Assessing the policy assumptions and lived realities of welfare-to-work programs

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Qualitative semi-longitudinal study funded by the ARC and Jobs Australia (2005-2007) to examine the ‘street-level’ dimensions of the Job Network model.

- 3 rounds of interviews in 3 locations (Brisbane inner-metro, outer-metro Melbourne and northern NSW)

- 75 participants first round, dropped to 65 by third round. 20 employment consultants.
Key arguments of the ‘paper’

- *Workfare* programs (compulsory Job Training, Work for the Dole schemes) add little or no value for most participants and are entirely counter-productive for others.

- Policies to address long-term unemployment must avoid confusing *consequences* with *causes* and expand narrowly defined ‘work-first’ principles.
Policy and program assumptions

- Poverty is a moral failing (lack of work effort, lack of human capital, single parenting).

- Participation in active labour market programs improves self-esteem/motivation (self-efficacy).

- ‘Tough love’ gets results (sanctions and compliance build character and improve work incentives).

- Income support fosters bad dependency, while paid work (of any kind) promotes good dependency (‘self-reliance’).

- The causes of long-term unemployment are predominantly psychological (motivation, self-esteem).
Examining the self-efficacy aim

- In Australia one of the aims of employment services is officially defined as ‘building self-confidence to find work’ and ‘success in finding work’ (DEWR, 2006).

- Associated active labour market programs, such as the Australian Government’s Work for the Dole scheme claim that the programs aim to provide opportunities for unemployed people to “build networks, improve self-esteem, communication skills and motivation.”

  (Department of Family and Community Services, 2002a section 3.2.8.80).
Defining self-efficacy

Bandura (1997), a principal proponent of the importance of self-efficacy, suggests that self-efficacy:

- ‘Refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments….'

The psychological literature on how to promote self-efficacy suggests that self-efficacy is derived from four main sources:

- observing valued role models
- successfully practicing a skill or behaviour;
- receiving encouragement and support from valued others
- Developing self-supporting emotions

(Bandura, 1997; Gagne and Medsker, 1996; Petrovich, 2004).
Do programs build self-efficacy?

- According to our respondents the short answer is a qualified No

- The positive responses mostly related to the quality of the case management relationship (in terms of ‘continuity’, ‘respect’, ‘input being valued’, ‘not being pushed’).
Interpreting the negative responses

- **Commodifying unemployment**
  (Participants were very conscious of market model, which generated some resentment about motivation of agencies):

  - “My feelings are that it’s just not real at all. They’re there to take the money that the Government hands out for job seekers and do the least possible they can to get that”.
‘Churning’ reinforces uselessness

“When it (the Job Network) was first set up they matched us up for work. That is not what is happening now, they are just a machine. They are getting thousands of dollars for each of us and that money would be better spent in other ways”. (Brisbane)

“It is a lot of time doing this and that and that brings you down. You are stuck in a time warp of trying to get by. It is degrading in that way”. (young person, Melbourne, unemployed 14 months)
Devaluing agency and experience

- “I feel like I am not a child and I don’t want a bell to congratulate me. A big bell to congratulate me about getting a job which I had very little input and choice about in the first place. I wouldn’t like that to happen to me, I find it a little bit patronising” (northern NSW).

- “The job network centres are degrading because there is no control over your own job hunting ability. You jump through hoops without too much input from yourself.” (Melbourne)

- “It can be patronising, and little bit of a joke sometimes. As yet I haven’t really been pumped up”. (Melbourne).
Process and outcome implications

- **Processes** – Rigid rules, impersonal case management and standardised programs erode **self-efficacy** and frustrate people’s own sense of ‘what works’.

- **Outcomes** - The system demands a lot from long-term unemployed but delivers few rewards (only 5 participants were working at the time of the second research interview and only 12 had any paid work in the past twelve months)
Changing the policy environment

- **Too much talk about welfare**, not enough talk about how *work* is organised and *poverty* produced under conditions of ‘new capitalism’.
  - “It is time to stop obsessing over the malingerer or the shirker and to address the needs of the majority of the poor” (Handler and Hasenfeld, 2007:15)

- ‘Work-first’ policies demand critical scrutiny.

- **Attention to discourse can help strengthen efforts** to challenge injustices of welfare policy. Effects are very real, as one of the research participants illustrates:

  "I feel like a fringe dweller these days. Especially in the city where I go everyone who sees me brands me as a dole bludger and these people who are lazy. Because I am in that queue I might be categorised like that, but I hate it".
Alternative Paths to responsibility (solidaristic vs individualistic responsibility)

- **Expanding Public employment** (surveys show that work satisfaction increases dramatically if people feel what they do is valued, publicly recognised) As Richard Sennett (1998: 146), argues: “in order to be reliable, we must first feel needed”.

- **Rethink the value of ‘strong paternalism’** and punitive sanctions (the analogy of ‘strict father family’ vs ‘nurturing parent family’)
  - “Nurturance has two dimensions: empathy and responsibility, for oneself and others” [Lakoff, 2004]

- **Policy model espouses individual service, but radiates indifference**