

Social Security Reform and the Surveillance State: Exploring the Operation of ‘Hidden Conditionality’ in the Reform of Disability Benefits Since 2010

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The application of formal conditionality to address ‘dependence’ on social security has been an important trend since the 1990s. Reforms between 2010 and 2015 saw a renewed interest in this approach. This article will focus on conditionality in disability benefits in that period. It will present findings from a qualitative study of twenty-three disabled people living in the central-belt of Scotland, exploring the operation of surveillance as a form of ‘hidden conditionality’. It will find that this had a significant impact on participants’ daily lives, affecting who they interacted with, and what activities they felt they could take part in. The implications of this for disabled people’s ability to realise equal citizenship will be examined.

Keywords: Social security, disability, conditionality, surveillance.

Introduction

The expansion of conditionality has been an important trend in UK social security reforms since the 1990s, and its application to benefits for sick and disabled people is well documented in the literature (Patrick, 2011a, 2011b; Wright, 2012; Patrick, 2015). This article contributes to these debates with a focus on the emergence of surveillance and self-surveillance as a form of ‘hidden conditionality’. Based on interviews with twenty-three disabled people living in the central-belt of Scotland between Autumn 2013 and Summer 2014, it will explore the operation of ‘hidden conditionality’ and its impact on disability benefit claimants since 2010. In particular it will focus on the ways in which expectations around how benefit recipients *should* behave have been internalised as a form of self-surveillance. This was evident in assessments for eligibility, but was also mediated by increased stigmatisation of the joint status of disability and benefit claiming. Behavioural narratives were prevalent in official discourses around social security reform, but were also increasingly normalised by debates in the mainstream media as well as by responses of fellow citizens. This resulted in a growing sense of resentment and even vindictiveness (Young, 2003) against people in receipt of disability benefits.

The article will begin by outlining some of the debates surrounding citizenship, dependency and the reform of disability benefits, before examining the role of surveillance in conditional benefit systems. It will then briefly outline the methods employed in the research. Finally, it will explore the experience of participants living under ‘hidden conditionality’ and surveillance. It will find that this was having a significant impact, affecting who they interacted with and what activities they felt they could take part in.

The article will argue that this form of conditionality has created a mismatch between the rights and obligations of citizenship, preventing disabled people from participating in society on an equal basis.

Dependency, conditionality and disability citizenship

Discourses concerned with the need to tackle dependency through the application of conditionality are based on a particular conception of 'active citizenship' (Dwyer, 2010). Dwyer (2010) discusses two theoretical underpinnings of these ideas. The first, emanating from a neo-liberal perspective, is based on the view that social citizenship rights introduced since 1945 have created perverse incentives leading individuals to act not as independent agents within the market, but as dependants on the state. These ideas have gained prominence through the work of American conservatives such as Charles Murray (1994) and Lawrence Mead (1997) who advocated measures to encourage or compel participation in the labour market either through reducing eligibility to benefits, or attaching conditions to their receipt. Embodied in so-called 'workfare' approaches (Wiggan, 2012), benefit recipients are increasingly expected to fulfil certain conditions, such as providing evidence that they are actively seeking work, or participating in work schemes, in return for receiving benefits. Failure to comply with these expectations can lead to sanctions, including the stoppage of benefit payments.

The introduction of conditionality has also been influenced by communitarian approaches to citizenship, which prioritise the fulfilment of citizenship obligations before being able to enjoy the attendant rights (Lister, 2003; Dwyer, 2010). This conception was influential in policies adopted by the Labour Government of 1997–2010 (Lister, 2003). Reforms to disability benefits such as Incapacity Benefit (IB) involved restricting eligibility through new medical testing and the introduction of conditional elements such as work-focused interviews (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012).

The place of disabled people within mainstream understandings of citizenship and debates around the provision of income transfers have been the matter of some debate. Stone (1984) has argued that disability emerged historically as a category to identify those legitimately excused from the obligations of participating in the labour market. However, in being excused from these obligations, disabled people were expected to give up claims to citizenship. As a result, disability developed as a status located outside the bounds of citizenship in a form of 'stigmatised social privilege' (Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012: 199). Since the 1960s, the Disabled People's Movement has called for the inclusion of disabled people as full citizens, through the articulation of the social model of disability (Barnes, 2012). Disability is created by the failure of society to consider the needs of disabled people, in itself a denial of citizenship (Dwyer, 2010).

The increasing application of conditionality in the awarding of disability benefits has been the subject of considerable debate. Concerns have been raised that policies are based on unfounded assumptions that claimants act out of self-interest to maximise the amount of benefits they can claim (Wright, 2012). Beatty and Fothergill (2011) have argued that many historic IB claimants have faced significant labour market disadvantage in addition to experiencing barriers arising from impairment or long-term health problems. Disabled people also face multiple barriers to participation in paid work (Morris, 2005). Removing benefits or reducing their value will therefore make it harder for disabled people to meet their citizenship obligations. The priority given to work as the major

obligation of citizenship also serves to undermine other contributions, for example through volunteering (Barnes and Mercer, 2005).

Conditionality and the Coalition

The Coalition Government of 2010–15 came to power emphasising the need to reform social security in order to tackle cultures of dependency (Wiggan, 2012) and to reduce the structural deficit (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). Their approach to tackling dependency was twofold: firstly reducing eligibility; and secondly incentivising or even compelling return to work. Reforms affecting disabled people have centred on changes to two key benefits: IB and the Disability Living Allowance (DLA). The reform of IB was initiated by the Labour Government of 1997–2010, but the increased focus on conditionality was supported by the new Coalition, who oversaw the reassessment of most existing claimants (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012). An income replacement benefit, IB had been paid to individuals who were unable to participate in work due to sickness or disability (Burchardt, 1999). The impetus for reform of this particular benefit has been the subject of some debate. Roulstone and Prideaux (2012) have argued that the need for change derived from a crisis of legitimacy due to allegations that it was prone to fraud and had been used politically to disguise high levels of unemployment. Other perspectives however have suggested reform was part of a wider neo-liberal project to increase supply of labour (Grover and Piggot, 2005). IB was replaced by the Employment Support Allowance (ESA) from 2008. The new benefit is available in two categories, the Support Group and the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG). Eligibility is determined through ‘independent’ medical assessment in a continuation of the trend towards reliance on medical testing. However, the ability of the system to adequately assess fitness to work has been the matter of some debate (Baumberg *et al.*, 2015). Those in the WRAG are subject to conditionality and expected to undertake activities that will bring them closer to the labour market. Failure to meet these conditions can result in the loss of benefits through sanctions.

The reform of DLA has followed a similar pattern to that of ESA, through the introduction of a new third-party assessment to determine eligibility to the new Personal Independence Payment (PIP). However, DLA in contrast to IB is paid to cover additional costs rather than as income replacement and can be claimed by those either in or out of work. DLA was developed in the 1990s and was intended to compensate disabled people for some of the additional expenses they face in daily life, such as transport and personal assistance (Burchardt, 1999). Unlike ESA, claimants of DLA and PIP are not expected to meet conditions beyond being assessed for eligibility to the benefit, and do not face sanctions. However, the benefit was introduced with a significantly reduced budget compared to DLA (DWP, 2012).

Conditionality and surveillance

The concept of surveillance is increasingly being applied in discussions around conditionality (Henman and Marston, 2008; Maki, 2011; Dee, 2013). Henman and Marston (2008) coin the term ‘welfare surveillance’ to describe the way in which conditionality is used by the state to exert power, or control, over citizens to bring about behavioural changes. Emanating from a perceived belief that people claiming benefits

will be doing so fraudulently, surveillance is employed to monitor whether recipients are deserving of assistance (Maki, 2011; Dee, 2013).

Less widely applied in the literature around conditionality is the concept of 'self-surveillance'. Building on the work of Foucault (1991), self-surveillance involves modifying behaviour to fit the expectations of society (or the state) (Vaz and Bruno, 2003). Importantly, self-surveillance is a conscious process that is carried out knowingly, even if this goes against the way an individual would wish to act (ibid). As a result, while surveillance is concerned with the state as an external power, self-surveillance is both an internal and external process. Power is mediated by external expectations from the state, and also internally reinforced through comparison between ourselves and the expected 'norm' (Henderson *et al.*, 2010). In this sense, self-surveillance could be conceptualised as a subtle or 'hidden' form of conditionality, causing individuals to adapt their behaviour according to social norms about how benefits claimants *should* behave.

Related to the concept of self-surveillance is 'sousveillance', which, unlike surveillance, is exercised from the bottom up, rather than from the top down (Dennis, 2008). This can have a positive and emancipatory application, but can also be manipulative, inciting communities to surveil each other and correct deviant behaviour through condemnation or vigilantism. In a similar vein, Young (2003) highlights the ways in which resentment against members of a community who are perceived to be receiving more favourable treatment, such as those in receipt of benefits, can spill over into vindictiveness against them. Such resentment can also be fostered in order to build public support for social policies. Hoggett *et al* (2013) point to the cultivation of 'anti-welfare populism' by the Coalition Government as an example of this. Self-surveillance as behavioural control can therefore be exercised internally by an individual, horizontally within a community and externally through the operation of government and media narratives that foster feelings of unfairness.

There is growing evidence of such processes at work through the reform of social security. Research has focused in particular on the co-construction of stigmatising identities within communities with high rates of claims as well as among benefit recipients themselves (Garthwaite, 2011; Chase and Walker, 2012; Garthwaite, 2015; Baumberg, 2016).

Resentment can run the risk of becoming vindictiveness when negative feelings of mistrust are directed at individuals rather than a faceless other. Quarmby (2011) argues that media narratives around social security reform have amounted to the scapegoating of disabled people. In exploring the motivations for hate crimes, she highlights disability having become synonymous with 'scrounging' as an important factor.

Methods

This paper reports findings from a doctoral research project looking at the impacts of reforms to social security for disabled people living in Scotland. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-three individual disabled people from across the central-belt of Scotland between November 2013 and July 2014.¹ A thematic analysis was carried out using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo. The findings presented in this paper emerged organically from the data rather than through a-priori enquiry.

Participants were aged between twenty-eight and sixty-seven and included nine women, thirteen men and one person identifying as gender queer. Twenty-one were

claiming DLA at the time of their interview, but only one had been called to apply for PIP. Six of the participants receiving DLA were also claiming ESA, while a further three had used it in the three years immediately prior to the interviews. Two participants were claiming ESA but not DLA. The majority of participants had physical impairments, though a number also experienced mental health problems in addition to their primary impairment. Participants had a range of labour market experiences: seven were in work at the time of their interview, while a further seven had previously worked but had retired due to ill health. Seven were out of work but hoped to work again in the future. Only one participant had never worked.

Surveillance and self-surveillance: a case of hidden conditionality?

The majority of participants in this study were not subject to conditionality as a matter of policy, however their experiences indicate that debates around conditionality were nevertheless impacting on them. The threat of losing or being found ineligible for benefits was ever present, and did appear to have an impact on the way they behaved. These concerns were raised by just under half of participants.

Behavioural expectations were most prevalent when applying and being assessed for eligibility to benefits, including feeling judged by assessors for demonstrating particular characteristics or lifestyle choices. One participant was angry at discovering that the assessor knew which brand of tobacco he smoked:

Why do they put that down on the medical report? . . . They're saying, ah he's smoking, we're giving him too much money. (Liam, 50)

Interviewees also talked of feeling that they had to give particular emphasis to things that they could not do. At least four participants commented that this had gone against their natural inclination to focus on the positives of their situation.

If someone were to ask me . . . how far can you walk without it being sore, I think I would probably exaggerate how far I could walk . . . And then I was confronted with a form where actually if you were to do that, that's the difference between getting something and not getting something. (Catriona, 29)

This was explicitly not indicative of an intention to cheat the system or to lie about the severity of their condition, but was seen by participants as a necessary requirement for demonstrating genuine eligibility. This was not only unpleasant, but also challenged the way participants viewed themselves and their impairments, impacting on their sense of self. One participant talked with dismay at being encouraged by a welfare rights advisor to alter her appearance ahead of an assessment:

You feel as if you're putting it on . . . I was told [don't] be too smart in what you are wearing, and don't make an effort with your hair . . . wear odd socks, literally look like you're not well. (Fiona, 28)

Fiona had gone along with the advice as she felt that it was necessary to prove her case, but described feeling degraded by the experience.

The feeling of being observed and judged was not restricted to agencies acting for or on behalf of the government. A small proportion of participants mentioned judgmental attitudes among members of their communities, and a fear that if they behaved inappropriately, members of the public would report them to the authorities.

People in the town, I just don't tell them . . . [because] people would then say 'he's claiming benefits you know, and look at him, he's out on the hills or he's gone off for the weekend somewhere'. (Adrian, 50)

As a result, only their immediate families were aware that they claimed benefits. This was not because they felt that they were doing anything wrong that would lead them to be reported, but rather because they did not feel that they fitted in with the traditional understanding of what a disabled person *should* look like, and that they were therefore less likely to be seen as deserving. This echoes Garthwaite's (2015) findings around the growing stigma associated with the benefit recipient identity.

The feeling of living under 'welfare surveillance' (Hennman and Marston, 2008) had a significant impact on participants' daily lives, affecting who they interacted with and what activities they felt they could take part in. One respondent had even decided to put off starting a family with her husband because she was worried that her benefits would be stopped if she came off her medication in order to conceive. She felt that this would be seen as a sign of recovery rather than a decision to exercise reproductive choices. Barr *et al* (2016) have found that far from improving recipients' health, the testing regime has resulted in a decline in their reported mental health and an increase in suicide rates.

As with formal conditionality, these expectations arose from assumptions within the benefits system about how recipients will act. Participants in this study were keen to distance themselves from the 'scrounger' narrative. They felt that they were all genuinely seeking support because their impairments were such that they were unable to work, or that they faced significant labour market disadvantages as a result of discriminatory attitudes. They also felt that they had gone to considerable lengths to meet the requirements to prove their eligibility, as evidenced in the granting of benefits. However, the assumptions underpinning and narratives around the reforms meant that many felt their eligibility remained in question. Participants had therefore adopted practices associated with self-surveillance in order to demonstrate their conformity with the rhetorical expectations about how benefit recipients *should* behave.

Resentment and vindictiveness: the impact of 'hidden conditionality'?

Narratives surrounding how benefit recipients *should* behave had affected participants' interactions with their wider communities, whether or not they chose to disclose their status. Many discussed being perceived as having stigmatised identities, both as disabled people and as benefit claimants. Several also described experiencing discrimination, bullying and harassment as part of their daily lives. This was often explicitly linked to having visible impairments, or living in supported accommodation, making them easily identifiable as 'other' within their communities. This experience of disability discrimination was increasingly becoming bound up with their status as benefit recipients too. In the past, disabled people may have felt more protected from 'scrounger rhetoric' (Garthwaite, 2011; Briant *et al.*, 2013) as a result of being perceived as being more

deserving of state support (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012). However, it appeared that as policy became more stringent in determining eligibility, this was being reflected in a greater sense of mistrust and resentment by the general public.

Of the twenty-three individuals involved in this study, nine discussed feeling a hardening of attitudes towards them. These were being normalised and enforced by media narratives around scrounging, with participants facing a growing perception that they were not really disabled but rather trying to cheat the system.

You see the general public are starting to believe all this [rhetoric] and thinking that aha, these people are at it, they've been getting an easy ride. (Anthony, 46)

This is reflected in some of the informal and community elements of hidden conditionality discussed above. Participants with unseen impairments felt that they faced additional barriers to being believed.

Because I look fine, that's the worst thing about it. It's a terrible thing to say but if I was in a wheelchair, it would be so much easier, because people would understand it a bit better. (Fiona, 28)

The attitudes they faced were frustrating and often upsetting, particularly, as in one case, when they came from their own families. Again, this echoes Garthwaite's (2015) findings around the stigma of benefit claiming.

Mistrust over the legitimacy of disability status is also commonly reflected in incidences of hate crime (Sherry, 2010). Participants did not speak about experiencing disbelief in these terms, however several had experienced harassment and abuse that could be characterised as hate crime. Six respondents had faced incidences ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault. This was overwhelmingly the case for those with visible impairments or those whose disability status was more apparent. One couple were subjected to several months of intimidation from a gang harassing residents living in supported accommodation for people with learning disabilities. They felt that they were identifiable because of where they lived, making them an easy target.

Those involved in this study exhibited a shared sense of mistrust in the ability or willingness of authorities to deal with problems of harassment and hate crime. Only two had made a report to the police, and neither felt that their concerns had been adequately addressed. The rest had seen little point in contacting the authorities, or feared repercussions if they did so. This was perhaps unsurprising given the poor success rates of prosecuting disability hate crimes (Sherry, 2010; Quarmby, 2011). However, it was clearly having a lasting impact, with four stating that they felt less able to go out in public as a result.

I've been indoors a lot more, unless I've got support. I have got good support though, and they come and take me out, but it's not the same. I like to be able to go out and just have a coffee. (Sophie, 47)

This had a serious negative impact on participants' ability to live independently and be recognised as a valued part of the wider community. Quarmby (2011) cites examples of neighbours articulating resentment against disabled people as a common

trend, due to the perception that they have certain privileges such as accessible housing and adapted vehicles. However, the targeting of disabled people through acts of violence within their own neighbourhoods suggests escalation from feelings of resentment to acts of vindictiveness (Young, 2003).

Conclusions

This article has examined the emergence of 'hidden conditionality' experienced by recipients of disability benefits following the expansion of conditionality since 2010. This was prevalent in assessments for eligibility to benefits, but was also notable in their daily lives. Recipients of disability benefits increasingly felt that they experienced 'welfare surveillance' (Hennman and Marston, 2008) by government agencies, as well as by their own communities. This was experienced as a form of control designed to bring about behaviour change. This was also evident in the adoption of elements of self-surveillance in order to conform to societal expectations about how they *should* behave. Resentment within communities was being driven by official and media discourses around benefit claiming, leading to the dual stigmatisation of both disabled people and benefit claimants. Examples of vindictiveness (Young, 2003) in discriminatory attitudes and even hate crimes (Quarmby, 2011) were also reported as a result of the operation of some of neighbourhood-level elements of hidden conditionality. The consequence of these processes was that participants felt more socially isolated and less able to participate in their communities on an equal basis.

Conceptions of citizenship evident in dominant discourses around social security reform prioritise the obligations of citizenship as a prerequisite to the enjoyment of rights (Lister, 2003). This is evident in the expectation that benefit recipients will meet certain behavioural conditions in exchange for support. The findings of this study suggest that narratives supporting conditionality are serving to dissolve the bonds of social solidarity that are essential to citizenship (Lister, 2003). Disabled people are becoming more marginalised as a result. Those writing from a Disability Studies perspectives have stressed the importance of social security in enabling disabled people to meet their obligations as citizens, including participating in work (Morris, 2005). Conditionality has placed ever-harsher requirements on disabled people to meet their obligations, but without enabling them to enjoy the rewards of full citizenship in return.

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Note

1 The project received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Participants are referred to here by a pseudonym and any other identifying information has been removed or altered.

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