security – DSS) and the labour exchange (Commonwealth Employment Service – CES) and merged them into one organisation called *Centrelink*. The employment assistance and job-matching services delivered by the CES were contracted out to the new JN.
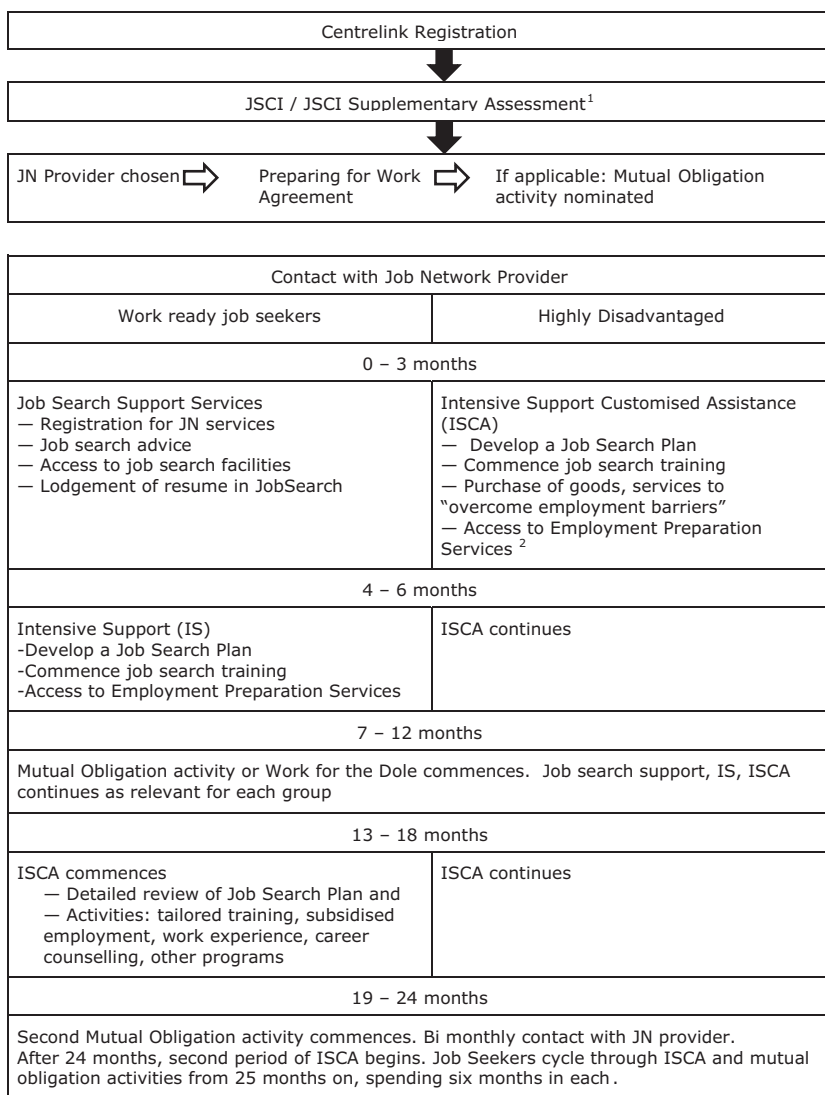
The JN offered different levels of assistance, ranging from finding job vacancies to job training to more customised assistance. To determine the level of service an individual would receive, the government adopted a combination of risk and duration-based targeting. The risk-based approach was implemented by having Centrelink staff assess individuals using a computerised, algorithmic Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), designed to distinguish between 'work ready' and 'disadvantaged' jobseekers (DEWR, 2002: 27–8). The jobseekers' duration of unemployment was determined by the length of time they had been in receipt of the Newstart payment. The UK government followed the Australian reforms a few years later (in 2001) by creating Jobcentre Plus, which combined

the employment office and benefits agency, and a new central government department called Department for Work and Pensions to manage contracts with the new Jobs Centre Plus and non-state organisations who would deliver welfare-to-work programmes and services (Bennett, 2017). However, the UK has taken a different approach to determining disadvantage by using payment claimed, rather than individual risk (Carter and Whitworth, 2015).

Underscoring Bennett's (2017: 133) recent argument that quasi-markets for employment services are not static, it is essential to point out that the JN/JSA has been repeatedly reformed since the first Employment Services Contract 1 (ESC1, May 1998 to February 2000). Subsequent contract rounds have been as follows: ESC2 February 2000 to June 2003 (Considine *et al.*, 2011); ESC3 – Stage One mid-2003 to mid-2006; ESC3 – Stage Two mid-2006 to mid-2009; and JSA mid-2009 to mid-2015 (covering JS Deed 2009–2012 and JS Deed 2012–2015)).

Similar to the experience in the UK (Bennett, 2017), over the period 1998–2009 there was a dramatic consolidation of providers, with the number of core providers falling from 306 to 99 and very few new providers entering the system (Finn, 2011). The substantial commencement fee that agencies were given under the first two contracts (ESC1 and 2) encouraged them to 'park' the hard-to-help while using the resources saved to 'cream' by assisting the easy-to-help (Thomas, 2007). As occurred internationally (Struyven and Steurs, 2005; Carter and Whitworth, 2015), a key aim of subsequent contract reform was to discourage this behaviour (DEEWR, 2007). Thus, under ESC3 (Stage One), commencement fees were dropped to discourage 'creaming', as also occurred with the UK work programme in 2014 (Carter and Whitworth, 2015). To discourage 'parking', outcome fees for disadvantaged jobseekers were increased and providers were given new Employment Pathways Funds (EPF), which they could use to purchase goods and services to assist jobseekers to gain employment, but could not retain as profit (DEEWR, 2007).

Given the timing of our fieldwork (2007 and 2013/15), the remainder of our review of the JN/JSA systems focuses on ESC3 (Stage Two) and JSA (particularly JS Deed 2012–2015). ESC3 Stage 2 (2006-2009) (see Figure 1) coincided with the introduction of the 2005 WTW reforms described in the previous section. The movement of primary carer parents into the JN/JSA coincided with a complex funding shift for employment service agencies. On the one hand, the government provided significant new funds ($227 million) for the expected 84,000 new parent places; including $266 million for additional childcare places to support parents required to work, and an allocation of $47 million for an *Employment Preparation Programme*, intended to provide parents and other disadvantaged groups, with 'flexible' and 'individually tailored' pre-employment services (Australian Government, 2005). On the other hand, the government cut around half a billion AUD from the JN/JSA on the grounds that labour market conditions were improving. This mismatch between a small injection of funds

Centrelink Registration

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JSCI / JSCI Supplementary Assessment[1]

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JN Provider chosen ⇒	Preparing for Work Agreement ⇒	If applicable: Mutual Obligation activity nominated

Contact with Job Network Provider	
Work ready job seekers	Highly Disadvantaged
0 – 3 months	
Job Search Support Services — Registration for JN services — Job search advice — Access to job search facilities — Lodgement of resume in JobSearch	Intensive Support Customised Assistance (ISCA) — Develop a Job Search Plan — Commence job search training — Purchase of goods, services to "overcome employment barriers" — Access to Employment Preparation Services[2]
4 – 6 months	
Intensive Support (IS) -Develop a Job Search Plan -Commence job search training -Access to Employment Preparation Services	ISCA continues
7 – 12 months	
Mutual Obligation activity or Work for the Dole commences. Job search support, IS, ISCA continues as relevant for each group	
13 – 18 months	
ISCA commences — Detailed review of Job Search Plan and — Activities: tailored training, subsidised employment, work experience, career counselling, other programs	ISCA continues
19 – 24 months	
Second Mutual Obligation activity commences. Bi monthly contact with JN provider. After 24 months, second period of ISCA begins. Job Seekers cycle through ISCA and mutual obligation activities from 25 months on, spending six months in each.	

[1] Completed by seekers with "severe or multiple employment barriers". May be referred to support services outside of the JN

[2] Tailored services for parents, carers, mature aged jobseekers

Figure 1 Job seeker engagement pathway under the ESC3 contracts
Note: Drawn from DEEWR, 2009; ANAO, 2005: 35–37; Australian Government, 2005: 142

for new clients but less general funding generated substantial criticism from JN providers (Thomas, 2007).

Despite the radical nature of this shift there is little research into how JN/JSA providers have targeted their single-parent clients. Two recent studies, Grahame

and Marston (2012) and McArthur *et al.* (2013), working in the tradition of presenting income support claimant's accounts of service encounters, report on single mothers' experiences of the overall welfare service delivery system (JN/JSA and Centrelink) but do not systematically analyse their interactions with the JN/JSA. While providing general insights into parents' experiences of being made targets for activation, they reveal little about how providers' JN/JSA contracts shaped their targeting of single parents, including the dynamics of this over time. Findings from the tranche one interviews for this study (Brady, 2011b), suggested that, while some providers embraced the 'tough love' approach to activation, most embraced a pastoral care variant of dependency discourse and sought to provide caring support.

The Rudd Labor government, elected in 2007, replaced the JN with the JSA (in mid-2009) in light of the criticisms of the former system. Service providers were encouraged to target the most disadvantaged and to widen the range of employment assistance sub-programmes. JSA continued the dramatic consolidation of providers but also heralded new disruption. With the new JSA, even providers who retained their contracts experienced massive disruption, with approximately half the total JN caseload having to move geographically or change service provider. Even providers who retained a similar business share estimated the transition to JSA cost them millions (Finn, 2011:17). A review into the JSA contracting process raised many criticisms, arguing insufficient weight was given to prior performance, resulting in successful JN performers not having their contracts renewed (Senate, 2009: 14) and many new agencies struggling to remain viable (Finn, 2011). As we will elaborate below, it appears that these harsh new financial realities shaped service providers' focus on targeting their efforts at clients who attracted the highest outcome payments.

The JSA contract retained the use of different fee levels, according to jobseekers' disadvantage level and length of unemployment, with funds in the EPFs, Service Fees and various Outcome/Placement fees generally increasing across the Streams. However, the JSA contract shifted away from the assumption that jobseekers' needs were positively correlated with the duration of their income support receipt. Instead of increasing the service level the client was allocated when they remained in receipt of an income support payment for longer than 3 or 12 months (see Figure 1); the JSA model used the initial JSCI assessment to place a client for a full 12 months, with reassessments occurring after this period (see Figure 2) (DEEWR 2009: 6–7).[3] JN's three levels were also replaced with four 'streams' ranging from 'work ready' (Stream One) to various levels of disadvantage (Streams Two through Four) (see Figure 2). As we elaborate below, this shift to keeping clients in the same category for 12 months appeared to have increased the degree to which service providers associated specific clients with a stream.
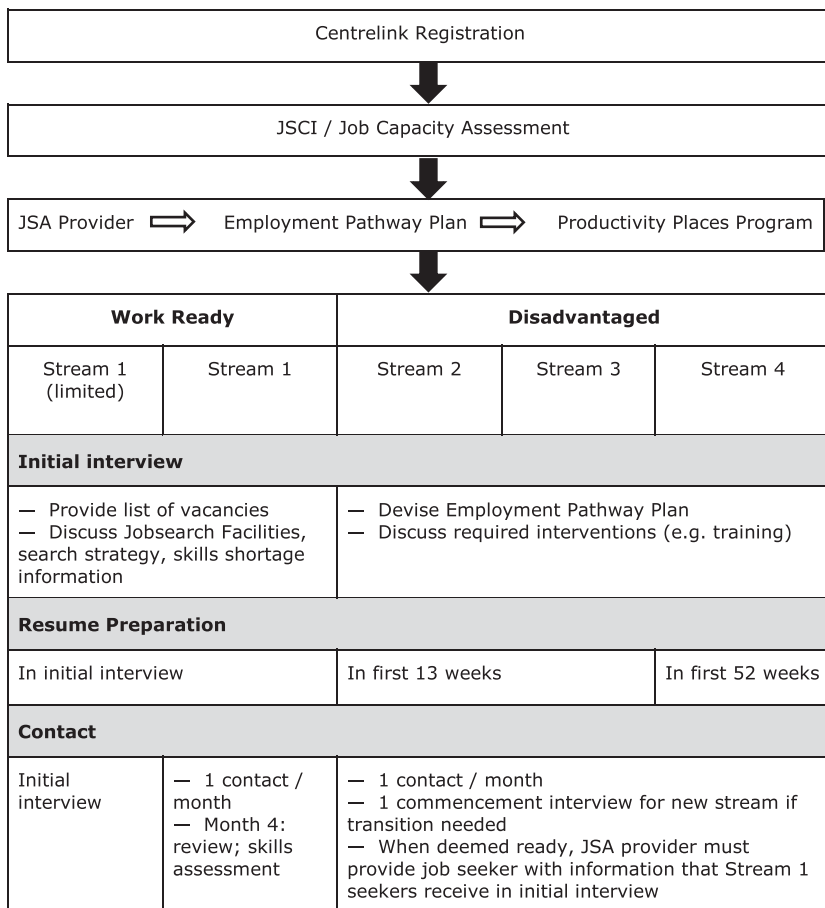
Centrelink Registration

⬇

JSCI / Job Capacity Assessment

⬇

JSA Provider ⟹ Employment Pathway Plan ⟹ Productivity Places Program

⬇

Work Ready		Disadvantaged		
Stream 1 (limited)	Stream 1	Stream 2	Stream 3	Stream 4
Initial interview				
— Provide list of vacancies — Discuss Jobsearch Facilities, search strategy, skills shortage information		— Devise Employment Pathway Plan — Discuss required interventions (e.g. training)		
Resume Preparation				
In initial interview		In first 13 weeks		In first 52 weeks
Contact				
Initial interview	— 1 contact / month — Month 4: review; skills assessment	— 1 contact / month — 1 commencement interview for new stream if transition needed — When deemed ready, JSA provider must provide job seeker with information that Stream 1 seekers receive in initial interview		

Figure 2 Job seeker engagement pathway with JSA 2012 – 2015
Note: Adapted from DEEWR, 2009; DEEWR, 2012.

The Study

Our study used quasi-ethnographic methods to understand how JN/JSA providers target single parents. While ethnography is commonly associated with participant observation, our approach involved less observation – though we did spend full days at the agencies – and more a focus on what Forsey (2010: 567) has defined as 'engaged listening', which meant conducting the interviews 'with an ethnographic imaginary'. Forsey (2010: 567) defines 'ethnographic imaginary' as 'the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces that underwrite the socially patterned behaviours of all human beings and the meanings people attach to these conditions and forces'.

We carried out two tranches of semi-structured interviews with JN/JSA staff working in Perth, Western Australia. The Perth labour market poses challenges

for women with children as it is dominated by the mining industry and has few industries where primary carer parents are typically employed. The first tranche of interviews were carried out in 2007, under the ESC3 Stage 2 contract and immediately following the implementation of WTW. Agencies were contacted directly using the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) list of JN providers. Nineteen JN staff across nine agencies agreed to participate. Interview questions for both tranches addressed providers' caseloads, their programmes' aims for parents (including use of special programmes for this target group) and their assumptions about parenting clients. They also addressed how providers sought to use various governmental technologies (including assessment tools, IT systems, service encounters and training) to assist this group and how this shaped how JSA staff addressed clients as subjects of activation. In late 2013, we attempted to conduct follow-up interviews with the same agencies but, as outlined earlier in the paper, there had been dramatic upheaval following the mid-2009 commencement of JSA and we were only able to conduct interviews with the two agencies that had gained JSA contracts. Recruitment of seven new agencies lengthened the time period for the second tranche, and these interviews were completed just before the end of JSA Deed 2012–2015.

All interviews were transcribed professionally and imported into NVivo for systematic coding. Our concern was with understanding how the Australian Government's target group of single parents with a school-age child were 'made up' as category members at the street level, and how this changed across the two tranches of interviews. More specifically, this involved attending to: 1) how staff critically reflected on the governmental rationalities that underpinned their actions; 2) their accounts of how governmental technologies shaped their actions; and 3) the forms of subjectification that occurred as part of agencies' efforts to shape single parents' conduct. Reading and re-reading the coded material, we established that two key shifts had occurred over time.

Targeting and governance of single mothers in Australia's contractualised employment system

Firstly, while staff in the two years immediately following WTW overwhelmingly viewed single mothers as being part of a vulnerable group, they shifted following the new JSA contract to describing them in terms of their official risk profile or 'stream'. Secondly, service encounters during this eight-year period were re-purposed to move clients quickly into paid work, rather than to develop deep relationships with clients to address their 'welfare dependent' mindsets.

From vulnerable mothers to risky individuals in the targeting process

'Making up' single mothers involves sorting them into categories, while governing them involves seeking to shape their conduct in a way that is consistent

with the categories in which they have been placed. As signaled earlier, the WTW legislation categorised single mothers as individuals with welfare-dependent mentalities (Raffass, 2017), who had become psychologically incapable of viewing themselves as workers, rather than as people without workforce skills or with other barriers, and promoted a 'tough love' approach to activation. Our first tranche of interviews revealed that only two agencies embraced the government's 'tough love' punitive rhetoric. This alignment with the government's position was evident in the ways they ignored the workforce participation barriers faced by primary carer parents and asserted that, in the words of a programme manager Amy, if they were 'in receipt of government benefits that they should be contributing in some way to the community'. Staff in these agencies viewed mothers' concerns that they lacked marketable skills as evidence of a dependent mentality and sought to counter this mindset by asking mothers to identify the skills, such as cook, cleaner or driver, that they had developed through their mothering role. As one Job Search Trainer in the JSA, Lilly, explained:

Also identifying [workforce] skills that you have but you don't necessarily think are work related. So it's about changing their way of thinking, that you've been at home, so what are those technical skills that you have picked up from home that we could now move into a workplace scenario . . . it is just breaking down barriers when it comes to parents, more so than people who have just been out of work for a little while.

The message was that as stay-at-home mothers, they had learned skills that were easy to transfer to paid work if they simply changed their mindset.

Staff in the other seven agencies rejected this punitive discourse by asserting that single parents were psychologically vulnerable. They described their role as caring confidants and mentors, a discursive position that placed them closer to the discourses around the earlier Personal Adviser programme than to WTW. This caring role was particularly evident in the responses of staff in the two agencies that had developed dedicated programmes for single-parent clients (seven of the nine had not). These programmes included special days with group sessions that provided these clients with opportunities to share their fears about returning to the workforce and to receive moral support. At one of these agencies, the manager Rose explained that their programmes sought to provide thoughtful, caring support, given parents' psychological vulnerability:

What we find though, a lot of these people come in with a lot of anxiety, issues of anxiety, self-esteem, lacking confidence. Those are the major areas. So what we have done, we have organised a workshop for them. Initially anybody who comes in as a single mother we put them in this workshop. It is a three-day workshop, we tailor it to time it for after they have sent the kids to school. Roughly for 10 o'clock in the morning to about 1:30. We make them feel valued, we put on a nice morning tea for them . . . we make sure we go the extra mile. We put flowers and coffee, nice coffee and we put the [glasses out there], just to make them feel cared for and valued.

Although this emphasis on personal, caring touches was unique to these two agencies, the five other agencies without dedicated programmes for single

parents similarly foregrounded the problem of psychological vulnerabilities. When asked to explain how their agency assisted their primary carer clients, one manager Jane explained, 'Well mainly our programmes centre around confidence and motivation building', elaborating that staff usually referred clients to a programme on goal setting, challenges and fears, which a psychologist was employed to deliver.

JN staff sought to get single-parent clients to embrace the mindset of, in the words of Rose, 'successful single mothers who have made their transformation'. Rose explained that, for her single-parent programme, she sought to get women who had transformed themselves to come as guest speakers and to locate inspirational television programmes about single parents who had transformed themselves. One recent speaker had gone from being on income support to becoming the CEO of her own global company. Having this CEO share her experience with clients was powerful because 'these parents identify with her. And it was such a wonderful experience to watch how these women suddenly could see the hope in them, the empowerment in them'.

In tranche two interviews, we again asked what providers' programmes sought to achieve for single-parent clients. Returning to the distinction drawn in section one – between targeting that relies on normative discourses (which achieve their political and policy effect by relying on moral problematisations of sub-populations), and targeting that relies on risk-based technologies (which facilitate differentiated treatment on the basis of individualised risk profiles) – there was a clear shift to targeting which relies on the latter. As described earlier, since its introduction in 1998, the JN has been governed through the use of complex contract arrangements; including sophisticated algorithms for assessing clients' disadvantage and sorting them into different assistance pathways to encourage agencies to focus their efforts on the most disadvantaged and achieve sustainable employment outcomes for all clients. While such streaming has always played an important role in JN/JSA processes, including how clients are made up at the street level, over the course of the two tranches it assumed a more prominent role. This appeared to be because the intense financial pressures generated by reforms to the JN (outlined in section on JN/JSA reforms) made agencies more responsive to the incentives embedded within contracts.

When we asked JSA staff in tranche two interviews about the programmes they offered their single-parent clients, they began by describing the JSA streams and the financial incentives attached to them, rather than these clients' psychological characteristics or needs as they had in tranche one. One manager, James, responded:

[The programme] is different per client I guess based on their stream of benefits so I'll go into two categories here. So the lower the stream, generally they're easier to place or they generally find their own work. So this would be a Stream 1 and 2 client.

Similarly, Julia, an agency manager who had worked in the JN/JSA for 12 years, initially told us that a client's programme was based on the JSCI score and the individual barriers the assessment had identified. She then corrected herself, arguing:

it's individual based, if you ask me, or streams based. Like I said, we've got classifications for our job [seekers], A, B, C. Are they job ready? They're not job ready.

One manager, Tim, rejected the idea that their agency had programmes for clients, arguing:

We don't have actually a programme, we follow [the government's] instructions and all the clients have to follow [Centrelink/ Department of Human Services, DHS] requirements because when you're on benefits . . . you have to meet your requirements . . .

Having explained how the client's activation obligations, and the service pathway, shaped the service they received, he quickly moved to explain how the agency's contract requirements and the financial incentives embedded within them shaped their engagement with clients:

Tim: We assist them to get employment . . . [all our activities] have to be towards employment. All our funding is towards employment. Are you familiar with the Stream Services?

Interviewer: The one, two, three and four?

Tim: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, somewhat. The fourth is the most high-need.

Tim: Yes and it's 40 per cent of our funding . . . [the government] pay more – we give more assistance to Stream 4 than Stream 1. If a single parent is in Stream 1 it will be less assistance to him.

These accounts do not simply reveal how services are delivered to pre-existing groups, but, more importantly, how JN clients are categorised or 'made up' as targets. Over the course of our study, the category of vulnerable single parents that was so prominent in earlier interviews largely disappeared and, in its place, were new risk categories. The new focus on streams appeared to be partly due to harsher financial realities but also due to the new JSA contract relying more heavily on the JSCI to stream clients, as opposed to earlier contracts that used duration in the service together with the JSCI. This change perhaps allowed staff to permanently categorise particular clients into a stream, thereby sharpening the identification of particular clients with a specific stream.

Repurposing the service encounter: from targeted transformation to pragmatic service adaptation

A recurring theme within much official welfare-to-work documentation is the idea that meetings between clients and street-level administrators can have

a transformative effect on the lives of the former (Blaxland, 2013). As Blaxland (2013) has argued, when staff seek to use these encounters to transform clients they must first 'hail' that client to recognise themselves as a particular kind of subject (e.g. a person with a problematic mindset). Such encounters have thus become a key site where single parents are 'made up' as particular kinds of targets. In order to understand whether or not staff viewed such service encounters as having a potentially transformative role and, if so what it was, we asked staff about the aims of their meetings with clients and the ideal role they envisaged for themselves and clients. In tranche one interviews, staff tended to argue that the aim of such meetings was to develop a real connection with clients, not simply superficial rapport, as they believed this was an essential precursor to the client revealing their barriers, fears and ways of thinking, and consenting to being mentored by JN staff through a process of transformation. As the programme manager, Amy, in tranche one explained:

Amy: I think we are working with people to effect change and that we can't force people to change, so I think that the consultant is really integral to the success of the client. And we do form a real connection with the client.

Interviewer: So it is connection?

Amy: I always make a point of introducing myself to clients and trying to get to know what they are doing, what they want to do, how we are helping the … I mean we know what our boundaries are but I think we have to form a relationship. (Emphasis added)

While the goal was always securing work for the client, the Job Search Trainer Lilly, who viewed herself as ideally playing a mentor role with her client, explained:

If you don't build that trust and you don't build that rapport with your client you're never going to get anywhere, they're never going to open up to you. You're never going to find out … if there are any barriers, what they are and how you can address them together, and if you don't get to know your clients you're not going to get to know for one, what they want to do, for two, what their lifestyles are, where their stressors are.

As Lilly elaborated, the clients came to her because they wanted to gain paid employment and her role was to be 'somebody who is going to guide and mentor them to where they want to be … an honest open relationship will hopefully get us there'.

This vision of changing clients' attitudes through developing a genuine relationship based on an intimacy developed over time had largely disappeared by the time of the tranche two interviews. While JSA staff continued to assert the importance of the relationship, this was not the kind of deep mentoring relationship that many JSA staff described in the earlier interviews. Building immediate rapport was instead stressed as a critical task in order to quickly understand immediate barriers to an 'employment outcome'. Within the service

encounter clients were 'made up' less as individuals with welfare-dependent mindsets, and more as rational individuals who sought to find paid work and had practical barriers that prevented them from doing so. Efforts to transform clients' mindsets took a backseat to the need to rapidly get clients to mention pressing practical issues preventing them from gaining paid work, as articulated in the following exchange with the JSA agency manager James:

Interviewer: Can you comment on how important the nature of the relationship is between the advisor and the client in your service?

James: Well [the relationship is] very important. If there is no relationship or rapport between the two, then the clients aren't going to open up about anything that's impacting on them going for a [job] interview. You experience that so often. You just wish that the clients would open up . . . I do a little bit of that work too in sending off resumes to the employers on behalf of our clients. You send the resume with all good faith and the client has said yes . . . I'm happy to be referred for this job . . . then they don't turn up.

Thus rather than slowly develop a deep intimacy with clients in order to transform their long-term attitudes, James instead sought to develop immediate rapport so as to understand his client's immediate practical issues:

Then you're like, 'why haven't they turned up [to a job interview we arranged for them]?' It's because I didn't have petrol this week, because my son had to go to the doctor and this and that. Again whose fault is it? It's probably no one's, but . . . it's probably ours because we should have provided that support network prior to them going . . . Like hey, do you need fuel? . . . Or do you need – have you taken into account childcare for that day for the interview or something like this.

Face-to-face service encounters were thus a key site that reinforced the new ways that JN/JSA staff sought to 'make up' single-parent clients. Not only did these encounters reinforce the new categorisation of single-parent clients into one of the 'streams', these encounters also increasingly categorised single-parent clients as rational actors who responded to incentives and assistance with barriers, rather than as vulnerable individuals.

Conclusion

A growing literature has recognised the importance of researching the quasi-markets that increasingly provide activation services that were formerly directly provided by governments (Bennett, 2017; Carter and Whitworth, 2015; Considine et al., 2011). Additionally, the social policy literature has increasingly sought to understand how individuals subjected to activation policies are 'made up' as activation targets (variously conceptualised) (Altreiter and Leibetseder, 2015; Blaxland, 2013; Jordon, 2017). However, neither body of literature has systematically analysed the ways quasi-market governance shapes the targeting of clients. For example, while Jordon's (2017) analysis – of how staff in UK

Work Programme centres target clients – notes that these staff are employed by agencies who are contracted to the government in a target-driven role, he does not examine how the contracts themselves shape how staff administer welfare to work programmes.

The analysis presented here suggested the importance of devoting more careful attention to quasi-market contracts and governance technologies (such as interviews and risk streaming) when seeking to understand how employment agency clients are made targets of activation policies. Methodologically it speaks to the benefits of seeking to understand staff working in these agencies as situated actors who critically reflect on, and can account for, the practices of government they are a part of rather than focusing primarily on the discourses they transmit. Across the two tranches of interviews staff were equally able to account for the practices of government they were a part of. But, following the turmoil associated with the JSA contract and in the context of an increasingly tough financial environment, they were substantially less willing to take a critical stance on the government's activation policy.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Jobs, Education and Training advisors and Personal Advisors.
2 Eight years later the 'grandfather' clause was removed and the work requirements were extended to those who claimed payment prior to 2006 (an additional 65,000 single parents).
3 However, reflecting the higher disadvantage of Stream 4 clients, they can remain in S4 for 18 months.

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