

The Experiences of Claiming Welfare Benefits for People with Disabilities in the UK

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Abstract : Over the years UK Governments have extended the use of welfare conditionality to more marginalised groups. Whereas in the past, disabled people's rights to unconditional welfare were defended, significant numbers of disabled people have in recent years been re-classified as 'fit for work' as a result of this policy shift towards increased conditionality targeting more welfare service user groups. This paper discusses findings from a five-year project exploring the ethics and efficacy of welfare conditionality. Drawing on repeat interviews over three years with 58 disabled welfare service users across England and Scotland, the paper explores the experience of, and impact of conditionality upon, disabled participants. In particular, participants described the process of claiming disability-related benefits as stigmatising, with some describing the medical assessments as demeaning, traumatic and even painful. The medical assessments are conducted by private contractors and participants felt they were treated unfairly, under suspicion and under surveillance. This finding is important in line with a recent UN report concerned with the practice of such assessments. The findings reveal that notions of 'deservedness' are embedded in this system as disabled recipients argue for their entitlement to welfare claims relative to what are deemed to be less deserving groups of benefit claimants. This indicates an increasing competition ethic within different sections of the most marginalised social groups that facilitate further forms of social fragmentation, particularly in relation to opposition to benefit cuts and other changes requiring concerted and organised forms of resistance. The impact of media and political scapegoating of the most marginal has generated divisions within even those who position themselves as legitimate recipients.

Keywords : disability, medical assessments, stigma, welfare conditionality

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