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# On 'Activation Workers' Perceptions': A Reply to Dunn (2)

**SHARON WRIGHT**

*Department of Sociology/Social Policy and Criminology, Colin Bell Building, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, United Kingdom*
*email: sharon.wright@stir.ac.uk*

## Introduction

'Activation workers' have come to play a central role in the reform of contemporary OECD welfare systems (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). Understanding their beliefs about the claimants they interact with is a crucial aspect of analysing 'personalised' employment services. This is particularly important in the UK, where, since 2009, front-line advisers have been afforded much greater discretion through the promotion of the 'delivery black box' (House of Commons, 2009) first by a Labour government (2009–2010) in the implementation of the Flexible New Deal, then by the Conservative–Liberal Coalition government (2010–present) for the Work Programme (DWP, 2012). This hands-off approach to marketised implementation, combined with lucrative financial rewards for approved job outcomes and severe consequences for failure (including loss of contract, potential organisational failure and loss of the advisers' own job) has intensified pressures for street-level (Lispky, 2010) 'activation workers' in their daily practices of policy accomplishment (cf. Wright, 2003). The value of Dunn's arguments, about front-line workers' views on whether or not some of their long-term unemployed clients are looking for work, raises three key issues for debate and further research: the value of activation workers' perspectives, the issue of 'not looking for work' and policy implications.

## The value of 'activation workers' perceptions'

Dunn's focus on the viewpoints of front-line workers is most welcome in its capacity to advance understandings of the role and dynamics of face-to-face welfare work. This is very timely given the recent international revival of Lispky's (1980, 2010) concept of street-level bureaucracy and its application to contemporary welfare interactions in several country cases (Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2010; Jewell, 2007; Jewell and Glaser, 2006), including 'activation work' (Brodkin, 2011; Fletcher, 2011; Hill, 2006; McDonald and Marston 2006; Thorén, 2008; van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). Now more than ever:

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> the policy–action relationship needs to be regarded as a process of interaction and negotiation, taking place over time, between those seeking to put policy into effect and those upon whom action depends. (Barrett and Fudge, 1981: 25)

However, care should be taken to interpret the views of front-line workers as a particular type of perspective, with accompanying implications, rather than statements of 'fact', or, as Dunn implies, as more reliable or valid accounts of the experience of long-term unemployment than those possible to access from unemployed people themselves. It is indeed possible to research and examine critically the motivations and actions of benefit recipients using direct interviewing techniques (Groves, 2002). It is also evident that well-established scholarship has offered conceptual advances by recognising the capacity for 'agency' to be refused and/or used to the detriment of self or others (Hoggett, 2000, 2001).

Furthermore, any comment on either front-line workers' or long-term unemployed people's actions and motivations must be located within an accurate account of the contemporary context within which they are formed and enacted, rather than attempting to analyse social processes in decontextualised or dehumanised isolation. This vital contextualisation includes a range of socio-political, economic, policy and labour market issues that are missing from Dunn's account. For example, the role of front-line workers has become increasingly important following the global economic crisis and subsequent repeated UK recessions, resulting in 2.7 million redundancies between 2008 and 2013 (Philpott, 2012) which have impacted on the number and type of jobs available. Recession has created unemployment directly on a scale not witnessed for a generation, with 5.1 unemployed people per available vacancy (ONS, 2013). Rather than recession inspiring a rethink of boom-time supply-side 'work first' (Lindsay *et al.*, 2007) measures, 'austerity' has been manipulated in a discourse that masks the continuation of ill-fitting policy responses to enduring problems of poverty in an unfamiliar contemporary setting.

The current situation (in 2013) is that establishing and maintaining eligibility for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) is very difficult. In order to qualify, claimants must be involuntarily unemployed and actively seeking work (tested via stringent job seeking conditions). Over the last fifteen years, increasing efforts have been made to impose fervent anti-fraud measures and a harsh sanction system (including 100 per cent benefit penalties) to eradicate the possibility of claiming JSA whilst not looking for work. It seems reasonable to assume that these efforts have met with at least a proportion of the success that has been claimed (NAO, 2008), meaning that fraudulent JSA claims may still exist, but are minimal (often due to changes in circumstances not being reported/recorded properly, NAO, 2010) and policies to prevent and punish such claims are already firmly in place. Benefits are now also subject to capping (gov.uk, 2013).

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This has increased pressure on street-level (Lipsky, 2010) interactions from the users' perspective, since claimants are more vulnerable to destitution than at any point since the establishment of the post-war welfare state (for example, increasing reports have been made of record levels of food parcels, *Guardian*, 2012).

On the other side of the desk, advisers are also subject to greater individualised pressure than ever before due to specified job outcome targets, which are harder to deliver because of repeated overpromising on results by both the Department for Work and Pensions and successful prime contractors (NAO, 2012). This also highlights a disjuncture between the language of professional discretion used to justify the permissive 'black box' model of delivery design and the managerialist type of performance regime that relies on 'procedural governance' to exert control over implementation practices (cf. Considine *et al.*, 2011). The state of twenty-first century employment services falls far short of the impression of personalised customer service (implying widely available, generous and flexible user-led support) that is advertised in welfare reform rhetoric. At a time when economic conditions have increased demand for employment advice and support, Jobcentre Plus services have been deliberately reformed to minimise face-to-face contact by reducing 'footfall' in offices and 'redirecting customers to self-help channels', meaning that 'staff prioritise processing people through the system and this is at the cost of offering jobsearch-related support' (Stafford *et al.*, 2012: 502). This means that by the time most long-term unemployed people reach the Work Programme, they are likely to have experienced very little advice or assistance in finding a job.

Furthermore, the notion that the 'black box' enhances the professionalisation of 'activation work' (cf. van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012) is misleading. Adviser autonomy has been undermined since 'the frequency and intensity of adviser–participant contact in practice was lower than providers envisaged and desired' (Newton *et al.*, 2012: 3). Rather than increasing discretion and promoting innovation, official evaluation of the Work Programme highlighted in-built standardisation architecture, for example 'computerised action planning systems which generated generic actions. In some cases advisers could not change or adapt these actions, which limited the degree to which they could be tailored to individuals' needs and circumstances' (Newton *et al.*, 2012: 3). The power of front-line workers was thereby circumvented by de-humanised and impersonal pre-programmed systems (Bonvens and Zouridis, 2002), creating the opposite effect of the stated intention of 'personalisation'. Experiencing this contradiction as a service user whilst also 'being asked to engage in inappropriate or irrelevant activities, or to enter unsuitable employment' (Newton *et al.*, 2012: 5) can have a direct impact on motivation and capacity to self-actualise (Wright, forthcoming). Those most in need of support continue to be served least well by much Work Programme provision, which may be of poor quality, continues to favour the most

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'job ready' and operates without resources to provide the additional support that those facing complex or multiple barriers require (Newton *et al.*, 2012: 3–5).

It is within this context that street-level workers mediate transitions between unemployment and employment through social processes of interactional accomplishment (Wright, 2003). However, front-line workers are not, as Dunn implies at least in part, neutral truth-telling vessels, but active moral agents (Wright, 2012) who accomplish policy intersubjectively (Crossley, 1996) and interactively. These processes are, by definition, social. Thus shared moral frameworks, including popularised anti-welfare myths, are as likely to inform the world views of activation workers as they are of anyone else sharing a social context in which attitudes have been hardening (especially since a sharp downturn in 1997) to offer diminishing support for unemployed people and benefit recipients (Park *et al.*, 2012; Sage, 2012). This is no accident, since for more than thirty years politicians and high-profile analysts have engaged in concerted media campaigns to shape public views to exactly that end. Advisers' references to 'third generation' recipients who have 'never worked' are especially telling in this regard, since there remains no evidence that any such families exist (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012). However, 'activation workers' are situated uniquely in being able to apply these views in live interaction with unemployed people. In this situated social context, belief in stigmatising anti-welfare myths takes on a new potency, with the capacity to convert social suffering into direct emotional and psychological penalties (cf. Frost and Hoggett, 2008). Thus, the unfounded belief in 'chosen worklessness' and 'third generation' 'dependency' constitutes an additional layer of re-moralisation of welfare that occurs at implementation level and may result in direct discrimination and disempowerment.

## Not looking for work?

Dunn's conclusion that some long-unemployed people may at times feel unmotivated is entirely unremarkable, since this is one of the most robustly predictable findings in the history of social science research. A very substantial body of multi-disciplinary unemployment research spanning more than eighty years (cf. Jahoda *et al.*, 1972) has demonstrated:

> near unanimity that unemployment is not only associated with, but 'causes', individual misery and mental health problems including anxiety, depression, negative self-esteem, dissatisfaction with life, social dislocation, community dysfunction and population morbidity. (Fryer, 2013: 1)

The harmful effects of unemployment are wide-ranging and deeply scarring (see Sage, 2013 for review of evidence). There are physical impacts, in both the short and long term (Jin *et al.*, 1995; Bartley and Lewis, 2002), and psychological damage (Jefferis *et al.*, 2011; Paul and Moser, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2005), including increased risks of self-harm (Keefe *et al.*, 2002) and suicide (Stuckler *et al.*, 2009). The personal impacts of prolonged inability to engage in reciprocal exchange

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(Morgan, 1992) include stigma (Link *et al.*, 1991) and shame (Eales, 1989), which are compounded by social impacts such as diminishing social networks for support (Bolton and Oatley, 1987). In the UK, unlike many comparable rich nations, the experience of long-term unemployment almost guarantees living in poverty (Gallie *et al.* 2003; Sainsbury and Morrisens, 2002). This is primarily because of the inadequacy of benefit levels, which are on course to reduce further in value in relation to the cost of necessities in the coming years (Sutherland *et al.*, 2008).

Indeed, these understandings of the conditions and effects of unemployment are so well known that the human suffering involved in the lived experience of being unemployed seems to have become normalised – hidden in plain view. The nature and prevalence of this suffering have somehow come to be dismissible by commentators who discuss unemployment as if it is a dehumanised phenomenon. However, it is indefensible to ignore the significance of existing knowledge that:

> although there have been huge differences in the nature of employment, the nature of work, the labour market, the nature and degree of support for people, distribution of wealth, dominant social values from the 1930s to the 21st century and from country to country, the psychological impact of unemployment has been, according to research, with minor caveats, pretty well identical across time, space and culture. . . . [A]lthough researchers have approached the impact of unemployment from very different political assumptions, there has been – again with minor caveats – an astonishing consensus both that unemployment is psychologically destructive and about the particular nature of that psychological destruction. (Fryer, 2013: 1)

And yet, this psychological destruction is not only tolerated, but purposefully and consciously created in capitalist societies, especially those, like the UK, that are governed by neo-liberal monetarist economic policy. The UK economy depends explicitly on maintaining unemployment at the precise level deemed necessary by dominant economists, who call the mechanism for doing so the NAIRU: Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment. This current economic convention states that if too few people experience unemployment, inflation will rise uncontrollably. Thus, the human suffering associated with unemployment is endorsed as a necessary requirement of capitalism, which has been viewed as a 'price well worth paying' (Lamont, in Hansard, 1991: Cm 413). However, those who suffer to pay the personal price of unemployment are not usually those in a thriving minority who deem it necessary. This highlights a fundamental power imbalance in the design of economic and social policies relating to paid employment, unemployment and social security.

## Policy implications

Dunn encourages the perspective that some long-term unemployed people are 'not looking for work' and relates this to a justification for punitive or conditional social security design, involving strict compulsion and very harsh sanctions.

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However, it is not clear that the evidence presented warrants such a conclusion, particularly in light of evaluation evidence that Work Programme advisers reported 'most participants complied fully and willingly with the requirements of the programme' and 'most wanted to work and were prepared to make efforts to find appropriate work' (Newton *et al.*, 2012: 4–5). Furthermore, there remains a sleight of hand in moving from recognising that some unemployed people may currently not be looking for work to generalisations relating to all long-term unemployed people, all unemployed people or all benefit recipients. However, let us consider the option that the workers interviewed by Dunn were accurate in their estimation that approximately a third of their long-term unemployed clients were not currently looking for work (overlooking the verifiable observation that attending interviews and discussing job seeking with employment advisers is in itself legitimate evidence of active job search, i.e. if these clients were not taking any steps to find work, they would not be known to the agency in question). If we sidestep for a moment the unjustified inferences necessary to reach this conclusion, we can focus on its implications. The latest available Labour Force Survey unemployment figures (ONS, 2013) show that in the period November 2012–January 2013 there were a total of 2.52 million unemployed people in the UK, 1.3 million of whom were long-term unemployed (for six months or more). If a third of those long-term unemployed people were 'unwilling workers', as Dunn suggests, that would equate to approximately 433,333 people, which is about a sixth of the total number of unemployed people. Dunn argues that the existence of 'unwilling workers' justifies harsh conditionality for benefit claimants. However, if his findings are correct, that would mean the majority five-sixths of unemployed people are being subjected to job search conditions that are unnecessary (because it can be agreed from all ideological perspectives and research evidence that they are looking for paid work, and usually find it via 'self-help', without requiring coercion) and inappropriate (because discourse, policy and front-line practice misrepresents their motivations and actions by treating them as unwilling workers when they are in fact willing workers). This raises an important ethical concern: is it just for the majority of unemployed people to be misrepresented and mistreated (including being required to live in poverty) because a minority of unemployed people reach a demotivated state after a largely unsupported and protracted period out of work?

## Conclusion

Dunn's article inspires several rich avenues for future research that are of critical importance for international twenty-first century welfare reforms and debate. First, it indicates the need to develop better and more readily applicable conceptualisations of benefit recipients' motivations, behaviours and conditionality. Second, there is a need for further insight into the intentions

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and ethics of powerful policy actors who design and set conditions for implementation. Third, the analysis of what street-level workers believe and how these beliefs influence their daily interactive practices with users is essential to understanding how contemporary social rights and responsibilities are mediated. It is essential that continued study of the motivations and actions of front line workers and their clients is conducted rigorously and contextualised accurately within contemporary socio-economic, political, policy and labour market contexts.

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