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Introduction to the special issue on ‘disability and conditional social security benefits’

Ben Baumberg Geiger, University of Kent

There are times that policy runs ahead of academic knowledge. Indeed, this is often the case, for policies must first be introduced before social scientists can study them – and if policymakers were restricted to policies that had been tried and tested, then policy innovation would be impossible. Yet such innovation can come with considerable risks, as new policies can be introduced and widely imitated, only for social scientists – after some delay – to show that such policies are difficult to implement, can fail to achieve some of their aims, and may even have unforeseen and harmful consequences that were not originally anticipated.

This special issue focusses on one area where this is potentially the case: the introduction of behavioural conditionality for sick and disabled social security claimants. Until recently, disabled people have been largely exempt from the activating turn in social policy. In recent years, however, high-income countries from Australia to Norway have increasingly required disabled claimants to take steps towards work, under the threat of financial penalties. The conventional wisdom repeated by bodies such as the OECD (see Geiger, this volume) is that this is a necessary step towards reducing high benefit claim rates, and moreover helps improve the finances, health, and social inclusion of disabled people themselves.

However, there are several challenges to this narrative. Implementing conditionality for disabled people is much more difficult than for non-disabled people: claimants can only reasonably be required to perform actions that they are capable of doing, but it is difficult for benefits agencies to correctly assess what a disabled claimant is capable of doing. If implemented badly, conditionality for disabled people can therefore create injustices, and put disabled people under considerable stress. Moreover, conditionality may move disabled people further *away* from work, by both undermining their relationship with their employment support caseworker, and making them less willing to take risks in performing tasks that they are *not sure* they are capable of doing.

Until now, there has been very little published research trying to establish which of these accounts is correct. This special issue of the *Journal of Poverty & Social Justice* therefore has two aims. Firstly, it aims to provide new evidence on the implementation and impacts of conditionality for disabled benefits claimants, to provide an empirical foundation for the contested claims on both sides of this debate. Secondly, and equally importantly, it aims to prompt further research in this area. Given the potential benefits and risks of conditionality for disabled people, and the considerable numbers of people affected, it is surprising just how little we know. This special issue is a contribution to this debate, but should only be the start of providing the evidence that policymakers (and those around them) so desperately need.

The research papers in this special issue

The special issue includes four research papers on the implementation and impacts of conditionality for disabled benefits claimants, sometimes focussing on disabled claimants of unemployment benefits, and sometimes focussing on claimants of disability benefits. This includes three papers looking at particular settings: Aaron Reeves on the impacts of conditionality for disabled people

claiming unemployment benefits in the UK; Sara Hultqvist & Iben Nørup on the different forms of conditionality implemented for young disability benefit claimants in Sweden and Denmark; and Patrizia Aurich-Beerheide & Martin Brüssig on the (failed) implementation of conditionality for disabled people in Germany. This is followed by my own paper, which brings together all of the available evidence on the implementation and impacts of disability conditionality from an international review.

Aaron Reeves (2017) looks at the impacts of benefit sanctions on self-declared disabled unemployment benefit claimants in the UK. To do this in the absence of individual-level data, he uses variation in sanctioning rates and labour market outcomes across local authorities over time. He finds that areas with greater sanctioning of disabled unemployment benefit claimants have consistently greater levels of disability among the economically inactive, but not consistently greater levels of disability among the employed – suggesting that the sanctions are pushing disabled unemployment benefit claimants into inactivity to a greater extent than into work. Despite data limitations, this is a crucial contribution: it is one of only two studies internationally to look at the impact of sanctions on disabled people (see Geiger, this volume).

Sara Hultqvist & Iben Nørup (2017) look at the very different ways that conditionality has been implemented for young disabled people in Sweden and Denmark, based on previous research in both countries that interviewed claimants, interviewed practitioners, and (in the case of Denmark) a quantitative study. They argue that in Denmark, the reforms have cut benefit levels to young people and required them to undertake actions to move towards work – even where their chances of finding work are low. In contrast, the superficially similar Swedish reforms took a broader approach to activation, where the young person themselves had more control over their goals (which did not have to be purely work-focussed), and where the emphasis was on the *right* rather than the *obligation* to participate. In other words, while Hultqvist & Nørup argue that conditionality in both cases appears to overlook the challenges disabled people faced in the labour market, they show that conditionality can be implemented in either an autonomy-enhancing or an autonomy-reducing way.

Patrizia Aurich-Beerheide & Martin Brüssig (2017) focus on the implementation of conditionality for disabled people in Germany, based on more than 70 interviews with doctors, case managers and other professionals in public pension insurance, public health insurance, and the public employment service. They focus particularly on the challenges of classifying claimants' work capacity within the context of a complex organisational division of labour, and two of their findings are particularly worth drawing out here. Firstly, organisational incentives create pressures to classify claimants in certain ways, which can conflict with the stated aims of the system as a whole. Hence while the German system nominally requires 'rehabilitation-before-benefits', claimants may fall between the unemployment benefit system (which focusses support on those with greater work capacity) and the incapacity pension system (which does not focus on employment support). Secondly, they show that even where there is a *potential* for sanctioning disabled claimants, neither sanctions nor requirements will be imposed where caseworkers have no desire or incentives to do so.

Finally, my own article (Geiger, 2017) brings the findings of these three papers together with the wider literature and my own international review of disability assessment in 10 countries (based on over 140 documents and 38 expert interviews). I summarise these as a series of 'stylized facts' about disability and conditionality:

- Requirements for disability benefit claimants are common, but sanctioning is rare (particularly outside of the UK and Australia);
- Assessment and support are critical for implementing conditionality, and we can construct a typology of models of disability conditionality around this (which I term ‘passive’, ‘supportive’, ‘demanding’ and ‘compliance-based’ systems);
- The limited but robust existing evidence suggests that sanctioning may have zero or even negative impacts on work-related outcomes for disabled people; and
- Individual case studies in ‘compliance-based’ systems suggest that sanctioning in the absence of other support can lead to destitution, and that conditionality can negatively influence mental health.

Other sections of the special issue

This is then followed by two long-running sections of the journal, Policy & Practice and Reviews, both of which focus on disability conditionality in the UK (perhaps the country where issues of conditionality have been most prominent in public and political debate).

In the Policy & Practice section, Jenny McNeill, Lisa Scullion, Katy Jones and Alasdair Stewart (2017) present two case studies of disabled benefit claimants subject to conditionality in the UK (from within their major ‘Welfare Conditionality’ project). While these case studies cannot be taken to be representative of disabled benefit claimants in the UK in general, this does enable the general findings of the preceding research papers to be understood in the complex context of individual people’s lives. While it does not make sense to decontextualise the cases by summarising them here, it is worth noting that Brenda and Steve’s stories illustrate that individuals can struggle to make sense of often inflexible administrative systems, with damaging effects.

In a slight departure from the main themes of the special issue, Jed Meers (2017) explains a recent UK Supreme Court judgement on the ‘spare room subsidy’ (more widely known by its unofficial title of ‘the bedroom tax’). The policy introduced extra charges for housing benefit claimants who were deemed to have a ‘spare room’; the issue at question is how a ‘spare room’ is defined for disabled people given e.g. challenges in sharing rooms or the need to accommodate carers or medical equipment. Amid various issues (particularly around the localisation of welfare provision), Meers highlights the challenges of assessing disability within the benefits system, a concern shared with much of the rest of the special issue.

The special issue closes with two unorthodox Reviews. Rather than reviewing non-fiction writing, we instead have focussed on two award-winning fictionalised accounts of conditionality for disabled people in the UK: a film and a play. In her review of Ken Loach’s Cannes-winning film *I, Daniel Blake*, Alison Wilde (2017) dwells on the way that the film highlights the affective dimensions of conditionality for disabled people – the way that it affects people’s sense of self-respect, as well as its ability to generate both anger and human solidarity in response. Kim Allen (2017) suggests that Katherine Soper’s play *Wish List* does likewise in highlighting the potentially ‘devastating’ effect of the system, but goes further in suggesting that the play’s two protagonists (like the rest of us) are at least partly complicit in the system constrains them.

A final word

To understand conditionality for disabled benefits claimants, we need to understand several dimensions of human societies simultaneously. We need to understand the gap between policy and practice, and the formidable challenges of implementing superficially simple instructions around disability benefits. We need to understand the lived experience of conditionality for disabled people, not just because empathy is valuable in its own right, but because the responses of disabled people will be bound up in the complexities of their lives and the meaning that conditionality has for them. And we need to understand how conditionality impacts both employment and wider outcomes, and how this is affected by the tangled web of policy, practice, context and meaning in each case. We hope that this special issue makes a start in this direction, and that is only the first step towards a larger research literature that emerges to underpin future policymaking.

Ben Baumberg Geiger, University of Kent

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