

Medicine, Health and Illness Stream Plenary

THE VICTIM IS ALWAYS EVERYONE THAT'S ON THE BOTTOM, THE WORKING CLASS, THE PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY ILL": DISABLED CLAIMANTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PUNITIVE WELFARE CONDITIONALITY

The punitive nature of welfare conditionality has had a profoundly negative impact on disabled claimants. Successive waves of welfare reform have sought to reduce entitlement to disability benefits and subject greater numbers of disabled people to behavioural requirements under the threat of sanctions. Drawing on data from the Welfare Conditionality project, a five year ESRC Large Grant funded study, and associated projects, this presentation explores the pernicious effects of increasing welfare conditionality across three key themes. Firstly, the competing "bodies of knowledge" within UK medical assessments, that pit lived experience of impairment and ill-health and reports from medical specialists against an assessment framework based on a reductionist biopsychosocial model. Secondly, the contrast between policy discourse justifying conditionality as good for mental health through promoting work and the lived experience of conditionality as caustic to mental well-being through its enforcement of an endless repetition of futile jobseeking. Thirdly, how the experience of welfare conditionality, with its persistent questioning of disability status and threats of disentanglement and sanctions, impacts disabled people's sense of self. Across these themes, a larger argument will be made that the reforms of disability benefits and policy are part of an exercise in neo-liberal state-crafting seeking to redefine and reconfigure the relationships between disability, welfare entitlement, and employment. Crucially, though, also highlighting the ways some disabled people critiqued welfare reform and challenged the stigmatised identities foisted upon them.

Joanne Brown completed her doctoral research at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow. Her research explored disabled peoples lived experience of welfare conditionality, drawing on interviews with disabled welfare claimants and key informants. She currently works as a Research Manager for Groundswell, a charity which exists to enable people experiencing homelessness to take more control of their lives, have a greater influence on services and have a full role in our community.

Dr Jenny McNeill is a Research Associate at the University of Sheffield and is currently working in the Management School on the Enabling Social Action Programme, funded by DCMS and the Mobilising Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) project funded by ESRC. She previously worked in the Urban Studies and Planning department at the University of Sheffield and for the University of York on the Welfare Conditionality project, funded by ESRC. Prior to this she studied at Nottingham Trent University and completed her PhD exploring the role of employability in homeless people's resettlement.

Dr Alasdair B R Stewart is a Research Associate at the University of Glasgow, currently working as the Data Lead for the GCRF funded Centre for Sustainable, Health and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods (SHLC) and a Co-Investigator for a Health Foundation funded qualitative project on the policy discourse and lived experience of employment and welfare conditionality for people with mental health problems. He is interested in how large-scale social processes, state-crafting, and social policy enter into and shape lived experience and inequality.