Welfare to work activity agreements, or how to reduce mothers’ autonomy by requiring they do what they are already doing

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Submission to the Australian Social Policy Conference refereed papers
Labour market participation and welfare reform stream
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Abstract

From 2003, Australians Working Together compelled Parenting Payment recipients of teenage children to engage in approved activities in order to remain eligible for income support. Australians Working Together was abandoned for Welfare to Work in 2006, in part because there had been little change in Parenting Payment recipients’ activities in the preceding years. In this paper, I contend that there was little change in behaviour, not because there were too few compulsory measures as argued by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, but because most parents were already undertaking the kinds of activities that Australians Working Together made compulsory. As a result, while the policy did not greatly increase parents’ employment, education or voluntary work, it did reduce parents’ autonomy to decide what activities to do when. Welfare to Work further sharply reduces parents’ autonomy.

Introduction

Two years after the full introduction of Australians Working Together (AWT), the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) published its official evaluation report. Regarding the Parenting Payment component of the policy, the Department concluded:

Overall, results show little change in levels of self-reliance and participation among PP recipients following the introduction of AWT.

By and large, this reflects the voluntary nature of most of the AWT measures, which were designed to encourage and assist income support recipients to move off welfare and into paid work. (DEWR, 2005: 13)

In this paper, I contend that the evaluation report found little change in the behaviour of parents, not because there were too few compulsory measures, but because most parents were already undertaking the kinds of activities that Australians Working Together made compulsory. As a result, while the policy did not greatly increase parents’ employment, education or voluntary work, it did reduce parents’ autonomy to decide what activities to do when.
Background

In September 2003, Australian parents claiming income support faced compulsory activity requirements for the first time. Australians Working Together was a radical departure from previous income support policy which had provided support to low income sole and partnered parents until their youngest child reached 16 years of age. Under Australians Working Together, Parenting Payment recipients, if their youngest child was aged 13 to 15 years, were required to undertake 150 hours of employment-oriented activity in a six month period, approximately six hours per week. Failure to comply with requirements could result in a penalty of reduced income support for 26 weeks or full suspension for eight weeks. This policy was in place for three years, until it was declared unsuccessful and replaced with Welfare to Work, which introduced far more onerous activity requirements on parents claiming income support.

Under Welfare to Work, compulsory activity requirements are imposed when a parent’s youngest child is in the early years of primary school. Today, parents are compelled to undertake at least 15 hours of employment per week. Any parent not doing 15 hours of employment must seek such employment and also, in a period of six months, complete 150 hours of an additional activity: education, training or voluntary work. At the same time, the financial returns from combining income support with part-time employment have been reduced (Harding et al., 2005).

This paper draws on the experience of 16 women who were subject to the Australians Working Together compulsory activity policy. I interviewed most of these women several times between 2003 and 2005. They each had a youngest child who was aged between 13 and 15 years old. I contacted potential research participants through a range of indirect methods using a passive sampling technique. I approached a diverse group of NSW-based organisations for assistance and with their permission promoted the research through posters, flyers, newsletter articles etc. I also spread word through friends, colleagues and family. Most mothers who took part in the research did so after a friend of a friend, community worker or other trusted person told them about the study.

The interviews were loosely structured and conversational. While guiding the direction of our conversation across the range of topics I anticipated I would need to explore, I also endeavoured to allow the participants to lead the discussion and raise aspects of their experience I had not previously considered. In the interviews we spoke of family circumstances, employment and education, future plans and dealing with Centrelink. With the respondents’ permission I made audio recordings of the interviews, which were later transcribed. Three women preferred that the interview be conducted in Arabic, not English, so I spoke to them with the aid of an interpreter. Two women did not wish to be recorded, so my analysis of those interviews is based solely on my notes.

I selected the themes through which I analysed the data by immersing myself in the interviews and the transcripts to determine which issues were most important to mothers as ‘expert practitioners of their everyday worlds’ and which also spoke to key aspects of welfare policy (Smith 1987:161). I analysed the interviews by these themes and by key words, reading and listening to the material again and again. I
then used NVIVO to code the data to reveal patterns and disjunctures. In analysing the interviews I was seeking to understand how small daily acts fit within a complex of social relations (Smith 1987:167); that is, how the elements of everyday life for a woman claiming Parenting Payment are organised by and contribute to a web of interacting family, policy, social, educational and economic relations.

The findings of my research into mothers’ experience of Australians Working Together have implications for Welfare to Work. While the Australians Working Together package of policies finished in 2006 and 2007, many of the policy mechanisms continue under Welfare to Work. In particular, like Australians Working Together, Welfare to Work requires parents to make a contractual agreement with the state, and to undertake a set list of activities to remain eligible for benefits. To date, very little research has been published about Welfare to Work (Barnett and Poehr, 2008; Cox and Priest, n.d.), so the small body of research on Australians Working Together provides the only evidence of the operation of Australian compulsory labour market programs for parents claiming income support.

**Australians Working Together Participation Agreements**

Compulsory activities were detailed in a Participation Agreement which was developed jointly between a parent and an adviser. The activities which could be included in the agreements included paid employment, education and training and vocationally oriented voluntary work. By signing the Agreement, parents committed themselves to engaging in a particular activity for six months. In the year to June 2004, 58,109 Parenting Payment Single claimants and 15,534 Partnered claimants entered into Participation Agreements (DEWR 2005:30). Only a few exemptions were granted, 316 to Parenting Payment Single recipients and 122 to Partnered.

Among the women who participated in this study, education was the activity which was most often written into agreements. Nine mothers committed to education, five to employment and two to voluntary work. Four received exemptions due to health problems or because of significant care responsibilities for other family members and two were unsure of the nature of their agreement.

Many of the women I interviewed were already working or studying at the time of their adviser interview. They included those existing activities in their Participation Agreements. Of fifteen mothers with activity requirements, seven signed agreements in which they committed to continuing in an activity they were already undertaking; one of them, Margaret, was later exempt due to health problems. Another two mothers, Alia and Ana, both of whom were studying English, were so unsure about the nature of Australians Working Together requirements that it was unclear whether this was a new activity or if they were already doing it at the time of their adviser interviews.

It was to be expected that many Parenting Payment claimants would be able to fulfil their participation requirement with existing activities. Before the introduction of Australians Working Together, there was strong research evidence of the high rates of employment, education and volunteering among Parenting Payment recipients.
For example, in their 1998 study, Saunders et al. (2003:34) found that fortnightly activities included study for 16 per cent of Parenting Payment Single and 10 per cent of Partnered recipients (see table 1). Other research found that very high proportions of Parenting Payment claimants who were not employed or studying at the time they were surveyed said they would like to participate in education. More than half of the Partnered claimants and more than a third of the Single claimants said they would ‘like to be studying now’ (Carlile et al. 2002:136). A number of Parenting Payment claimants volunteer their services each fortnight. This is most common for Partnered recipients, among whom nearly a third engage in voluntary work, while just over a fifth of Single recipients volunteer (Saunders et al. 2003:34).

Table 1. Activities of Parenting Payment recipients in one fortnight

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Single (%)</th>
<th>Partnered (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paid work</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self employment</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job search</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer work</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample: Single n=208, partnered n=204. Source: Saunders et al. 2003:34

Most often though, Parenting Payment recipients were employed. In just one fortnight in 1998, 35 per cent of lone parents receiving Parenting Payment were employed, as were 17 per cent of partnered claimants (Saunders et al. 2003:34,46). Parenting Payment Single claimants are employed at a higher rate than any other category of income support recipients in Australia. They worked for an average of 26.5 hours per fortnight (Saunders et al. 2003:34,46). Many would like to have more work. Twenty per cent of lone mothers working part time would prefer to be working full time, whereas for couple mothers the equivalent figure is just eight per cent (Gray et al. 2003:17).

It is not surprising then that the evaluation of a pilot program, conducted prior to the introduction of Australians Working Together, concluded that most Parenting Payment recipients would be able to fulfil the activity requirements by continuing the activities they were already undertaking (Pearce 2000).

Two studies conducted after Australians Working Together began examined Parenting Payment Participation Agreements in detail. They also found that most parents incorporated existing activities into their agreements. Both of these studies were funded under the Australian Government evaluation of Australians Working Together.1 At the time that parents first attended a personal adviser interview 74 per

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1 The Social Research Centre (2005a, 2005b, 2005c) surveyed income support claimants who had attended personal adviser meetings. Respondents were interviewed twice, once in May or June 2004, then again in November or December 2004. Of the 3,007 participants in wave 1, 629 were Parenting Payment claimants whose young child was aged 13 to 15 years (Social Research Centre 2005c:47-48). Eighty-two per cent of the sample participated again in wave 2. The Australian Institute of Family Studies was funded to research the impact of compulsory Australians Working Together participation on Parenting Payment claimants and their 13 to 15 year old children (Alexander et al. 2005). To contextualise the impact of the program, the authors presented an appendix which detailed examination of the nature of parents’ Participation Agreements. Like the
cent were already participating in some activity (Social Research Centre 2005a:8). For the majority this was economic participation: 64 per cent were employed, seeking employment or engaged in voluntary work or training for vocational reasons. A further 10 per cent were studying or working voluntarily for reasons which were not vocational. An additional four per cent had care responsibilities for family members or friends that limited their ability to take part in employment or education.

Many parents signed Participation Agreements that included those activities. Of those who remembered signing a Participation Agreement when interviewed by the Social Research Centre (2005a:17), 61 per cent said that they were already doing at least one of the activities in their agreement before their adviser meeting. Of their smaller sample of just 60 parents, Alexander et al. (2005:78) found that three-quarters of the parents had an existing activity in their agreements. More than half, 33 parents, signed agreements which contained only activities they were already doing and a further eleven had agreements which included new and existing activities.

Of those who signed an agreement containing an existing activity, this activity was employment for nearly half and for most of the others this was voluntary work (Alexander et al. 2005:78). Those who combined an existing activity with a new one most often started to study in addition to the paid work they already had.

Both research teams found that parents most often agreed to include education, voluntary work or employment in their Participation Agreements (see table 2). The Social Research Centre found nearly half of the agreements included education or training and a similar proportion included voluntary or community work. A quarter said they would undertake to search for a job and a sixth part-time employment (Social Research Centre 2005a:17). The activities of participants in the Alexander et al. (2005:80) research were also concentrated in the areas of education, voluntary work and employment.

Social Research Centre study, this research was also undertaken over two waves, the first in June and July 2004 and the second in March and April 2005. Alexander et al. (2005:13) interviewed 60 parents and their children in wave 1 and 55 in wave 2.
Table 2. Activities included in Participation Agreements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Social Research Centre n=450</th>
<th>Alexander et al. (^2) n=55</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education or training</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary work</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job search</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care for family member</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health maintenance</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain drivers license</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Social Research Centre (2005a:17) and Alexander et al. (2005:80).

Not only were the majority of parents already undertaking activities before they entered into a Participation Agreement, nearly all were spending far more time each week on those activities than the 6 hours which was required. On average, Alexander et al. (2005:80) found that parents committed 21 hours per week to the activities in the Participation Agreement. Only two parents, out of the 55 at wave two of their research, were doing six hours per week\(^4\) and only 4 were not spending any time on their activities when interviewed (Alexander et al. 2005:80). The researchers asked respondents if they were committing more or less time than was required on their activities. Those who said they were doing more than they needed averaged 23 hours per week on their activities, those who said they were doing about what was required or less averaged 17-18 hours per week. These parents had a substantially exaggerated sense of the extent of their participation requirements.

**Mothers’ autonomy**

Richard Sennett (2003:178) writes that liberal welfare regimes commit the ‘glaring error of denying that the clients [are] competent to participate in the terms of their own dependency’. He proposes relying instead on mutual recognition of autonomy, illustrating his point using medical practice. Just as we grant doctors autonomy to treat patients, because they have specialist knowledge of medicine that we do not understand, so doctors ought to grant autonomy to patients, who know about their own illnesses in ways doctors could never understand (Sennett 2003:122). In the same way, a respectful welfare system would accept in its clients what it does not understand about them and so treat their autonomy with respect (Sennett 2003:262).

Australians Working Together did not respect parents’ autonomy. Instead it reduced their autonomy to determine for themselves how to balance their commitment to

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\(^2\) Detailed data about activities was collected at wave two of the survey. At that time, around nine months after wave one, 55 participants were aware that they had a Participation Agreement (Alexander et al. 2005:80).

\(^3\) Two of the 12 employed parents were unpaid family workers.

\(^4\) Six hours is close to the required number of hours if the 150 hours is averaged out over six months.
employment and family. For example, Nicole explained that she felt under pressure
to make a commitment to further study before she was sure what she wanted to do.

Nicole: … they kind of push you, as well. ‘Like, okay so you’re
doing this now, so what are you going to do when this is finished?’
… I haven’t decided whether I want to go and work in a salon, or
whether I want to go and do more study. So I don’t actually know.
But I had to make an agreement with this lady that I’m going to go
and try and get into another TAFE course and a few different things
that I’ve had to agree that I’ll definitely do, otherwise they cut your
payments off.

Like the parents surveyed by Alexander et al. (2005), Nicole was not aware that she
could apply to change her Activity Agreement if her circumstances changed.
However she was sharply aware that breaking the agreement could lead to a loss of
payments.

Whereas previously a mother could elect to change her pattern of employment and
study to suit her understanding of her family’s needs, under Australians Working
Together, if it meant she would not meet her activity requirement, she would have to
negotiate her decision with Centrelink. So, for example, when one of the mothers I
interviewed, Alia, decided to stop attending her English classes during summer
because her asthma made walking to class in summer impossible, she needed to
explain this decision to Centrelink. Otherwise, if she did not fulfil her Activity
Agreement, she could be penalised and have her benefits reduced. If she explained
her decision, but Centrelink found that the summer heat was not a sufficient reason to
stop going to English classes, then Alia might be unable to renegotiate her
Agreement. Then she would face a choice between protecting her health in the
manner she felt was best and preserving her Parenting Payment by continuing to
attend classes.

Furthermore, Australians Working Together limited the autonomy of all Parenting
Payment claimants whose youngest child was aged 13 to 15. This was the case
regardless of whether or not they were fully meeting the activity requirement prior to
it becoming compulsory. Even though they already managed their lives in a way
which accorded with the official depiction of welfare recipients’ obligations, these
parents were required nonetheless to sign a Participation Agreement. These parents
demonstrated a capacity to make decisions for their family which also met
government objectives, but their autonomy was constrained regardless.

Conclusion

Australians Working Together did not dramatically change the daily lives of parents,
as they were generally already engaged in the kinds of activities it encouraged.
However, what did change dramatically was the environment in which they parented.
No longer could mothers decide for themselves how best to organise their
employment, study and family. Under Australians Working Together, they risked
breaching a contractual agreement if they stopped paid employment to prioritise their
children’s needs. Rather than making such decisions themselves, parents were instead
required to notify Centrelink of any change and renegotiate their agreements. Failure
to do so carried severe consequences, a loss of income support. While few if any penalties were applied to Parenting Payment claimants, the mothers in my study were well aware of this threat. In addition, claimants tended to have an exaggerated sense of their obligations under their Participation Agreement and many did not understand that they could renegotiate their agreements (Alexander et al. 2005). As a result, parents might have continued with a heavier workload than necessary despite needing to change it for fear of losing their Parenting Payment.

Welfare to Work substantially further reduces parents’ autonomy when compared to Australians Working Together. More low-income parents face compulsory requirements, as these now apply from when the youngest child is in primary school, and the requirements are greater. Welfare to Work expanded the compulsory nature of Australians Working Together, requiring at least 15 hours of employment per week from parents. Yet many mothers were already working close to this number of hours prior to the introduction of Australians Working Together and many wished for, but could not find, additional hours. Merely mandating that mothers spend longer each week in paid employment does not necessarily ensure that they will be able to find more hours.

The Welfare to Work policy mechanism that most significantly reduces parents’ autonomy is the requirement to report on their employment and job search to Centrelink every fortnight, compared to every six months under Australians Working Together. Each fortnight, parents receiving Newstart Allowance visit a Centrelink office to submit a form which details their activities. Any time a mother’s hours drop below 30 in a fortnight, she needs to explain why, whether or not it was anticipated, how long she expects to be working fewer hours and, if unable to answer these questions appropriately, explain why she did not look for another job (Australian government, Guide to Social Security Law, 3.2.8.40, reviewed 20 March 2008). This highly detailed level of reporting significantly reduces a mother’s autonomy to determine for herself when reduced hours are acceptable and what length of time being employed at reduced hours is too long. The amplified surveillance places parents at a high risk of being penalised.

References


