We have our dignity, yeah?

Scrutiny under suspicion: Experiences of Welfare conditionality in the Irish Social Protection System.

Abstract

Conditionality has arguably always been part of welfare and poor relief regimes dating at least as far back as the poor laws and the condition of less eligibility. Nevertheless, there has arguably been a more pronounced turn towards welfare conditionality in the latter part of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries and this appears to be continuing across jurisdictions largely unabated and despite the fact that large amounts of evidence continues to suggest the ineffectiveness of welfare conditionality as means of promoting re-entry to the workforce for those experiencing unemployment. Alongside this, much evidence also points to the ultimately deleterious effects of welfare conditionality on those at whom it is targeted. This is an area which has seen an abundance of recent contributions in the context of the UK and further afield but that has arguably suffered from a lack of cognate data that sheds light on the Irish example. In attempting to begin to remedy this, this article presents data from a series of interviews carried out with welfare recipients in Ireland in 2018. The purpose of this article is to shed light on experiences of conditionality in the contemporary Irish welfare state and to attempt to nuance further what conditionality can mean. In doing so, this article takes the approach of allowing the data to 'speak for itself' in order to best showcase the experiences of those most effected by welfare conditionality.

Keywords: Welfare; welfare state conditionality; lived experiences; scrutiny; Ireland.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to shed light on experiences of conditionality in the contemporary Irish welfare state while further refining and nuancing what welfare conditionality means in the minutiae of the everyday. Welfare conditionality in general has seen an abundance of recent contributions in the context of the UK but has arguably suffered from a lack of cognate data that sheds light on the Irish example, although this is slowly changing (see Wiggan, 2015; Boland and Griffin 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2018; Collins and Murphy, 2016; Boland 2018; Millar and Crosse, 2018; Murphy, 2018; 2019; Gaffney and Millar, 2020). In attempting to remedy this further, this article presents data from a series of in-depth interviews carried out with welfare recipients in Ireland in 2018. Historically, conditionality has arguably always been part of formalised welfare regimes and 'poor relief' dating at least as far back as the poor laws and the condition of less eligibility (Dukelow and Considine, 2017; Powell, 1992; 2017). Nevertheless, there has arguably been a more pronounced turn towards welfare conditionality in the latter part of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. Internationally, literature suggests that ongoing reforms to welfare regimes across jurisdictions since about the 1970s are indicative of the bedding in of neoliberalism as a 'global' ideology (Harvey, 2007; Dardot and Laval 2013). Arguably, a pronounced feature of this 'bedding-in' has been an emphasis on welfare reform that promotes strict conditionality (Umney et al, 2018). In Ireland specifically, 2011 ushered in the beginning of extensive reforms to the social protection system under the then Minister, Joan Burton, TD. These saw the establishment of Intreo – a new 'one-stop shop' that brought together all employment and income services. Policy followed and in 2012 in 'Pathways to Work' (GOI, 2012) policy document which outlined a series of conditionalities based on new labour market activation schemes was introduced (McCashin, 2019). Overall,

this constituted an emphasis on a 'work-first' mode of practice in the Irish welfare state (Millar and Crosse, 2018).

Of course, welfare conditionality is not solely focused on those receiving jobseeker type payments and, accordingly, the participants interviewed for this study consist of a diverse cohort who will have all faced welfare conditionality to varying degrees, the nature of which will have been dependent on their payment type. In defining what is meant by welfare conditionality, notable work by Clasen and Clegg (2007) offers a useful framework using the concepts of *category*, *circumstance* and *conduct* to arrive at a way of conducting comparative analysis of contemporary welfare regimes in respect to conditionality. However, as meaningful comparison is beyond the scope of what is presented here, it is felt that the following definition, taken from the Welfare Conditionality (2019, p, 08) final findings report, provides a useful starting point:

> Welfare conditionality links eligibility for collectively provided welfare benefits and services to recipients' specified compulsory responsibilities or particular patterns of behaviour. It has been a key element of welfare state reform in many nations since the mid-1990s.

Here the concept of eligibility is linked to specified responsibilities and patterns of behaviour and this essentially captures the inherent nature of welfare conditionality. Furthermore, this definition does have consistency within the contemporary literature (see Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). However, building on this definition in an attempt to add nuance, it can also be argued that many aspects of welfare conditionality are simply 'expected' without necessarily being explicitly or overtly specified, constituting the 'mundane' reality of life in the welfare space. There are also, arguably, 'hidden' or at least less well-known areas of conditionality that may only become apparent when the boundaries that they set down are contravened. For the

purposes of example, in Ireland, the obvious conditions for receipt of a jobseeker's payment are that the recipient be both available for and actively seeking work, proof of which is required periodically. There is also the need to engage with employment and training services as and when requested with the potential of sanctions for non-compliance. Both of these areas of conditionality are explicit (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2019a [hereafter DEASP]). However, further 'expected' aspects of the conditions for legitimate receipt include, signing on as a jobseeker at a specified time and in a specified place, collection of payments in person, again at a specified time and in a specified place, an inability to pursue further education as this disqualifies individuals from receiving a jobseekers type payment on the basis that it prevents them from actively seeking employment[1], the inability to partake in voluntary work[2] without explicit permission as, again, this may be deemed to be contrary to the role of the active jobseeker. Permission must also be sought to go out of country or to take a holiday[3]. Welfare conditionality often also means the submission to and passing of a means test alongside an agreement to update welfare administrators should the financial circumstances of a recipient change, meaning that it is a condition of payment, either partial payment or full, that the means of a recipient are below a fixed amount. It is to this, much broader and arguably more nuanced conception of conditionality which the findings presented in this article refer. In this respect, both direct and obvious, examples of welfare conditionality will be drawn upon as well as more subtle or 'hidden' examples.

Research design: Brief overview

This research presented in this article has been carried out in the context of a PhD study. It has been conducted using qualitative research techniques and has sought to produce original data which is both rich and meaningful giving both a sense of experiences and the things that go to make them up. This method of data collection involved the researcher conducting in-depth

interviews each of which took the form of a 'structured conversation'[4] and which were carried out over a period of approximately two months in various locations in the south of Ireland. Interviews were approximately an hour in duration and focused on various thematic aspects of participants' experiences of claiming and receiving social welfare and how this impacted on their day to day lives. Drawing on the work of Baumberg (2016) and Patrick (2016; 2017), the following concepts were utilised during fieldwork to help give a language to experience:

1) **Claims stigma:** The stigma that arises during the process of actually claiming benefit or welfare entitlements;
2) **Stigmatisation:** The perception that others will devalue your identity as a result of claiming benefits;
3) **Personal stigma:** A person's own sense that claiming benefits conveys a devalued identity.

These concepts were not theorised beyond how they have been dealt with in the work of Baumberg (2016) and Patrick (2016; 2017) and neither was it the researcher's intention to approach the use of these concepts in an attempt at abduction. Rather they functioned as research tools by simply allowing the researcher to open up a dialogue with participants. Essentially, each participant was engaged in a conversation by the researcher and asked to discuss each of the three areas in turn. The allowed the participants the scope to articulate their experiences in detail while simultaneously keeping the conversation structured around the themes of interest. Twenty-two interviews were carried out and nineteen[5] were subsequently transcribed for analysis. NVivo code and retrieve software was utilised throughout the analysis process. In particular, this study focused on those who were or who had been in receipt of the following core group of payments:

1) **Jobseekers Benefit (JB) and Jobseekers Allowance (JA)[6];**

2) **Illness benefit (IB) and Disability Allowance (DA)[7];**

3) **One Parent Family Payment (OPFP) Jobseekers Transitional Payment (JST)[8].**

Removed payment info. Replaced with endnotes.

These particular payment schemes were chosen as they provide a comprehensive cross-section of working-age welfare state service users in the Irish context and it was hoped would therefore uncover a wide range of experiences and the potential differences and similarities between these.

Inclusion criteria

To be included in the research, participants simply either had to have been in, or still be in, receipt of any of the payments listed above. There were no exclusions based on age, ethnicity or gender etc. This was because the core research interest was broad representation across the core working age payments related to unemployment as opposed to seeking to test whether there were differences in experiences according to other aspects of identity (gender, age etc). Nevertheless, participant profile information was collected at the point of interview in a bid to establish a foundation for more intersectional analysis at a later stage. The breakdown of participants whose transcripts were selected for analysis is detailed in the following table: Table 1:

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age group**	**Welfare category**	**Duration on current scheme**	**Region**	**Other details**
Jane	F	40-49	JST/OPFP	10 yrs approx.	Cork city area	Single m* of two. In higher ED**
Patricia	F	30-39	JSA/BTEA	5 yrs approx.	Town in Tipperary county/Cork city area***	Single individual. In higher ED

Clive	M	50-65	JSA	10 yrs approx.	Town in Cork county	Single individual. Fully unemployed
Olive	F	40-49	JSA/BTEA (formerly)	10 yrs approx (periodically)	Rural Clare/Kerry	Single individual. Currently on Tús[9] Scheme
Mary	F	18-29	JSA	3 months fulltime/9-10 on and off	Cork city area	Single individual. Suffers from anxiety/ Fully unemployed
Scarlett	F	18-29	OPFP	4yrs approx.	Town in Cork county	Single m of two. Also works part time.
Lisa	F	30-39	JSA/BTEA	6 months approx.	Cork city area	Works part time
Grace	F	18-29	OPFP	5 yrs approx.	Cork city area	Single m of one. Fully unemployed
James	M	50-65	DA	20yrs+	Cork city area	Single individual. Suffers from severe psychological illness
Martin	M	30-39	JSA	2 yrs approx.	Town in Cork county	Single individual. Fully unemployed
Gail	F	30-39	DA	15yrs approx.	Town in Cork county	Single m of one. Significant mental health issues. Fully unemployed
Trevor	M	30-39	DA	12yrs approx.	Town in Cork county	Single individual. Significant mental health issues. Fully unemployed
Trish	F	40-49	JSA	3yrs approx.	Cork city area	Single individual. Fully unemployed.

Alan	M	18-29	JSA/BTEA	2yrs fulltime then 3yrs on/off.	Cork city area and rural Kerry	Single individual. Now fully employed.
Peter	M	30-39	JSA	2yrs fulltime plus 1yr part time	Cork city area.	Single individual. Works part time
Graham	M	50-65+	JSA	10yrs+	Cork city area	Fully unemployed.
Harley	F	18-29	IB	5mths	Town in Cork county	Recent mental breakdown.
Frank	M	50-65+	DA	8yrs	Town in Cork county	Suffers from poor mental health.
Jennifer	F	30-39	OPFP	16yrs approx.	Cork city suburb	m of two, also has long term chronic condition

Breakdown: F (11); M (8); JA(10): OPFP/JST(4); DA(4) IB(1)

***m=Mother**
*****ED=Education**
*****Some people have had experiences in more than one geographical area.**

As can be seen from the above list, a total of nineteen interviews, which consisted of eleven female and eight male participants, were included for analysis.

Recruitment strategy and recruitment avenues

There was a multi-pronged approach to recruitment which included a widespread poster campaign coupled with an online campaign as well assistance in recruiting through gatekeepers. Snowballing was also used, via initial interviews, in an attempt to gain additional participants. This was built into the consent form that participants were asked to sign, essentially giving them the option to pass details of the study on to others should they wish to do so, while remaining aware that by doing so they were potentially identifying themselves as a participant of the study to others.

Overview of the remaining sections

Having briefly discussed the research context and having described how the research was undertaken, the remainder of this article will present data from the research process before concluding with a brief discussion. What follows is by far the lengthiest and most detailed part of the article and, again, the purpose here is to both enter Irish data into the record while simultaneously attempting to nuance how conditionalities can be conceptualised beyond that which is overtly specified to include that which is habitually expected or more deeply hidden. In the first instance, the data will speak to experiences across payment types and deals, in the main, with the process of establishing a claim. From here attention turns to the process of maintaining a claim and the multiple conditionalities that this entails, encapsulating a move toward monitoring, surveillance and a strict adherence to predetermined conditions. Finally, data that illustrates the effects of the public face of making and maintaining a claim on claimants will be presented and here it will be shown that what makes up the mundane and expected everyday of welfare recipiency can often be the most impactful for those receiving it.

Experiences across payment types: Submitting for judgement

Conditionality is something that has affected all participants in this study across the different payment groups, the specificity of which is reliant on payment type. In the case of DA, submitting for a physical assessment or assessments can form part of the overall claim assessment process (DEASP, 2019b). This process was something that Frank, a recipient of DA, experienced when he first applied to receive assistance:

> I've had to prove that I was genuine—you know, that's how I felt. I had to get notes off my GPs. I had to get notes off of the specialist. I go to the pain clinic, I had to get notes

> off of him stating, yeah, this man is attending me because of his back, this is what's wrong, this is the part of his back that's giving trouble. It's like you constantly have to do it.

Here Frank talks about feeling the need to prove that he was genuine, and this was something experienced by many of the participants across the different payment groups. Essentially, Frank describes building up a body of evidence in order to prove his worthiness. This suggests that while welfare conditionality is often conceptualised as the step's recipients take in order to continue receiving a payment, it is also an aspect of qualifying to receive a payment in the first place. It is a process that, in the first instance, is tempered with the veil of judgment before latterly becoming much more about monitoring, surveillance and a strict adherence to pre-determined conditions. Ultimately, and apparently despite the evidence provided by his GP and others, Frank had to submit for a medical assessment, a process which he found particularly difficult:

> I was scared going in because I knew I was going to come out in more pain than when I went in. He'd get your leg, he'd put it up, he pinned it back, and you'd be in tears. And I say, 'Doc, you have to stop.' And there's one stage I had to get off the couch and I wouldn't let [him] touch me and I walked out. I couldn't. Like the pain the man put me in I spent a couple of days sleeping on the ground, on a hard ground, because I couldn't go to bed with my back.

This was something that Frank described experiencing on more than one occasion. In the first instance, it seems unnecessarily intrusive and invasive given that Frank had already, by that point, provided documentary evidence attesting to his prevailing medical condition from several qualified medical practitioners. Nevertheless, this was part of Frank's process of

making a successful claim to receive DA. When asked why he felt he had been examined in the way that he had, Frank was certain as to the purpose:

> The purpose was to prove to who[m]ever the powers be that I'm a genuine person and he's just there to try everything just to make sure that I was genuine, that I wasn't pulling a fast one.

It is clear from what Franks says here that he viewed the assessment process, at least in part, as a submission to and for judgement. He talks about proving that he is a 'genuine' person, someone that is worthy of assistance. This submission to judgement is something that Jayanetti (2018, np), writing in the context of the UK welfare system, has labelled 'Punishment beatings by public demand' conceptualising access to welfare entitlements as 'a set of institutional trials to determine whether individuals are sufficiently morally worthy to receive benefits' (np) and suggesting that in order to receive assistance:

> ...every individual must prove that he or she is worthy of public money, that they have done everything imaginable to avoid needing benefits and nothing to put themselves in their situation. Every aspect of their life and mindset is rendered fair game for scrutiny.

The concept of 'Punishment beatings by public demand' also suggests that while the mechanism of conditionality is structurally bounded, in that, it is administered and carried out within a welfare system; it is nonetheless guided and influenced by public perception and discourse in the form of the welfare framing consensus (Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Patrick, 2016; 2017; Boland and Griffin, 2016; Devereaux and Power, 2019).

It can be argued that the experiences described by Frank meet the description of conditionality given above; with the scrutiny he underwent going so far as to move beyond the symbolic violence talked about by Pinker (1971) in the context of welfare to include the actual

infliction of pain. This submission to judgement, or set of trials, was something experienced across payment groups as part of the qualifying process. Below, Martin describes the process in the context of JA:

> I found it to be very rigorous…Detailed bank accounts—six months banks accounts. It can be very demanding as to what information you have to—for example, my parents had to...undergo testing as to what school they went to in 1934 and things like that.

While perhaps not as visceral or physically intrusive in nature as the medical assessment undergone by Frank, what Martin describes here nevertheless seems to border on forensic. He describes finding the process to be 'very rigorous' and again this speaks to the high level of scrutiny that claimants must undergo in order to establish worthiness. It is also clear that there is a struggle on Martin's part in gathering the necessary information. This, in turn, raises questions about the necessity to submit certain types of information. In particular, Martin describes his parents needing to provide information as to what school they attended in 1934. Martin also suggests that the penalty for not submitting the correct required information was as serious as potentially having a claim dismissed:

> There were these letters that used to come in and there was 'provide this information'——'or the claim would be dismissed'.

Graham, a recipient of JA, also describes the forensic level of scrutiny needed to re-establish a claim; something which he too felt was overly cumbersome and at least partly unnecessary:

> I had to fill in about ten fucking forms. Now, this is all information they already have, right. Nothing is going to change at my time of life...oh, here, fill that in. I mean, they're computerised.

Again, Graham's experience speaks to submitting to forensic scrutiny via the need to provide copious amounts of information in order to establish his worthiness. He is clearly also left feeling that much of what he is required to provide is unnecessary as the information is already available to welfare administrators, an assertion that is not without credence or basis given that service user data is increasingly managed and stored electronically. Below, Olive, a recipient of JA, echoes both Martin's and Graham's experiences:

> It was very much you have to have everything perfect. If they want a letter phrased in a particular way from your employer, if they wanted something, then if it wasn't exactly right there'd be a bit of a pause or a bit of hesitancy to say, well, when is that starting, or when are you starting that, or—you know, everything was questioned, everything was I wouldn't say aggressive but it was suspicious.

Olive describes needing to have everything in perfect order when submitting information. She also describes having to do so under the veil of suspicion if not quite aggression. In an example of what could perhaps be considered one of the more 'hidden', or at least less explicit, aspects of welfare conditionality, Peter, a recipient of JA, describes the reaction of welfare administrators to the revelation that he was going on holiday, something he had arranged and paid for prior to becoming unemployed:

> ...at the same time now I signed on the Social I was going on holidays…I said, 'I'm going on my holidays.' And she said, 'What are you doing down here looking for money?' I said, 'Excuse me, I'm not down here looking for money,' I said, 'I'm entitled to my social welfare.' She says, 'No, you're not entitled to social welfare,' she says to me...I said, 'Okay, well, look, I've a holiday paid for.' I says, 'I paid for it while I was working.' 'Grand, away you go.' 'I'm going off to Alaska.' 'Oh, you've money to go to Alaska and you're down here looking for money off us.'

There is a very clear tone of judgement in this exchange as it's described by Peter. The inherent suggestion appears to be that Peter should not be trying to establish a claim to a social welfare payment whilst at the same time planning to go on holiday, despite the fact that this arrangement was made and paid for prior to his becoming unemployed. He is also made starkly aware that he is 'not entitled to social welfare' as a matter of right; rather he may or may not be after detailed scrutiny. Whilst this exchange speaks mainly to an aspect of 'scrutiny under suspicion' the formalised conditionality attached to the reality of going on holiday while attempting to establish a claim to social welfare was also made plain:

> 'It's paid for.' I said, 'I was working. I paid for a holiday.' I said, 'I'm entitled to go on the holiday.' And she said, 'Okay, when you go on holidays,' she says, you've to bring back my boarding flight and show them and my hotels, the hotel I stayed, and show them. And I went, 'Why do I have to show you that?' 'That's what you have to show us.'

Here, the arguably more deeply hidden, nature of welfare conditionality is laid bare. Peter can go on holiday, but in doing so he needs to provide documentation to attest to this. When he asks why this is the case, he is simply told that that's what's required.

This experience of 'scrutiny under suspicion' was common for many of the participants across payment groups. For example, below Grace describes a similar level of scrutiny in the context of applying for OPFP:

> ...there was a lot of questions, but then also the other side of which is why are you not getting maintenance? Where is he? What's his name? How do we know you're telling the truth? All this kind of stuff. And you're just like I don't know, I barely know the fella!...So they'd ask me to and you'd have to send in a form, or, you know, you'd have

> to fill it out, and maybe your rental agreement, all that kind of stuff again...Bank statements, everything. So you do feel like you've no privacy, like.

In Grace's case, much of the initial focus appears to be on the question of child maintenance payments, something which was difficult for Grace given her personal circumstances. She also details the familiar process of filling out forms and submitting documentation. Again, there is an inherent thread of submitting for judgement and scrutiny here, the undergoing of 'institutional trials' (Jayanetti, 2018). Scarlett describes a similar experience when making her application for OPFP:

> I remember I needed an awful lot of stuff for it, which I found it hard to gather. So there's lots of stuff that you need for it. Everything is looked into. You almost feel like you're being investigated—

Echoing the experiences of Grace, the tone described by Scarlett is one of 'scrutiny under suspicion' and, along with needing to provide 'an awful lot of stuff'; she specifically references feeling like she is being investigated.

So far, this article has described the nature of the welfare conditionality that has been experienced by participants in the process of establishing a claim. It is argued here that this involves a submission for judgement and the undergoing of 'scrutiny under suspicion' in what could be considered a set of 'institutional trials' (Jayanetti, 2018). However, this represents only the beginning of the conditionality process. As claimants work to maintain their entitlement, they are subject to continued conditionality that shifts form, becoming much more about monitoring, surveillance and a strict adherence to pre-determined conditions alongside aspects of the mundane, habitual and expected. It is to these aspects of welfare conditionality that attention will now turn.

Ongoing welfare conditionality: Monitoring, surveillance and a strict adherence to pre-determined conditions

Having submitted for judgement, undergone a set of institutional trials and having been subject to 'scrutiny under suspicion', successful applicants now enter a new phase of continuing conditionality, one that is characterised by ongoing scrutiny and continuous monitoring. Jane, a recipient of OPFP, describes this level of monitoring as 'constant':

> ...you have constant reviews, you know, where they send out these review sheets,

When asked what kinds of information were required during these reviews Jane answered that:

> They're asking about do you get maintenance, if so, how much, if not, why not? They're asking you about your tenancy, how much rent you pay, your bank statements, if you're working or if you're studying.

It is clear from what Jane says here that the level of scrutiny undergone at the time of establishing a claim does not 'drop off' or 'relax' once that claim has been established, rather it persists in much the same format. This was common across the participant group and across payment types. Staying with OPFP recipients, Scarlett talks specifically about the continuing feeling of being investigated in the context of maintaining a claim:

> You have to maintain it, yeah. And again there's still the investigation feel, constantly having to send in six months' bank accounts.

Again, the key word used by Scarlett is 'constant' and she goes on to paint a picture of what this constancy consists of that echoes Jane's experience of the process:

> Constantly. You know anything changes and I need to source forms, I need to go to the city, get form, tell them everything. Everything about my life needs to be known.

A common focus of review for the OPFP participants in this study was the continuous need to provide up to date bank statements. This is arguably an intensive level of scrutiny and one which many of these participants found difficult to deal with:

> ...I feel that you know, I, you know, work within my means and like let's say I want to order JustEat[10] for the kids or I want to get something nice, you know, that's up to me and I would have felt embarrassed if, you know, that was on my six months' bank account. But I suppose that's me, like…

Scarlett talks about feeling embarrassed about the nature of some of her purchases, which she knows will inevitably be viewed by the persons or individual administering her review. Grace has faced similar embarrassment and has sought to adjust her behaviour as a result:

> ...it's made me a little bit more conscious about what I use my card for. And like I know that sounds a little bit ridiculous but like I do purposely kind of say I'll only use my cards for the groceries, petrol, and then if I want to go out I will only use cash...

Grace is clearly conscious of the nature of her purchases and of how she perceives they will be received, meaning that she is clearly affected by the review process that forms part of the conditions for maintaining her entitlement. She may still 'go out' but she is affected enough that, in doing so, she will only bring cash. This was also at issue for Jane:

> ...if I have something that I spent, sometimes you look at it—you know if you went to McDonald's and you put it on your debit card or something and you're like oh, that doesn't look good, you know!... I'd be very aware of, like, well, yeah, that doesn't look great...so I can kind of get rid of that part.

Jane talks about purposely tailoring her bank statements to remove what she sees as problematic purchases, perhaps purchases that she feels somebody receiving welfare should not be making.

Fear the postman

A further aspect of how continuing scrutiny was experienced as stressful and difficult for many of the participants, and one which shows the very real effects of the encroachment of the welfare system into the lives of those who interact with it, was something as simple as receiving correspondence by post. Of course, an aspect of the on-going scrutiny that is incorporated into the overall structure of conditionality necessitates a degree of communication between the administrators of welfare and the recipient's thereof. It has also been noted by many of the participants' that this correspondence appeared, at times, to border on the frequency of constant. With this in mind, receiving correspondence from the DEASP was something that many of the participants in this study really appeared to dread, with some participants even having a visibly stressful reaction to the topic during interview. When articulating her experiences of receiving correspondence by post, Jane describes a viscerally powerful reaction that gives a real sense of just how impactful this aspect of welfare conditionality can be:

> I get a pain in my stomach...Stress straight away...I get a pain in my stomach when I'm opening it...It's just always, you know, a review or something's wrong or 'come in', you know.

And, far from isolated, this was common for many of the participants and across payment groups. Here, for example, Trish, a recipient of JA, makes a strikingly similar observation:

> I dread. My heart goes. I see the envelope and I'm like oh God, what do they want now, you know?...I get the sweats, you know. What do they want now?

Grace describes something similar:

> I'd say it's *quite* stressful, especially for somebody like me. I get anxious over the smallest things. The small things panic me. And getting another letter in the door it freaks me out.

It is clear, from these accounts, that receiving the continuous correspondence that goes along with being a welfare recipient can be an intensely stressful experience and this can arguably be conceptualised as one of the more hidden or less obvious aspects of welfare conditionality at least in the sense that it is not commonly thought of as such. As was shown earlier, hidden or less apparent conditionalities, when revealed, can effectively 'condition' recipients to engage in maintaining the visage of compliance through impression management, however, more than this, it can also induce fear, stress and anxiety.

The public face of welfare recipiency under 'expected' conditions

For a welfare recipient to successfully realise an entitlement they can't simply stay at home, apply over the phone or over the internet. Making a successful claim involves a degree of physical activity. It necessitates a claimant to enter the physical geography of the welfare state, to queue in obvious proximity to other members of the public, to liaise, in person, with welfare administrators, to be interviewed, often with little privacy, essentially to dedicate oneself to the goal of establishing, or not as the case may be, an entitlement based on pre-determined criteria. Once, and if, this has been successfully achieved recipients must continue to enter the physical geography of the welfare state, to sign-on, to collect payments, to hand in medical certificates, to further liaise with welfare administrators and so on. This will have been a reality, and at the time of interview continued to be so, for most of the participants quoted in this article and this was an aspect of 'expected' welfare conditionality with which many of the participants

struggled a great deal. Below Harley, an IB recipient who had suffered a serious mental breakdown leading to her reliance on the payment, describes really struggling with this aspect of managing her claim in the context of collecting her payment in the local post office:

> ...it's that haunting moment sometimes walking into the post office and people knowing what you're doing, yeah...The post office will always be a problem...I think generally the women in there are just very...it's almost as soon as you take out that card it's like, you know, they don't look at you as much. And I don't know if that's the way I look but I go, 'Have a nice day. I hope you have a great time. Thank you so much.' You know, I would be pleasant mannered and stuff but it always seems like there's, you know, literally as well as physically there's a block in between us, like, there's some type of friction.

Harley clearly struggles with this aspect of managing her claim, she describes entering the post office as a 'haunting moment' and suggests that it will always be a problem. She also describes perceiving a change in how she is received once she produces her social welfare card thus revealing or 'spoiling' her identity (Goffman, 1990 [1963]). Whether or not this is the case, what it does denote is the difficulty with which Harley experiences this aspect of mundane or 'expected' conditionality. This public face of claiming, and the post office in particular was something that many of the participants struggle with:

> I think it's a bit, yeah, degrading, like, to meet neighbours in your local post office and all this when you're collecting—everyone knows you're collecting your money. Like that would bother me... I suppose because it's the local post office. Like, you're always going to meet someone. And then you have like your card and you're going along. I think everyone knows what you're there for, and I just think that some people can be very judgemental.

Here, Jennifer, a recipient of OPFP, describes something similar to Harley. She specifically refers to using the local post-office as 'degrading'. Again, she also refers to producing her social welfare card as though an act of revelation, effectively marking you as a welfare recipient and making your purposes plain to other members of the public. This speaks to elements of Goffman's (1990 [1963]) classical conception of stigma, specifically the notion of possessing a 'discreditable' stigma, that is, one that is not immediately obvious and can be hidden to a point. Of course, the bearer of such a stigma can engage in 'passing' but, an act such as producing a social welfare card during the public process of collecting a payment, undoes the pretence and reveals that which the bearer finds 'degrading' and would rather be keep hidden. James, a long-term recipient of DA with significant mental health issues, has also found collecting his payment in the post-office difficult to negotiate at times and links this specifically to the work ethic along with his own sense own sense of internal ethics:

> Well, I used to feel very uncomfortable about doing it, you know...I suppose I felt that I was wrong to take it when I should be looking for work more sincerely or something like that...Out looking for it more. More actively I suppose I should say, you know...I suppose it's just my ethics, you know.

Grace describes facing particular issues around how to personally present when collecting her payment in the post office:

> …there's almost a sense of guilt when you have a new pair of shoes or you have gotten your hair done. And that shouldn't be the case...I suppose it's just the way it is. But I feel like you would be kind of like, oh, where did she get the money for this? And you go into the post office and you're collecting your money they're like, oh, you know, you got your hair done, or whatever, like.

Grace echoes the experiences of Harley. There is a concern with how she feels she might be perceived, and this appears to devolve upon ideas around public judgement, deservingness and what constitutes legitimate expenditure for a welfare recipient.

Aside from the post office, privacy in spaces such as these was something that many of the participants also struggled with as Lisa articulates:

> I mean, the spaces themselves are not conducive to privacy or confidentiality. You know, there's no sort of design plan or thought gone it in according to what it is that's going on, you know...You're clearly on display, like, you know. And if you know who the people are then you know what the person is in talking about. So again no privacy even when there's kind of voice privacy, shall we say. But, yeah, I mean, maybe that's part of the design.

Lisa, a recipient of JA, describes a fundamental lack of privacy and likens this to, in effect, being 'on display'. Interestingly, she also questions whether the infrastructural design might not be intentional in this respect. This question of design is interesting as it was something that several of the participants touched upon in respect to the public element of making and maintaining a claim. For example, Olive questions the essential purpose for which a building, in this case a local social welfare office, was designed:

> This building wasn't designed for what it's supposed to do because it can't even contain the people that are supposed to be engaging with it. Maybe they've never been that busy since it was built, I don't know.

Olive was accessing the buildings concerned during the late 2008/early 2009 period and onwards. Undoubtedly, there would have been an influx of people in need of social assistance at that time, brought on by the sudden and severe downturn in the Irish economy. With this in

mind, it could be argued that many of the buildings in use at that time were almost certainly not designed with recessionary numbers in mind, previous recessions notwithstanding. Nevertheless, what Olive goes on to describe certainly speaks to the potentially stigmatising nature of interacting with the physical geography of the welfare state, a necessary condition of making and maintaining a claim:

> ...could they not open like fifteen or twenty minutes early when they see there's a queue and at least let people stand—even if they're not at their desks, if the blinds are down, could people just not stand in from the weather and from the rain and just be afforded some little bit of space?

Olive describes the indignity of standing in the rain waiting for welfare offices to open, the building unable to cope with the influx of people and the staff apparently not willing or able to ameliorate the situation. As frustrated as Olive may have been, she nevertheless displays a degree of acceptance and understanding of the necessity of her situation. Other participants in the study make no such compunctions and are clear on what they feel the public face of making and maintaining a claim ultimately represent:

> We have our dignity, yeah? And I think dignity is a thing you must protect in people if sometimes they can't protect it themselves...And it's very undignifying, that. You know, the very fact the way it's set up. You've to go down to the dole office. You must go down and sign, you know...You must go there. It's almost as though it's designed to take away people's dignity.

Here, Clive sums up the concept of hidden, less explicit or 'expected' welfare conditionality and the effect it can have. He questions the way the system is set-up. Ultimately, he concludes that in order to make or maintain your claim you *must* go where you are directed, it is a condition of receipt and one that arguably has a deep effect on human dignity.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to present data that illustrated experiences of conditionality in the Irish welfare space. The goal in doing so was to put lived experiences, front and centre in an attempt to nuance what is meant by and what can be seen as welfare conditionality. Having done so, questions about what this means for Irish welfare recipients and for the Irish welfare imaginary remain. In attempting to answer this, it is perhaps worth looking at jurisdictions where more pronounced levels of welfare conditionality have become deeply entrenched. Again, while meaningful comparison may be beyond the scope of this article, certain points of confluence do bear some discussion.

In turning to Ireland's nearest neighbour, in an article from 2015 that addresses the welfare framing consensus in the UK, Jensen and Tyler (2015, p. 471) noted that:

> It is difficult to remember from a contemporary perspective that the Keynesian welfare state was imagined by its original architects as a 'cradle to grave' safety-net for citizens: a 'welfare commons' of 'shared risks' which would function to ameliorate economic and social hardships, injustices and inequalities.

In the time since this intervention by Jensen and Tyler (2015) there have been reports based on conditions in Britain and Northern Ireland, that appear to show all too starkly what the human cost of a move away from an ethos of 'shared risk' has been (Alston, 2019). Others still have questioned the compatibility of a welfare state, now characterised by strict conditionality, with the Marshallian 'right to welfare' (Fitzpatrick, McKeever and Simpson, 2019). Undoubtedly then, welfare practices and processes have changed in the UK, affecting the welfare imaginary and thus the 'common-sense' understanding of the meaning of welfare. The notion of right to welfare, constituted as a right to basic 'a modicum of economic welfare and security' (Marshall and Bottomore 1992, p. 8) appears significantly eroded. In practice, this 'paradigm shift'

manifests in the operation of conditionalities which were described here earlier as a form of submission to judgement and the undergoing of 'Punishment beatings by public demand' and which conceptualise gaining access to welfare entitlements as 'a set of institutional trials' (Jayanetti 2018, np) rather than a matter of access by right. With this in mind, a question that arises from a consideration of the data presented here, along with a growing body of other scholarly material, is whether or not there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Ireland has followed or is now following a similar trajectory to that seen in the UK and, if this is the case, what does this mean for welfare recipients here. While the Irish welfare state does not ultimately devolve upon the same Beveridgian or Marshallian template as the British model, recent changes in policy and practice, spoken about here in the introductory paragraphs in the context of Intreo and Pathways to Work (GOI, 2012), suggest that there is perhaps more overlap now than ever before.

Bearing this out further, one of the most striking aspects of the data that emerged from this study, and apparent in some of what has been presented here, is the sense of both space and place, as they relate to welfare conditionality, and the 'compulsion' inherent in both. 'Space', as it is used here is very much presented as being an intangible aspect in the experience of welfare recipiency. Place, on the other hand, is meant in the sense of hard physical geography and was perhaps most apparent in data which described welfare conditionality as being encompassed within a 'compulsive geography' of the welfare state, into which claimants needed to continuously enter to both establish and maintain welfare entitlements and in which they were further compelled to engage in activities necessary to meet their entitlement requirements. It is also notable that the compulsive geography of the Irish welfare state has fairly recently broadened via the 'insertion' of private job matching services into the infrastructure of the Irish welfare state via the Jobs-Path initiative. Entities such as Turas Nua and Seetec (private job-matching entities) have added a corporate visage to the physical

geography of the Irish welfare state and appear to reinforce the compulsive 'workfarist' approach to welfare conditionality (Boland and Griffin 2015a; 2016; Wiggan, 2015; Collins and Murphy, 2016) which, in turn, feeds into the broader conception welfare conditionality as it has been presented here. In respect to the compulsion that resides within geography of the welfare state, this is something that Boland and Griffin (2015a) have also articulated in their work. In attempting to situate the contribution made in this article within a body of literature, Boland and Griffin (2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2018) and Boland (2018), are particularly relevant as, collectively, their work constitutes very recent Irish examples and thus is grounded in the same welfare space as the work presented here. However, there are also examples of cognate literature from further afield and within this specific idiom. For example, Crossley (2017) is representative of someone who has made a distinct contribution to a much broader conception of spaces and places in respect to poverty. In doing so, Crossley (2017, p. 98) unpacks the complexity of space and place as being psychosocially intertwined while also addressing the 'concrete settings in which the state engages poor and marginalised individuals, families and communities', thus noting how these have become sites of compulsion and conditions.

Crossley (2017) was writing in the context of the UK, where, despite the differences between the jurisdictions, an experiential overlap seems apparent with experiences in Ireland. Others working in the UK, lend further weight to this assertion. In the context of social welfare, Patrick (2017), for example, has managed to bring descriptive detail to a similar context by crucially focusing on the lived experiences of welfare recipients of multiple payment schemes in the UK. Like the work presented here, Patrick's work too shows the effects of compulsive conditionality. In her own words, she details the element of compulsion that exists within these places in describing how many of the participants in her study felt that (2017, p. 155):

> …conditionality forced them to do things they would not have done if they had been given the choice.

On this basis then it can be suggested that the shift seen in the UK in respect to welfare has some degree of confluence with the Irish example, at least in the form of experiential overlap in respect to conditionality. If the divorcing of the British welfare state from an ethos of the 'welfare commons' is now continually manifested in daily 'Punishment beatings by public demand'(Jayanetti 2018, np), it may be suggested that Irish welfare recipients are likely to continue to face similar circumstances in a jurisdiction that was never wedded to the idea of a 'welfare commons' in the first place.

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Notes

[1] Back To Education Allowance is available to persons unemployed, parenting alone or with a disability and who are getting certain payments from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. However, qualification for this payment is not automatic and is reliant in part on the duration of time spent on a qualifying payment. See Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2019e).

[2] To get Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit recipients must be available and looking for work. In order to take up voluntary work, recipients must first get permission from a Deciding Officer at their Intreo Centre (Equivalent to a Job Centre in the UK) or Social Welfare Branch Office. They must continue to satisfy the conditions of their jobseeker's payment. See Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2019a). Persons receiving Disability Allowance, Illness Benefit or Invalidity Pension must also get permission to work as a volunteer by applying to the section that pays their particular social welfare payment and before starting any voluntary work. See Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2019b)

[3] In general recipients can take up to 2 weeks holidays each year and have their social welfare payment paid. However, they are always expected contact their local Intreo Centre. In the case of Jobseeker's Allowance or

Jobseeker's Benefit, recipients can go on holiday for a maximum of 2 weeks and get the 2 weeks payment on their return. Again, recipients are expected to notify their Intreo Centre or Social Welfare Branch Office before taking a holiday. See Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2019a).

[4] A 'structured conversation' is the researcher's term to describe the specific approach to data collection. Essentially this consisted of engaging directly with each research participant and guiding them through a conversation with specific themes.

[5] Three interviews did not meet the inclusion criteria and so were discounted.

[6] In respect to JA and JB, the intention was to capture a sample of people who are engaged with and who are or who have been receiving social welfare in order to meet to same basic needs but who may have had very different experiences due to the nature of the payment. In this respect it should be noted that JB is a social insurance-based payment whereas JA is a means-tested or assistance-based payment. It was also entirely possible that some participants may have had experiences with both as JB is only paid for a limited time after which recipients, who have not found employment in the intervening period, are expected to apply for JA and submit to a means test. It is also possible to receive both payments at once with JA acting a top-up payment in cases where insurance contributions alone are not sufficient to meet the base rate for a qualified adult (DEASP, 2019a).

[7] In respect to IB and DA the same logic is followed with IB functioning as a limited insurance-based payment and DA functioning as a means tested assistance-based payment. Certification via a medical professional is also needed in order to qualify for these payments (DEASP, 2019b).

[8] OPFP is a payment targeted at people who are either caring for a child or children on their own or who are co-parenting but in the position of primary carer[8] for the child or children. They may or may not being in receipt of maintenance. It is a means tested payment and it is possible to work a limited number of hours when in receipt before the payment becomes affected (DEASP, 2019c). JST is targeted at those who are in receipt of OPFP and whose youngest child has turned 7. The underlying ethos of the JST payment scheme is preparation for and transition to the workplace and as such, obligatory attendance at workplace preparation training is expected with the potential of sanctions for those who do not engage. Unlike JA, the recipient does not have to be available for or genuinely seeking work to continue to receive JST. It is also possible to continue to pursue higher education while on this payment and this has the potential to extend the duration for which the payment is made (DEASP, 2019d).

[9] The Tús initiative is a community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people. The work opportunities are to benefit the community and are provided by community and voluntary organisations in both urban and rural areas.

[10] A food delivery service.