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The welfare racket: conditionality and marketised activation in street-level welfare-to-work services

James Kaufman

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School of Social and Political Sciences
College of Social Sciences
University of Glasgow

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Abstract

This thesis investigates everyday encounters between benefit recipients and street-level welfare agencies in an era of behavioural conditionality, marketised 'activation', and neoliberal paternalism. Central to this thesis is a concern with the relational dynamics that policies of 'behavioural conditionality' and 'mandatory activation' produce, explored through reflexive analysis of the researcher's own experiences as a street-level activation worker, and thirty in-depth interviews with former colleagues, other street-level staff, and benefit recipients. Informed by relational and psychosocial theorisations of both the subject and street-level welfare organisations, the thesis looks at the interactions between symbolic/ideological representation, individual agency, and street-level organisation. Arguing that attention to the dynamic, libidinal investments of street-level employees casts familiar street-level practices in a new light, the thesis draws attention to a dynamic of *illusio*-disillusionment (Bourdieu, 2000) among street-level staff, re-rendering familiar practices of 'creaming and parking' in terms of punishment and protection. Similarly, it is argued that specific instances of support, indifference, and/or sanction do not exist as discrete experiences in the life of claimants, but as ongoing possibilities, producing a situation of ever-present surveillance and threat. In this way, conditional activation services come to resemble a protection racket, in which both the threat and means of defence are produced simultaneously. These dynamic materialisations of behavioural conditionality are situated with respect to the ideology of neoliberal paternalism, which at street-level takes the form of magical voluntarism, and the enforcement of an anti-sociological imaginary which, it is argued, results in the denial and effective privatisation of the troubles, difficulties, and needs that bring people to welfare services in the first place.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed name: James Kaufman

Signature:

A black rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'James Kaufman'.

Definitions/Abbreviations

DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
JSA	Job Seekers Allowance
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IS	Income Support
UB	Unemployment Benefit
WCA	Work Capability Assessment

‘But I’m not guilty,’ said K., ‘it’s a mistake. How can a person be guilty anyway? We’re all human, every single one of us.’ ‘That is correct,’ said the priest, ‘but that’s the way guilty people talk.’

Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

Chapter One – Introduction

In welfare, for too long, the right had let social division and chronic unemployment grow; the left argued for rights but were weak on responsibilities. We believe passionately in giving people the chance to get off benefit and into work [...] But with the chance, comes a responsibility on the individual - to take the chance, to make something of their lives and use their ability and potential to the full [...] An active welfare state which brings together benefit offices and job centres so that instead of simply dishing out cash, personal advisers provide everybody coming through the door with advice and support to help them into work or at least get them closer to the labour market. This is a welfare state which reflects all our responsibilities: the responsibility we have to engage actively with the jobless to provide them with opportunities; their responsibility to engage actively with us and take those opportunities (Tony Blair, 2002).

Compassion isn't measured out in benefit cheques – it's in the chances you give people - the chance to get a job, to get on, to get that sense of achievement that only comes from doing a hard day's work for a proper day's pay. That's what our reforms are all about. Transforming lives. Helping people walk taller. Attacking the complacent, patronising view that said all millions of working-age people were good for was receiving from the state. And saying: no – self-reliance is in everyone. Industry is in everyone. Aspiration is in everyone. No-one is a write-off. That's why getting people into jobs is central to our vision for making this country stronger and we need to keep building a system that delivers this vision (David Cameron, 2012).

Trawling for outcomes

It's high summer and there's very little shade on Depot Lane. Though only a twenty-minute walk from the office and a short distance from the amble and clatter of the high street, it feels as though I have crossed a boundary. There are no other pedestrians making this particular route, which twists back over the railway line and leads to a patch of messy ground set between trunk road, train tracks, and the elevated dual carriageway which hums overhead. Shop fronts, offices, and the busy mingle of bus stops have all gradually petered out, giving way to a quiet road of pot-holed tarmac and the grey-green painted steel of warehouse buildings and industrial units. As I walk around the swing barrier a security guard in his

cabin nods me through. Proceeding past the bus depot toward the thrust of buildings, hard and sharp in the sunlight, I don't really know where I am going, nor can I picture the face of the person I am looking for.

Nine months before, in the winter, I had applied for a job. The advert had said:

Advisors are the heart of [Activation Works] and make up the majority of the workforce. An advisor's role is simple: to get as many people into suitable, lasting work as possible. Exactly how this goal is achieved depends largely on the skills and initiative of each individual person; there is no such thing as a 'typical' advisor.

That morning I had been instructed to use my initiative. It was nearing the end of July and having fallen very far behind my target of job outcomes it was by now too late to find any 'suitable, lasting work' for my clients in time for the monthly target deadline. Instead, it was strongly suggested that I trawl through my caseload and search for potential outcomes which may have gone unnoticed. This meant identifying people who might recently have gone into work without telling me.

I spent the morning conducting a telephone tour of schools across the sprawling breadth of the borough. One of my regular clients, Zenab, had mysteriously stopped answering my calls. In her thirties, with two school-age children, Zenab was one of my more reliable clients and, I thought, someone who genuinely valued coming along to my appointments. Near the top of my 'job-ready' list, I mentioned her name regularly in supervision, each time assuring my line manager that soon, next month, she would be an outcome.

An ESA claimant, Zenab had some form of osteoporosis –a condition I only dimly understood, if at all – but nevertheless had been making applications to work as a teaching assistant in local schools. She was under no obligation to do so, and, quiet and softly spoken during her appointments, I sometimes felt the need to check whether she actually wanted to get a job. A couple of weeks before she had been

offered an interview (she didn't tell me which school; I hadn't asked). On hearing this news, and recognising the name, my line manager became visibly excited: she would do a mock interview with Zenab herself –we would work together to give her the best possible chance of getting the job.

The day of the mock interview I had been sick. Returning to work I was told that it had gone well and that they'd had a very positive, motivational conversation.

Zenab, my manager told me, was a little under confident, but otherwise came across very well: *make sure that you are really supporting her, really encouraging her. She should be in work; it would make all the difference.*

The day of the job interview I called Zenab; unable to get through, I waited to hear from her. She didn't return my call. Nor did she answer when, the next day, I called again. And so this morning, in search of an outcome, my manager checked with the DWP and found that Zenab was no longer claiming benefits: there was a possibility that she had got the job. With a phone and an online directory I worked my way around the local schools, asking if in September they were to have a new teaching assistant starting called Zenab. Having no luck, after some thought my line manager handed me her mobile phone: *here, call her from this; she won't recognise the number...*

Later that day I am wandering between industrial units looking, not for Zenab, but for Jason, who is also ignoring my calls. I have only met Jason on a couple of occasions, and at each meeting he has told me that there is very little point paying him much attention – he is going to come off benefits very soon, and a friend of his with a workshop on Depot Lane is going to give him some work. On these occasions I have asked him to let me know when this happens; perhaps I will be able to help him with Working Tax Credits, buy him some work tools, new clothes, or give him supermarket vouchers. As I make my way around the industrial site I am rehearsing what I might say if I do find him here, the different

offers I might make, whatever will persuade him to do the necessary paperwork so that I can add my outcome to the job board.

There are very few people here; most of the units appear to have shut up shop for the day. Finding one unit with the roller doors raised, I walk in. *No, sorry, no Jason here.* Turning back toward the office I feel despondent, bemused, slightly ridiculous. After making my way past the security cabin and around the barrier I sit down on a wall overlooking the railway line, and try to conjure up a notion of what I have been doing with my day. My thoughts, clearer than doubts, haven't quite formed into questions. I wonder what has happened to Zenab, and why she doesn't want to answer my calls. I might have an idea. Earlier that day when I called her from an unknown number she had answered, putting the phone down as soon as she heard my voice. I try not to have the thought, but it's there in the back of my mind: has she stopped claiming because she has a job, or just to avoid us, to avoid me? There's no way of knowing unless I speak to her, but the last thing I want to do is call her again – although tomorrow I will no doubt have to do exactly that.

Beginnings

This thesis has a number of different beginnings, and one of them is here, on Depot Lane, feeling despondent and disillusioned with my job as a street-level employment advisor. This was a role I performed for nine months, between December 2008 and September 2009. At that time I was almost entirely ignorant of the wider political and policy context in which the role was situated; I was unaware of the recent developments in welfare and social security policy, of the trend toward increasing conditionality in the benefits system, and of the 'activation' of benefit recipients. However, in doing this job I began to wonder about its guiding rationale, the framework behind it, and to question what relation these bore, if any, to my day-to-day experiences. When in 2013 I saw an advertisement for an ESRC studentship addressing 'activation' and 'behavioural

conditionality' as they were practiced, looking for an ethnographic account of the experiences of advisors and claimants, in the sorts of organisation for which I had worked, I applied.

This thesis also has another beginning, which lies with these policy developments themselves. Over approximately three decades, under successive governments, there has been an increasing emphasis on making receipt of various benefits conditional upon some form of activity aimed at work and the labour market. In speeches and political rhetoric these changes have been described in terms of offering people 'opportunities' or, as David Cameron put it, 'the chance to get on'. These changes have also been described in terms of balancing rights with responsibilities, accompanied by an insistence on the 'duty' of benefit recipients to 'engage' with the 'help' they are offered. These are euphemistic formulations for the extension of sanctions – penalties of benefit withdrawal for those deemed incompliant, or seen in some way to be refusing the 'opportunities' and 'help' they have been offered.

If, at first, it seems difficult to connect this rhetoric with my description of searching for outcomes, then this incongruity might also be a useful way of situating the main aim of this thesis. What, it asks, do policies of activation and conditionality mean in practice? What do they look like to the low-level – 'street-level' – employees tasked with carrying them out, and to the people – the 'claimants' – who are their targets? In studying the street-level spaces where policies of conditionality and activation are made and materialised in practice, this thesis aims to provide a fine-grained and nuanced account of everyday experiences which might otherwise remain hidden under the rhetorical cover of 'help', 'opportunity', 'rights' or 'responsibilities'.

Although divorced from the more elevated (some would say obfuscatory) political rhetoric accompanying these policies, my tale of searching for outcomes nonetheless introduces several important themes which wind their way through

this thesis, the first of which is the very sense of such a disconnect itself. As this thesis will explore, there is often a large gap between people's initial expectations and their subsequent experiences of street-level activation work. This tale also introduces the theme of street-level relations, and their complex and sometimes obscure and unseen dynamics. Whatever I liked to think, I nonetheless had a very incomplete picture, as a street-level advisor, of what my clients thought or felt about me, or about the conditional and mandatory requirements of their 'activation'. In addition to interviewing former colleagues and other street-level advisors, this thesis also looks at the different experiences that claimants have of street-level activation services. A third important theme is the overwhelming importance of 'outcomes' and performance targets in the life of street-level activation. Alongside the 'formal' policies of conditionality and activation, there has also been a second track of 'operational' reforms which are no less important. These are the reforms which mean that such services are now often contracted out, operating within a quasi-marketised environment in which certain metrics of performance exercise important forms of power.

This research brings both a street-level (Lipsky, 2010) and an ethnographic approach to its investigation of the policies of conditionality and activation. The former is a tradition of policy analysis which attends to the everyday sites and spaces where citizens meet face-to-face with street-level officials and low-level policy actors, seeing the interactions between them as important occasions where policy is made in practice. An ethnographic approach is particularly suited to such a form of analysis; attentive to the texture and detail of everyday life, it seeks to understand the meaning of local practices as they are situated within a broader contextual fabric of social relations and interactions. In this research I have made (auto) ethnographic use of my own experiences alongside data drawn from semi-structured interviews with benefit claimants, former colleagues, and other street-level activation workers. In so doing, the thesis assembles a variety of perspectives and experiences into a multi-layered and nuanced account of conditional work-first activation-in-practice. In this way, the research approaches its object of street-

level activation through the perspectives of both advisors and claimants, and its research questions reflect this approach. It asks:

- How are street-level advisors invested in the field of activation? (What is the activation *illusio*?)
- What conflicts do street-level advisors face?
- How do advisors cope with street-level conflicts?
- Are there limits to coping? How might these be understood?
- How are activation and conditionality experienced by claimants?
- How do claimants experience their interactions with street-level advisors?
How do they deal with advisors?
- What do activation and conditionality mean to advisors?
- How do advisors process claimants?
- What forms do the myth of altruism and the ideology of benign intervention take in street-level activation services?
- How does the quasi-marketised form of street-level activation affect the relations and interactions between advisors and claimants?

Outline of the thesis

Chapter Two develops the context for this research by introducing the policies of conditionality and activation, outlining their recent history in British social policy over the last two decades. In so doing, the chapter draws attention to the ideological preoccupations driving and shaping these policies, looking in particular at the way they are organised around a construction of the ‘welfare recipient’ as a particular kind of problem person – as dependent, demoralised, and inactive. The specific policy content of ‘behavioural conditionality’ and ‘activation’ is thus introduced alongside a critical discussion of their guiding ideological framework, which is characterised in terms of ‘neoliberal paternalism’, wherein the state is seen to have an important role enforcing the work ethic, and in the formation of moral subjects with an orientation toward work and the labour

market. The chapter then reviews literature addressing the question of agency as it relates to 'welfare subjects', and concludes by suggesting that there is more scope for investigating the dynamic lived experience of conditional activation programmes, focusing on the interaction between street-level practice, symbolic/ideological representation, and everyday agency.

Chapter Three situates the research with respect to studies of 'street-level bureaucracy', and policy implementation. It highlights the contribution of street-level literature in terms of asserting the importance of street-level organisations as places where policy is made, rather than simply implemented. This chapter argues that the renewed interest in street-level perspectives in research on 'active' welfare states has been driven by developments in both formal and operational policy; this twin track of reform redoubles the importance of street-level sites as places where both policy and politics are mediated. The final section of this chapter returns to consider some important themes from across the street-level literature; these are the themes of coping, client processing, and street-level identity. It is argued that within the broadly defined 'street-level' approach to policy research there are a variety of ways in which the street-level actor and street-level decision making have been conceptualised; these are sometimes implicit, under-theorised, or contradictory. It is argued that in this respect street-level research might benefit from more sociologically informed theorisations of street-level practice.

Chapter Four introduces the conceptual framework of the thesis, which might best be described as psychosocial. Constructing street-level sites in terms of an activation field, this chapter introduces concepts which enable the research to explore the ways in which street-level advisors are invested in their work. This approach, it is argued, is particularly useful for the exploration of the dynamic relationship between street-level organisations, street-level advisors, and welfare users, especially where the interventions of the former target the behaviour, conduct, and affective dispositions of the latter. This conceptual framework is fashioned from the synthesis of Bourdieu's theoretical oeuvre with certain

psychoanalytic concepts; the chapter makes use of recent theoretical work exploring the points of affinity between these two approaches, and argues that the psychoanalytic concepts of splitting, projection, and introjection provide a useful means of understanding the ways that an individual habitus might accommodate and negotiate street-level social conflict. This framework is linked back to the street-level literature, and is argued to provide greater analytical purchase on such street-level concerns as coping and investment in the advisor role.

Chapter Five outlines the methods and methodological approach adopted by the research. This is ethnographic, drawing on my own experiences as a 'complete member' of the activation field alongside semi-structured interviews with street-level advisors and benefit claimants. This chapter provides a brief account of a changing research design, outlining the ways in which it developed in response to some of the contingencies of the field. There is also a reflexive account of my experiences of conducting interviews, in which it argued that attention to the unconscious dynamics of interviewing, in terms of the expected forms that participants bring with them to interview, can be a useful means of analysing the social relations operative in a particular social space. The chapter addresses the ethical principles guiding the research, and concludes with an exposition of its analytical approach, which is described as abductive, with analysis developed throughout the research process in the movement back and forth between concepts, experience, and data.

Chapter Six is the first of three findings chapters, and focuses on the experiences of street-level advisors. This chapter aims to answer the following questions: How are advisors invested in their role? What conflicts do they face? How do advisors cope with street-level conflict? Are there limits to coping and, if so, what are these? In particular, this chapter focuses on some of the very different experiences that advisors have of street-level activation, and attempts to develop a theoretical account which can both accommodate and explain these divergent experiences. In particular, this chapter makes use of the concepts of *illusio* and disillusionment in

order to explore the specific forms of expectation and investment that advisors brought to the role, and sees street-level conflict as being produced at the intersection of organisational imperatives, client situations, and advisors' orientations and investments. This chapter looks at the ways in which some advisors attempt to make their role fit more closely with their idealised conceptions of it.

Chapter Seven turns to the claimant, and looks at the different ways they interpret and experience the requirements of conditional work-first activation. This chapter aims to answer the following questions: How are activation and conditionality experienced by claimants? What are the subjective and relational dynamics of activation? What do activation and conditionality mean in practice for claimants? What is the role of street-level advisor, from claimants' points of view? How do claimants experience their interactions with street-level advisors? This chapter argues that conditional work-first activation can take the form of a protection racket, the constituent elements of which are explored. In particular, this chapter is concerned with the way in which activation works at the level of feeling and ideological representation, and involves the activation of stigma.

Chapter Eight is the final findings chapter. It returns to street-level advisors in order to understand more about the ideological practices of the activation field. In particular, this chapter returns to the question of how, and what it means, for advisors to be invested in their role (and thus, what constitutes the activation *illusio*). This chapter aims to answer the questions: How do advisors process clients? What does activation mean to advisors? What forms do the myth of altruism and the ideology of benign intervention take in the context of street-level activation? In contrast with Chapter Six, which set out some of the ways that advisors attempt to make their role fit more closely with their conceptions of it, this chapter addresses the way in which conceptions of the role come to frame and influence street-level practice. This chapter concludes by looking at some of the street-level conditions of punitive practice and social sadism in activation services.

Chapter Nine concludes the thesis by drawing together its various argumentative strands, considered under the headings 'street-level symptoms', 'obscure dynamics', and 'street-level fantasy'. In so doing, it argues that understanding the policies of conditionality and activation in dynamic, relational terms – rather than as a collection of discrete practices – draws attention to their implicit and sometimes obfuscated politics.

Chapter Two – Conditionality, activation, and the construction of claimants

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with street-level encounters in welfare to work services. This chapter begins to develop the context for such encounters by examining the policies of activation, conditionality, and their recent history in British social policy. This chapter also argues that it is important to attend to the ideological context of such welfare encounters, the way that they are discursively constructed, and how this might shape the ways they are experienced. After exploring some of the ideological justifications for intensified conditionality and the mandatory activation of benefit recipients, this chapter reviews literature on anti-welfare sentiment, and the stigmatisation and ‘othering’ of classed subject positions. Following this discussion, the chapter then turns to literature addressing the question of agency as it relates to ‘welfare subjects’. The chapter concludes by suggesting that there is more scope for investigating the dynamic lived experience of conditional activation programmes, specifically focusing on the interaction between street-level practice, symbolic/ideological representations, and the agency of benefit recipients.

Conditionality and activation

This thesis is concerned with behavioural conditionality. In the context of social security systems, ‘conditionality’ simply refers to the fact that entitlement to social benefits or assistance is not automatic, but dependent on a variety of factors such as personal circumstance and need. Over the past decade ‘conditionality’ has risen in prominence as a point of focus for social policy researchers; however, as Clasen and Clegg (2007) point out, ‘individual rights to social benefits have always and everywhere been conditional in some ways,’ making conditionality a ‘cornerstone’ of all welfare states (p171-172). The growing interest in this topic, especially in a British context, might then be attributed to the fact that recent decades have

witnessed the cumulative tightening of traditional conditions of eligibility (Clasen & Clegg, 2007; Novak, 1997), the ‘creep’ of conditionality into new welfare domains (Dwyer, 2004), as well as the creation and proliferation of new forms of ‘behavioural’ conditionality, extended to cover ever wider groups of welfare users (including the already employed), such that Dwyer and Wright (2014) now speak of ‘ubiquitous conditionality’.

Although the empirical context of this thesis is largely derived from these new, specifically ‘behavioural’ forms of conditionality, it is worth situating these with respect to traditional eligibility and entitlement criteria. Clasen and Clegg (2007) distinguish between three types of condition that regulate access to social benefits: conditions of category, conditions of circumstance, and conditions of conduct. Categorical conditionality describes a situation where entitlements are restricted to members of a defined category of support – for example, the condition that one is past retirement age in order to claim a state pension, or unemployed in order to claim unemployment benefit¹. Circumstantial conditionality refers to what are commonly regarded as eligibility and entitlement criteria. The circumstances in question might be a history of contributions, as in insurance-based systems, or particular circumstances of need, as in means-tested systems. Conditions of conduct – referred to in this thesis and elsewhere in terms of ‘behavioural conditionality’ – apply once the other two forms of conditionality criteria have been satisfied and, it is argued, serve the function of ‘regulating *ongoing* benefit receipt’ (2007, p. 174). This ongoing regulation of the welfare service user has been understood in a variety of ways; in terms of labour discipline and social control (Piven & Cloward, 1993; Wacquant, 2009), wage suppression, labour stratification and the (re)commodification of labour (Greer, 2016; Grover, 2012, 2003; Holden, 2003; Peck, 2001; Wiggan, 2015); and in terms of governmentality and the production of subjectivity (Dean, 2002; Hartman, 2005; McDonald & Marston,

¹As Clasen and Clegg also point out (2007, p. 172), even putatively universal benefits are not wholly ‘unconditional’ in this categorical sense. For example, proposals for a universal basic income or citizen’s income usually include the categorical condition of residency or citizenship.

2005). This thesis explores the ongoing regulation of benefit recipients in terms of their agency and everyday lived experience. Later this chapter will review some of the key literature informing this approach. Before doing so, however, it is worth considering another important policy term which has become very closely associated with the turn toward behavioural conditionality, and which describes one of the most significant ways in which this form of conditionality will be experienced by welfare users in the UK – namely, ‘activation’.

Activation and behavioural conditionality are, in the British context, tightly intertwined. In Jobcentres and welfare-to-work offices, in the day-to-day lives of frontline service workers and benefits recipients, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between the practices properly attributable to one policy category or the other. This might be understood as a result of the particular form taken by activation policy in the UK. The term ‘activation’ is often used as shorthand for active labour market policies and their associated programmes. Whilst ‘activation’ is sometimes used as a synonym for neoliberalism in the field of welfare, active labour market policies actually have their origins in 1950s Scandinavian social democracy. Active labour market policy is a ‘particularly ambiguous policy category’ (Bonoli, 2010, p. 439) encompassing a range of different policy measures. Bonoli (2010) offers a classification of these in terms of incentive reinforcement, employment assistance, occupation, and human capital investment. Broadly understood, active labour market policy is about the state taking an ‘active’ approach toward the supply of labour, rather than ‘passively’ supporting or insuring against social risk. The activity of the state can take a variety of forms, such as the provision of training and education. However, the form taken by active labour market policy in the UK (and the Anglophone world more generally) has been much more focused on reinforcing incentives – through conditionality and sanctions – than it has on providing education or training.

Policy context

The introduction of Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) in 1996 is widely identified as a significant juncture in the development of behavioural conditionality and more 'active' approaches to social security policy in the UK (Finn, 1996; Fletcher, 2015). Symbolically, in terms of nomenclature, the re-naming of Unemployment Benefit (UB) as Jobseekers' Allowance, and of the unemployed as 'job-seekers', can be understood as an exercise in 'the power of nomination' (Bourdieu, 1985), signalling a shift away from an understanding of unemployment as a social risk that is endured (and that might require collective provisions and support), and onto the individual agency and personal responsibility of the unemployed to change their circumstances and find work (Wiggan, 2012, p. 384).

Jobseekers' Allowance replaced two benefits available to the unemployed: contributions-based Unemployment Benefit, and the non-contributory, means-tested, Income Support (IS). The replacement of Unemployment Benefit by contributions-based JSA also included a reduction in the length of entitlement to contributions-based support from twelve to six months; after six months claimants would move onto means-tested, income-based JSA. Following the abolition of earnings-related supplements (1982), and of partial UB rates for those with incomplete contributions, this was a further erosion of insurance-based features of the British welfare state (Clasen, 2001), and a tightening of eligibility and entitlement criteria (Clasen & Clegg, 2007).

The introduction of JSA also included new 'behavioural' conditions, along with increased monitoring and more expansive powers of compulsion. Building on an existing requirement that the unemployed attend 'restart interviews' (1986), and the (re)imposition of the 'Actively Seeking Work Test' (1989), the Jobseekers' Act (Jobseekers Act 1995, The Jobseeker's Allowance Regulations 1996) introduced the requirement to sign a Jobseeker's Agreement, and an obligation to follow any 'jobseeker's directions' given by employment officers. In so doing, the act

increased the scope for employment officers to withhold or withdraw benefits from those deemed insufficiently active in their attempts to find work. Failure to follow jobseeker directions, to sign on, or turn up for an appointment meant the loss of entitlement to benefits; claimants would have to restart the process and make a new application for JSA.

These developments were viewed at the time as a portent of greater compulsion in the benefits system, and as evidence of a trend toward more coercive regulation of the unemployed and other welfare service users (Finn, 1995; Novak, 1997).

However, it is with the successive changes introduced under three New Labour governments (1997-2010) that the welfare landscape more closely begins to resemble the one in which the thesis fieldwork took place, with its particular street-level features. These changes can be summarised in terms of (i) the intensification of behavioural conditionality, and its extension to new groups of welfare users, and (ii) the much greater role given to the third and private sectors in the delivery of employment and welfare services. The remainder of this section will address the first set of developments; the turn toward contracting out and quasi-marketisation will be addressed in the following chapter (Chapter Three) which is concerned with the street-level organisation of welfare-to-work services.

New Labour was able to introduce its various New Deal programmes relatively soon during its first term in office. This was largely because, in many respects, they were following a path already laid down by the previous Conservative government with the introduction of JSA, but also through schemes such as Project Work and the Lone Parent Caseworker Project (Walker & Wiseman, 2003, p. 10). Project Work, launched alongside JSA, was a pilot involving thirteen weeks of compulsory supervised job search, followed by thirteen weeks of mandatory work experience, for those unemployed for two years or more. The Lone Parent Casework Project was a voluntary programme providing lone parents on Income Support with a named caseworker, there to provide advice and guidance on finding work. In the various New Deals, elements of these programmes were

developed and extended to ever wider groups of welfare users. Some New Deal programmes were, like the Lone Parent Caseworker project, initially voluntary, but by the end of New Labour's time in government the principle of mandatory participation had been widely extended, not only to lone parents, but also to disabled people and those claiming incapacity benefits.

The first New Deal programmes, introduced in 1998, were those for young people (18-24) and the long-term unemployed (two years or more). For both groups, the rules and conditions attached to JSA still applied, and participation in the New Deal was made mandatory. In addition, the New Deal for Lone Parents (for people claiming Income Support with a child over the age of five) had been running in pilot areas since 1997, and was rolled out nationally in 1998. Initially voluntary, attendance at 'work focused interviews' was made a mandatory requirement by 2001. Other New Deals included those for partners, for disabled people, for the over-fifties, and for musicians.

The move to greater compulsion – that is, to greater behavioural conditionality – gathered pace following 2000, when attendance at 'work-focused interviews' was made mandatory for lone parents and, in some pilot areas, for all new claimants. A mandatory programme of work focused interviews (Pathways to Work) for those claiming Incapacity Benefit and Income Support on the grounds of incapacity was piloted in 2003 -2004, and rolled out nationally in 2007-2008, with the aim and intention of reducing the number of people claiming incapacity benefits (Barnes & Sissons, 2013). In a symbolic reprise of the renaming of Unemployment Benefit, in 2008 Incapacity Benefit and Income Support on the grounds of incapacity were replaced by a new benefit, Employment Support Allowance (ESA). At the same time a new test – the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) – was introduced to assess whether or not someone was entitled to ESA. On the premise that many of the people claiming incapacity benefits could – and ought – to be job-seeking, this assessment was explicitly designed to reduce the numbers of people claiming benefits on the basis of incapacity, and facilitate a transfer to JSA (and thus to a

tighter conditionality and activation regime). This assessment has generated considerable controversy since its introduction; what should be noted here is that ESA and the WCA were designed to tighten eligibility criteria, but they also symbolically and institutionally shifted the emphasis away from social risk and the claimant's personal circumstances of entitlement, toward the normative *telos* of employment, even for those currently deemed incapable of work. In this way, the introduction of ESA, and the rollout of Pathways to Work, with mandatory attendance at six staggered work-focused interviews, signifies the extension of behavioural conditionality to new groups of claimants. It made activity related to work and employment central to the ongoing regulation of benefit claims, even in those cases where someone was deemed incapable of work.

The extension of behavioural conditionality and the raft of activation programmes introduced under New Labour were initially designed during a period of buoyant labour markets and a growing economy, and it was assumed that these conditions would continue. However, the launch of ESA coincided with the onset of the credit crunch and the following recession. Rather than auguring a retreat from either conditionality or activation, the politics of austerity that followed in the wake of the crisis brought about a renewed emphasis on both, in a concerted effort at ideological misdirection and displacement – users of welfare services were presented, nor as victims of the neoliberal economic crisis, but as its culprits (Mirowski, 2014; Seymour, 2014; Wiggan, 2012). In 2010 the newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government outlined its proposals for sweeping 'reform' of the benefits system (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010a, 2010b). These included the replacement of New Labour's various New Deals with a single Work Programme; the introduction of a new, tougher sanctions regime; and the replacement of six different types of payment available to working age people with the single benefit, Universal Credit². These changes

² The rollout of Universal Credit was originally intended to occur between 2013-2017; it has been subject to numerous delays, and at the time of writing, its future looks uncertain.

mark both a continuation and intensification of the turn to a more punitive welfare system under New Labour (Wiggan, 2012). This involved a tightening of eligibility criteria and greater focus on the regulation of benefit claims through behavioural conditionality and monitoring; an emphasis on work incentives and discipline pursued through punitive sanctions; and the extension of conditionality to new groups – in the proposed case of Universal Credit, to claimants who are already in work, for whom there will be a requirement to demonstrate steps taken to securing more or better paid work.

Neoliberal paternalism and the construction(s) of the claimant

Occurring across several decades and under different governments, the trend toward greater conditionality and the mandatory ‘activation’ of welfare recipients has been accompanied by different ideological and discursive justifications. These include: moral panics about a purported ‘underclass’ (Bagguley & Mann, 1992) lone parents (Atkinson et al., 1998; Mann & Rosehill, 1994), and ‘the broken society’ (Cameron, 2011; Driver, 2009); concerns about economic efficiency and fiscal rectitude; and problems of demoralisation and ‘dependency’ (Duncan Smith, 2010, 2014a; Freud, 2007). One curious feature of this situation is that continuity and consistency with respect to the overall welfare-to-work project is accompanied by some discordant notes among its various justifications. Among the influential proponents of welfare reform during this period one can find *laissez faire* libertarians who emphasise the reassertion of market discipline and work incentives (Murray, 2008; Murray et al, 1999); ‘new’ paternalists for whom, conversely, the state has a duty to actively foster and inculcate moral norms of work and the work ethic (Mead, 1997); and communitarians and ‘third way’ thinkers for whom the ‘reform’ agenda embodies a rebalancing of ‘rights’ with ‘responsibilities’ (Etzioni, 1994; Giddens, 1999; Lund, 2008). Here I argue that a focus on these discursive and logical contradictions belies an underlying political and ideological consistency, and this section explores the ideological context

surrounding the policy developments outlined above in terms of ‘neoliberal paternalism’ (Schram et al, 2010; Soss et al, 2011; Whitworth, 2016). First, it addresses the influence of Murray (2008; Murray et al., 1999) and his argument that welfare provision fosters an ‘underclass’ insulated from market imperatives, and the recommendation that welfare be withdrawn such that these are reintroduced. It then outlines the work of Mead (1997, 2008), who argues for a strengthening of the welfare state’s paternalist functions. The market-based and paternalist influences on activation and conditionality can be viewed as antithetical and paradoxical (Whitworth, 2016); however, in the third section I argue that, when viewed through the wider literature on neoliberalism, it is possible to discern an underlying political consistency amid these seemingly antithetical elements.

Murray, the underclass, and economic incentives

Although widely discredited (Alcock, 1994; Lister, 1990), the work of Murray (2008; Murray et al., 1999) has exerted a powerful influence, if not necessarily in terms of specific policy formation, then at least in terms of how developments in welfare policy since the 1980s have been received, understood, and circulated in wider academic and popular discourse: it has had a powerful ideological influence (Bagguley & Mann, 1992) contributing to what Jensen (2014) calls ‘anti-welfare commonsense’. Best known for his argument concerning ‘the underclass,’ Murray writes from an economically libertarian and socially conservative perspective, and with respect to the United States argues that the ‘Great Society’ reforms and expansion of welfare programmes during the 1960s were, perversely, largely responsible for the social ills of poverty and unemployment that obtained by the 1980s.³ Following the success of his book on U.S. social policy, *Losing Ground*, and the notoriety it gained him, in 1989 *The Sunday Times* invited Murray to the UK to assess the extent to which his argument held in the British context, publishing the

³ Murray’s argument is in this sense typically reactionary, in the sense defined by Hirschman (1991); indeed, Murray’s argument is one of Hirschman’s examples and targets.

resulting essay in its pages and stimulating extensive debate (Murray et al., 1999). For Murray welfare programmes have perverse effects because they undermine both the discipline of economic incentives exercised by the market, and patriarchal social relations of familial dependence. They do so by establishing a space in which it is possible to survive without recourse to either the labour market or someone, usually a husband, who is attached to it. As a result, Murray argues that welfare states foster a behaviourally and culturally distinct underclass who make the rational economic decision not to work, and who are therefore immune to the disciplinary norms that obtain for those who do. To this he attributes a plethora of social ills.

There is, in Murray's work, a sometimes discordant mix of utilitarian economic jargon about 'incentives', 'utility maximisation' and 'rational choice' alongside Victorian moralising about 'illegitimacy' and the values of marriage. This latter aspect is described by Alcock (1994, p. 49) as 'more like the preaching of a revivalist church minister than the analysis and policy prescription of an academic social scientist'. The critic of Murray's work is faced with a rich and sometimes bewildering array of potential targets, from its premises, (lack of) methodology, manipulation of empirical data, inflammatory use of language, to the inferences drawn. These latter are often circular (Alcock, 1994, p. 50), returning to the assertion of empirically unsupported premises, and as such 'fundamentally flawed' (David, 1994). The central thesis (or assertion) of a culturally distinct 'underclass', whilst lacking empirical support in Murray's own work (Lister, 1990, p. 26), has nonetheless proven a potent ideological image – a 'zombie concept' – which academics have continually felt the need to revisit and challenge on an empirical basis (Macdonald et al, 2014). Nonetheless, Murray's lurid moral conservatism alloyed with market-based prescriptions finds a clear echo in the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform both prior to, during, and after New Labour's time in office. There are particular resonances in the pronouncements of the Coalition and then Conservative governments' Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith (Duncan Smith, 2010, 2014a, 2014b), architect of the

Work Programme, for whom the utilitarian logic of ‘incentives’ is explicitly tied to a moral project addressing a putative ‘culture of dependency’.

Mead, paternalism, and moral supervision

Mead, like Murray, has made the trip from the U.S. to the U.K. in the capacity as an ‘expert’ on poverty and welfare systems, in his case at the invitation of David Cameron’s chief strategist Steve Hilton (Asthana et al., 2010), for whom he provided advice on the Coalition welfare reforms. While they differ in their specific policy recommendations (cutting welfare spending versus strengthening the supervisory powers of welfare agencies) and in some aspects of their analysis, both Mead and Murray frame their arguments in similar ways, with reference to the Great Society reforms that took place in the 1960s, in which they both identify the same problem: the (mis)attribution of responsibility and perverse effects of sociological reasoning when applied to social policy. For both Murray and Mead, structural, sociological reasoning is something that attributes agency to impersonal structures, stripping the individual of personal responsibility for their problems. Mead writes that ‘[p]olitically, the significant fact about the new social science was its determinism. Any science must assume that the phenomena under study are “caused” in some sense by identifiable outside forces’ (2008, p. 55). He continues: ‘Great Society social analysis...treated even personal problems like nonwork or family breakup as if they were forces acting on the poor, just like economic need or discrimination’ (Mead, 2008, p. 57). Both Murray and Mead, despite their differences, exhibit what might be called, adapting Mills (2000), an ‘anti-sociological imagination’; they both share a profound antipathy to forms of sociological reasoning that turn private troubles into public issues, that connect the vicissitudes of personal biography to wider social, historical, and contextual forces⁴. Looking ahead, this thesis will argue that the *anti*-sociological imagination

⁴ On this point, Gane (2014) has argued that the birth of neoliberal thought, located in Mises and Hayek, originates in the critique of sociology and its notions of ‘the social’, against which is posited an alternative economic epistemology in which the only ‘truth’ it is possible to apprehend emerges through individual rational economic activity and the pricing mechanism.

is one characteristic of neoliberal paternalist ideology as it exists at street-level, in the practices of conditional activation, which are, amongst other things, about the *privatization* of people's troubles and difficulties.

Unlike Murray, Mead does not argue that what he calls 'non-work' (emphasising that it is a personal choice, rather than a social, structurally determined ill) is explicable solely in terms of a logic of rational economic maximization, arguing that some aspects of 'nonwork' cannot be explained by economic logic: rather, Mead emphasises the determining role of culture, values, and morality (Mead, 2008, pp. 78–80). Mead's proposed solution to this problem is the reassertion of authority, in the form of obligation. He argues that the problem with welfare programmes is not that they are too generous (contra less-eligibility, economic arguments) but that they are too permissive, and fail to set norms and obligations for recipients. Whereas for Murray only the adjustment of economic incentive structures has efficacy, for Mead the welfare state has an important paternalist role to play, which he envisages in interpersonal terms. Welfare-to-work programmes combine both these elements: conditional activation alters incentive structures through the introduction of sanctions for non-compliance; it also entails one-to-one 'moral support' in the form of activation and supervisory monitoring. Whilst these programmes might, in this sense, appear to draw from contrasting and contradictory understandings of the 'problem' and its causes (rational-economic versus moral), as I argue below, these contradictory elements can be understood in terms of 'neoliberal paternalism'.

Neoliberal paternalism

A central feature of neoliberalism, whether it is understood as the restoration of class power (Harvey, 2007), a regulatory regime of accumulation (Peck, 2001), or a mode of governmentality (Foucault, 2010) is the emphasis on market mechanisms and competition as the preeminent means of organising social life. More than this, neoliberalism is characterised by the recognition that the state must first construct

and then maintain (Brown, 2003) the conditions in which competition and market forces can operate – often taken to be what distinguishes it from nineteenth century liberalism, where market forces are taken to arise spontaneously in the absence of intervening constraint.

It has been argued that policies of conditionality and work-first activation can be characterised in terms of neoliberal paternalism (Soss et al., 2011). For Whitworth (2016) neoliberal paternalism, in both its discursive and policy manifestations, is riven by internal fracture and contradiction. It is ‘neoliberal’ to the extent that policies are developed according to the logic of markets, competition, and the autonomous choosing agent; it is ‘paternalist’ to the extent that agency is purposefully constrained, and ‘choices’ are forced on policy subjects who are constructed as in some way deficient and unable to make the ‘right’ choices. Here, I would suggest that while the ‘neoliberal paternalist’ coinage is relatively recent (Soss et al., 2011), these identified tensions also recall the debates surrounding Thatcherism, the New Right, and its similarly contradictory mix of free-market liberalism with authoritarian tendencies (Gamble, 1988; Hall, 1979). As such, the discursive and logical inconsistencies manifest in neoliberal paternalist policy-discourse and policy-making arguably have a longer history, one mutually constitutive of the neoliberal project as such. From this perspective, the tension between autonomous competitive agents and the coerced subject of paternalism is only a *contradiction* when neoliberal paternalist policies are viewed in discursive terms alone, or read with the intent of extracting an internally consistent political philosophy. When viewed as part of a practical political project, on the other hand, and in particular a class project (Harvey, 2007), the combined promotion of competition and market mechanisms alongside more coercive forms of state intervention becomes less surprising, and exhibits a practical and political consistency, if not a logical or discursive one. As has been widely argued (Brown, 2003; Harvey, 2007; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2013), the neoliberal opposition to collectivism, and the *construction* of competitive market-relations in

its place, necessarily entails the coercive and sometimes violent removal or refashioning of certain barriers – of public ownership, workplace and trade union rights, and other social entitlements – but also the refashioning of the moral subjectivities and ways of life associated with these (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Lazzarato, 2009, 2012; Read, 2009).

Paternalist coercion can, in this sense, become a precondition for treatment as a ‘freely-choosing’ competitive agent⁵. Amable (2011) draws attention to the way that neoliberalism is also a moral project with its own specific ethical content – where competition, individual responsibility, and self-reliance are promoted as moral virtues and normative ends. By understanding policies of conditionality and activation in this way, as part of an ideological and moralising project, it becomes possible to understand the consistency uniting what might in other respects appear to be their contradictory discursive elements and influences. For neoliberal paternalists the cause of *moral* concern, and thus the target of neoliberal paternalist intervention, are those subjects who are not (yet) sufficiently market-oriented (or market-dependent). This is seen as *both* a problem of incentives, market mechanisms, and non-market dependencies (where support comes from the state), *and* as a problem of demoralisation. Neoliberal paternalism is about the active fashioning of moral subjects for markets (Schram et al., 2010; Soss et al., 2011) and, in the case of conditionality and activation, for labour markets.

This ideological formation is at once discursive and material – it is a formation embodied in institutions and their practices (Hall & O’shea, 2013; Seymour, 2014),

⁵ This argument has been made with respect to nineteenth century ‘liberal government and authoritarianism’. Dean (2002) argues that nineteenth century liberalism’s paradoxical relationship to certain forms of social authoritarianism is in part a function of its conception of the subject. Liberalism’s concept of the subject and its freedoms is modelled on an idealised notion of free market-relations; however, where subjects are unable to assume such relations, the state has a right to intervene and force these relations upon them. Dean suggests that the contemporary ‘neoliberal’ paradox of coercive ‘workfare’ schemes rests on a similar principle – engaging with the labour market is a precondition for being viewed as a ‘free’ and ‘choosing’ agent. The labour market, and its associated social relations, are not ones from which one is ‘free’ to withdraw.

particularly those studied by this thesis. These institutions and their practices are not, however, isolated or independent of other forms of discourse and practice, and it is worth considering the ways in which the paternalist policy construction of the dependent welfare claimant sits alongside other representations of class, inequality, and poverty within neoliberal society. Jensen (2014) has explored the way that, through the alchemy of austerity (Clarke & Newman, 2012), deep social problems of inequality have been magically transformed into problems of 'welfare dependence', 'cultures of entitlement' and 'irresponsibility' (Jensen, 2014). Jensen's analysis is concerned with how televisual representations of benefit claimants contribute to the cultural and political crafting of doxa, understood following Bourdieu (1977) in terms of received categories of understanding whose power lies in their assumed and unquestioned status. Such representations are important precisely because of the way they intervene in the emotional life of welfare (Hoggett & Campling, 2000), and in doing so help to shape conceptual and affective responses to social policy, directed towards particular political ends. For Jensen, the proliferation of stigmatising representations of poverty need to be seen and analysed in terms of the crafting of folk devils and the generation of moral panic; she draws parallels with Hall et al's (1978) analysis of the racialised moral panic surrounding 'mugging' and the figure of 'the mugger', pointing to the way that the figure of 'the skiver' similarly condenses various social anxieties and resentments (Hoggett et al, 2013), and does so in a way useful for anti-welfare politics. As she puts it, '[t]hrough imagining/inventing anxieties about the scheming deceits of those entitled to social protection, such entitlements become easier to undermine and dismantle' (Jensen, 2014, p. 2). This is a process aided by the circulation of such representations through a range of contexts – from the Houses of Parliament through various media forms – such that they come to represent a form of unquestioned 'commonsense'.

This analysis can be situated alongside a broader literature from both sociology and cultural studies addressing the affective experience of class, and that has

drawn attention to the way that class both mobilises and is made through various affective and emotional responses. In the work of Skeggs and Loveday (2012) attention is drawn to the way that classed subjects struggle to realise their value in situations where they are judged and positioned by powerful (dominant) others as without value. The emotional dynamics of class are often found to be marked by feelings of disapproval and disgust. This comes across particularly strongly in the work of Tyler (2008, 2013) who carefully anatomises the figure of the 'Chav' in terms of the middle-class social anxieties it represents and condenses; anxieties about female sexuality, reproduction, racial mixing. The figure is also found to express an anxiety about social mobility, and the need to enforce distinctions and exclusions. There is a focus on the relational dynamics of class and classed feelings; those who are judged as without value are judged from specific social positions. Such judgements relate as much to the position of the one making the judgement, as they do to the one who is judged (Bourdieu, 2010; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012).

This particular body of work is also concerned with the way that those who are dominated also struggle to realise their own value, and how 'class' can come to act as a name for, and means of understanding, the structures through which one is positioned; and that in recognising such structures people are able to assert alternative spheres of value and ways of valuing themselves. However, as Skeggs and Loveday (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012) write, this raises the important question of 'what happens when ugly feelings have no conceptual frames such as class that enable people to connect and collectivize their understandings? What happens when the affects of anger and anxiety produced through injustice are not attached to their proper object?' Recent research addressing the lived experience of claimants (Garthwaite, 2011; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster, & Garthwaite, 2012) points to the way that the ideological doxa of anti-welfare commonsense is something that many people live within, as much as they do against (Lister, 2004). Understanding how welfare recipients live with, within, and against certain ideological constructions of their situation can benefit from an

understanding of how claimants have and exercise agency. The next section addresses the literature on agency in relation to welfare subjects, conditionality, and activation.

Moral agency and agency against moralism

The turn toward activation and behavioural conditionality has been accompanied by extensive debate within academic social policy on the question of agency (Deacon, 2002, 2004; Deacon & Mann, 1999; Greener, 2002; Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004; Wright, 2012, 2016b). In some respects this debate can be seen as one response to the policy turn, particularly in the case of activation and conditionality, toward addressing social problems constructed in terms of individuals, their moral conduct and behaviours. For Deacon (2002; Deacon & Mann, 1999), the renewed policy focus on matters of individual moral conduct might be attributed to the social policy establishment's 'neglect' or 'denial' of individual agency, and its continued commitment to an outdated paradigm overly focused on the structural determinants of individual welfare need. In this view, the broadly social democratic left, in neglecting to address questions of behaviour, motivation, and moral accountability, had ceded this terrain to conservative moralists such as Murray (Murray et al., 1999), Mead (1997, 2008) and Etzioni (1994) granting them an important position from which to influence social policy discourse. Deacon and Mann (1999) argue that it is therefore imperative that questions of responsibility and moral accountability receive greater engagement (rather than simply critique) from social policy researchers, particularly via the analytical concept of 'agency', although as Deacon (2004) points out, this concept has been interpreted in very different ways within the discipline.

There is perhaps a risk in entering this terrain of tacitly accepting some of its landmarks, boundaries, and broad categories of understanding (for example, the importance of 'taking responsibility' or the significance of 'moral codes' - see

Deacon & Mann, 1999, p. 433), such that debate becomes constrained by the terms set by the (re)moralised political agenda of those conservative figures whose influence it might seek to counter. As Lister (2004) writes, there is ‘a fine line between acknowledgement of the agency of people in poverty, including their capacity to make mistakes and “wrong” decisions like the rest of us, and blaming them for that poverty’ (Lister, 2004, p. 125). Similarly, highlighting a key limitation of this debate, Wright (2012) points out that much of the subsequent discussion ‘has been skewed towards considering the intentions of benefit recipients...but has largely overlooked the motivation and behaviour of more powerful social actors, such as policy-makers and employers’ (Wright, 2012, p. 310). Much of the significant work on the agency of welfare subjects, mindful of such risks and limitations, has sought to move beyond simplistic and ‘thin’ accounts of agency (e.g. beyond abstract and normative discussion of the ‘responsibilities’ attendant to rights), drawing theoretical resources from sociology and psychosocial studies in order to produce more nuanced and contextually sensitive conceptualisations. Looking ahead, Chapter Four will explore some of these sociological and psychosocial concepts in greater depth.

Policies of conditionality and activation are based on particular discursive constructions of the welfare subject (Wright, 2016b). These discursive constructions can be described as ideological, and as such need not be conceptually or internally consistent, instead composed of ideational fragments, institutional and social practices, representations and resonant images (Eagleton, 1991; Therborn, 1999); as outlined in the previous section, the ideology of neoliberal paternalism is assembled out of a mixed-up assortment of discursive bric-a-brac (Whitworth, 2016). Nevertheless, from this ideological image-collage there stand out particular themes (the broken society, the underclass, the work ethic) and accentuated figures (the shirker, the skiver, the scrounger) toward which policies are directed (and, in this account of ideology, help to reproduce⁶).

⁶ This argument is also made by Howe (1990) who, following a critical discussion of the categories ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, writes: ‘social policies based on the presumed empirical existence of social

Two notable aspects of the way the welfare subject is presented in neoliberal paternalist discourse, and in conditional activation policy, are that it is either mostly passive and requires ‘activating’, or that it is a ‘bad’ or ‘malevolent’ agent who needs to be encouraged/coerced, by incentive or by sanction, into making the ‘right’ personal choices.

In a discussion of agency in the context of poverty, Lister (2004) argues against the kind of reductive ‘Othering’ that turns people living in poverty into ‘passive objects – in either the benign form of the helpless victim or the malign spectre of the lazy, work-shy, welfare dependent’ (Lister, 2004, p. 124). Drawing attention to the varied ways that people might exercise agency in the context of material (and symbolic) constraint, she discusses agency in terms of its personal, political, everyday, and strategic dimensions, offering a fourfold taxonomy of getting by, getting (back) at, getting out, and getting organized. ‘Getting by’ describes the personal, everyday forms of creative agency that are required in order to cope and simply keep life going in situations of poverty. This is a form of agency that is often invisible (not least to policy makers and street-level actors), most often noticed only when it breaks down and turns an ongoing situation into an official ‘problem’ (Lister, 2004, p. 130). This is a creative form of agency that involves ‘juggling, piecing together and going without’ (Lister, 2004, p. 133); frequently it involves the active enrolment of whatever material, social, and relational resources are to hand, as well as ‘resource augmentation’ through the informal economy. In the specific context of activation, conditionality, and claiming benefits, this account draws attention to the ways that what certain policy-actors construe as the merely ‘passive’ receipt of benefit is but a single moment in a complicated, active, and often exhausting project of getting by.

groups bearing a simple correspondence to these two cultural categories are therefore seriously flawed. Any such policy will not only fail to achieve its stated aims, but it will continue to reproduce the conditions which appear to render them sensible.’ (Howe, 1990, p. 4) An argument might be made for the supersession of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, in policy discourse perhaps more than popular, by the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’. Howe’s point about the role of social/institutional practice in the production of ideological distinctions would, however, still hold. There is a question about the extent to which ‘active/passive’ and ‘deserving/undeserving’ do the same, or similar ideological work.

‘Getting (back) at’ describes an everyday, political form of agency that includes the kinds of ‘everyday resistances’ described by Scott (1992), such as the deployment of ‘hidden transcripts’ which reject and subtly subvert the norms and values of dominant others. The work of Kingfisher (1996) has drawn attention to this kind of resistant agency in the context of interactions with welfare services; she describes how her participants employed a range of strategies in order to negotiate with inadequate welfare systems, through practices of concealment, exaggeration, ‘hyper-truth’ (the exaggerated performance of playing by the rules) and other techniques of impression management. With respect to the different ways that claimants might tactically engage with welfare agencies and professionals, Greener (2002) argues that this will often depend on the particular social and cultural resources they bring to such situations, but also how these relate to the wider welfare field and its structure of rules (on the notion of welfare as a field see also: Peillon, 1998). Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1992) concepts of capital, field, and habitus, he argues that some claimants ‘may achieve quicker and more deferent service from welfare professionals where [they possess a more] upper-class disposition likely to mean that the claimant is recognized as being “one of us”’ (Greener, 2002, p. 702). In this vein, Wright (2003) discusses the shift in power relations that can occur when employment officers are confronted with clients of perceived higher status (in terms of qualification, class-background, or previous occupation) – clients they labelled as the ‘hoity-toity’ or ‘snooty’ ones. Although attracting their own form of derision, these clients were able to ‘evade close scrutiny’ on account of their intimidating social position – a form of power of which they weren’t necessarily consciously aware (Wright, 2003, pp. 248–249). This approach draws attention to the relational nature of agency in welfare encounters, pointing to the way that it is exercised within a field of rules with which individuals can be differently accommodated (Ahmed & Jones, 2008); it also suggests the need to consider how the agency of welfare subjects interacts with, and can be constrained by, the perceptions and agency of others – street-level

welfare workers, but also more distant but influential policy actors with the power to shape the rules of the game.

Also discussed in terms of 'getting (back) at' are other more symbolically inflected forms of resistance (the explicit rejection of dominant norms and values) and, as well, more violent and destructive forms of agency aimed at the self, close others, and the wider community (Lister, 2004, p. 140). On this point Hoggett (2001) argues that there is a need to understand the psychosocial and non-rational dimensions of agency in situations of constraint, hurt, and suffering (Frost & Hoggett, 2008). This account points to the fragmented, non-unitary nature of the self, of the existence of non-reflexive aspects of agency, and the possibility of non-rational and non-purposive action. Elsewhere Hoggett (Hoggett, 2005, 2006, 2010) also develops a psychosocial and psychodynamic account of front-line, street-level welfare organisations, and this thesis will explore the implications of this approach for the research in greater depth in Chapter Four.

There is present, in both 'getting by' and 'getting (back) at', a tension between resistance and acquiescence, between rejection of both material and symbolic forms of domination, and accommodation with them. Resistance to particular bureaucratic rules can be combined with assent and attachment to their overall normative framework – for example, those who exercise their agency in order to 'fiddle the system' may nevertheless demonstrate a strong attachment to the work ethic which the system is designed to police (Dean, 1998; Dean & Melrose, 1997). In a different way, negative labelling and stereotyping can be both resisted and accepted at the same time – that is, resisted in the particular, personal instance *precisely through* acceptance of the general legitimacy of scrounging discourse. In an account of the ways that unemployed men 'get by,' Howe (1998) points to the relative absence of resistance in terms of 'hidden transcripts,' instead describing the way that the dominant discourse of 'scrounging' is fully assumed and even energetically adopted by the unemployed men themselves. This is part of a

paradoxical strategy to avoid negative labelling, and follows from the difficult double bind the unemployed find themselves in:

The only incontestable proof of willingness to work is actually to get a job. Barring that, the unemployed strive to conform, or at least claim to conform, to the expectations which kin, friends and neighbours have of them so as to get themselves classed as 'deserving'. The problem, however, again, is that the extent of conformity is always open to dispute and is not a matter of objective measurement: what constitutes 'diligence' in looking for work, and how is 'restraint' in claiming benefits measured? (Howe, 1998, p. 539)

In negotiation with this double bind the unemployed men in Howe's study strove to adopt the norms and forms of discourse of those around them; they made their efforts to find work as visible as possible, no matter how unrealistic, in the process subjecting themselves to repeated forms of painful rejection. At the same time, the unemployed men constantly monitored their own conduct, and were careful to avoid engaging in too many social activities lest these be seen as inappropriate (e.g. going to the pub, using leisure services) and as evidence of their 'scrounging' behaviour. Such activity and self-surveillance allowed them to adopt the discursive and ideological distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving', placing themselves on one side of this divide and negatively labelling others. This particular psychosocial, psychodynamic response to situations of shame and stigma is widely identified throughout the literature on peoples' experiences of unemployment, poverty, inequality, and making benefit claims (Garthwaite, 2011; Patrick, 2016; Peacock et al., 2014; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Shildrick et al., 2012). Looking ahead, in Chapter Seven the thesis will explore some of these dynamics as they operate in the context of welfare-to-work encounters.

In addition to these everyday forms of agency, 'getting out' and 'getting organised' represent more long-term, strategic projects. As Lister emphasises, living in poverty often means strategic horizons are constrained by everyday necessity, and there are significant barriers to enacting longer-term projects. 'Getting out' of poverty might mean getting a job, but even with a job 'getting out'

of poverty is not guaranteed. Some types of low paid, insecure work are more likely to keep people in poverty (Shildrick et al., 2012). Lister points to quantitative studies that demonstrate dynamics of cycling in between work and welfare (Heady, 1997; Jenkins et al., 2001; Lister, 2004, p. 145). More recent qualitative research on social insecurity and the 'low pay, no pay cycle' (Shildrick et al., 2012) describes the difficulties people face on entering low paid, insecure work, where finding a job is likely to be temporary, and unlikely to mean an escape from poverty and the material constraints it places on strategic agency. This work also directly confronts the myths and assertions of moralists such as Mead (1997, 2008) and, differently, Murray (Murray et al., 1999) that those regularly reliant on social benefits – either through demoralisation or disincentive – become disengaged from the labour market, and disaffiliated from the work ethic: 'one of the strongest, single findings of the study was that interviewees, who had been caught up in the low-pay, no-pay cycle over years, expressed great personal commitment to employment' (Shildrick et al., 2012, p. 84). The place of welfare-to-work programmes in this dynamic – ostensibly there to support the 'strategic agency' of claimants – is found to be less than supportive: targeted at the long-term unemployed, it ignores the low-pay, no-pay dynamic; based on the myths of inactivity and demoralisation, the focus on conditionality and sanctions exacerbates the difficulties people face (Shildrick et al., 2012, pp. 218–220).

'Getting organised' is a strategic-political form of agency; as such it confronts the same constraints faced by 'getting on'. However, where 'getting on' can readily co-exist with and alongside negative symbolic representations (and may be motivated by the need to escape these as well as material conditions), 'getting organised' faces a particular symbolic challenge in the sense that it often requires the recuperation of stigmatised and spoilt identities. It also entails forging collective identities against dominant individualised, individualising, blaming and self-blaming constructions of poverty and unemployment (Lister, 2004, pp. 150–151). Policies of conditionality and activation have, however, produced organised

forms of political activity; it would seem that this has often been allied to the anti-austerity movement, and emerged particularly strongly following 2010 and the Coalition government's subsequent 'reform' agenda. Prominent groups include Boycott Workfare and Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) (although there are numerous local groups); forms of activity have included the protest and picketing of Jobcentre Plus and welfare-to-work offices, work capability assessment centres, and employers taking advantage of free labour through various work experience and workfare schemes. These groups also keep an online presence, and maintain websites and social media feeds providing advice to other claimants on their rights, and on techniques for dealing with welfare agencies in order to avoid certain aspects of conditional compulsion. This is a topic that has received very little academic attention (although on DPAC see Williams-Findlay, 2011), and very little is known about the origins, extent, or reach of these forms of collective political agency.

There are also more everyday forms of political agency that would seem to sit somewhere between 'getting (back) at' and 'getting organised' – Lister refers to 'collective self-help' (Lister, 2004, p. 154) – which in the context of street-level welfare interactions might include the sharing of knowledge (of the benefits system), or support (accompanying others to interviews and appointments). The significance of collective political support, albeit of a more diffuse kind, is identified by Howe (1990), who found that those claimants who came from families or communities that rejected the 'scrounging' narrative and the 'undeserving/deserving' distinction were more likely to assert their rights and entitlements in encounters and interactions with welfare agencies. These were families and communities that had a strong history of political involvement and trade union participation, demonstrating the important influence that even historical or tangential forms of 'getting organised' can have for the exercise of individual agency in this context.

Informed by such contextualised accounts of agency as offered by Lister (2004) and Hoggett (2001), recent research into the lived experiences of people in regular contact with conditional, activating welfare regimes has staged a confrontation between welfare 'reform' as it is presented in policy discourse, and as it is experienced in real life. Wright (2016) makes this confrontation central and explicit, presenting the model of the welfare subject as constructed in policy discourse (inactive, dependent) alongside the alternative theorisations of creative and reflexive agency (Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004; Wright, 2012) and data drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews. Importantly for this research, Wright identifies the ways that 'activation' interacts with the agency of welfare recipients in practice. Arising from welfare recipients' engagement with activation programmes, Wright identifies a dynamic she calls 'activity without results' which describes a situation where continued and repeated (mandatory) activity toward finding work nevertheless fails to result in a job or change of situation – the stipulated activities being inappropriate, unnecessary, or unable to counteract the influence of other external factors. This echoes the account provided by Southwood (2011) of his own experience of attending welfare-to-work schemes, which he describes as a dispiriting and demoralising experience of 'non-stop inertia'.

Conclusion

This chapter began by exploring policies of activation, conditionality, and their recent history in British social policy. Since the 1980s eligibility for various benefits has been tightened, and their value progressively eroded; meanwhile, behavioural conditionality has intensified, and been extended to ever wider groups of people. This chapter argued that it is also important to attend to the ideological context of such welfare encounters, the way that such encounters are discursively constructed, and how this might shape the way that such encounters are experienced. The intensification of behavioural conditionality has been accompanied by reinvigorated reactionary attacks on the welfare state, in the form

of moralising discourse about the work ethic ('shirkers'), and stigmatising narratives about poverty ('scroungers'). This chapter reviewed the valuable literature on agency and welfare interactions. It argued that building on this literature, there is scope for investigating the dynamic lived experience of conditional activation programmes, specifically focusing on the interaction between street-level practice, symbolic/ideological representations, and the agency of benefit recipients. Alongside the intensification of conditionality, and ideological development and 'anti welfare commonsense', the delivery of employment support has been increasingly wedded to the policing of the benefits system; furthermore, this has occurred in a context of creeping privatisation and quasi-marketisation, with a much bigger role given to contracted organisations, many of them operating for profit. The following chapter turns to address this street-level, organisational context of conditional welfare encounters, as well as the role of the street-level employee.

Chapter Three – Street-level bureaucracy

Introduction

This thesis explores aspects of activation and behavioural conditionality as they are materialised at street-level. This chapter situates the research with respect to street-level studies of policy implementation generally, and of activation and conditionality specifically. The first section of the chapter locates the street-level perspective within studies of the policy process and policy implementation. It highlights the contribution of street-level literature in terms of asserting the importance of street-level organisations as places where policy is made, rather than simply implemented. The chapter then outlines some core features of the street-level approach to policy research, before considering the emerging street-level literature on activation. The renewed interest in street-level perspectives in the case of activation has been driven by developments in both formal and operational policy (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2009); this twin track of reforms (van Berkel & Borghi, 2008) redoubles the importance of street-level sites as places where both policy *and* politics are mediated (Brodkin, 2013a). One consequence of the operational reforms accompanying activation is the prominence of operational and management issues in the street-level literature on activation. The remainder of the chapter turns to consider some important themes across the street-level literature. These are the themes of conflict and coping; client processing; and identities. The final section of the chapter draws attention to some differences and points of disagreement within the street-level literature; these differences relate to the ways in which the street-level bureaucrat and street-level situation are conceptualised, which has consequences for how the practice of street-level advisors is understood.

Implementation studies and the policy process

This thesis can be thought of as an implementation study. Implementation studies have a specific place within the field of policy analysis and, more specifically,

studies of the policy process (Hill, 1997; Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). The latter are those forms of policy analysis ‘in which attention is focused upon how policy decisions are made and how policies are shaped in action’ (Hill, 2012, p. 5), and how ‘policy is shaped by social, institutional, political, economic and other contexts’ (Birkland, 2014, p. 4). The notion of ‘the policy process’ developed soon after the establishment of public administration and ‘the policy sciences’ (Lasswell, 1951, 1970) as a distinct disciplinary space in the mid-twentieth century United States (Hill & Hupe, 2014, p. 6). As an object of analysis it has been extensively adopted and developed in different national contexts, including the United Kingdom (Ham & Hill, 1984). There is a broad literature addressing the different ways in which the policy process might be conceptualised, in terms of stages or cycles (Easton, 1967; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 1995; May & Wildavsky, 1979), and drawing attention to different forms of feedback and complexity within and between its different stages (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; Jenkins, 1978). Within the different conceptualisations of the policy process, implementation is but one stage among others.

From the beginning of the 1970s implementation specifically began to receive greater attention as a worthy and interesting topic of study in its own right, again first and foremost in the United States, but also in Europe (Hill, 1997, p. 127). The context of this growing interest was a perceived ‘mismatch between policies-as-conceived and policies-as-executed (or *not* executed)’ (Brodkin, 2015, p. 27). In particular, there was a sense that the reforms and policies instituted from the 1960s onwards under the banner of the ‘War on Poverty’ and ‘Great Society’ programmes were not having their intended effects and outcomes (Hill, 1997, p. 129). The influential work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) sought to direct attention toward the ‘black box’ (Palumbo & Calista, 1990) of implementation in order to study what went wrong on the frontlines of policy implementation, or as the subtitle of their book put it, to understand ‘[h]ow great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland’ (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). There was a concern to understand the ‘gap’ between policy-as-formulated and policy-as-

practiced – the so-called ‘implementation gap.’ In the United Kingdom, Hood (1976) formulated a similar problematic, focusing on the ‘limits of administration’ and its ability to control policy implementation and achieve compliance.

These early problematisations of policy implementation carried with them certain normative assumptions which became the focus of critique and extensive debate (Sabatier, 1986). Briefly put, the conceptualisation of an ‘implementation gap’ as the product of small, cumulative deficits in compliance was reliant on a definition of policy as distinct from its implementation (Hill & Hupe, 2014, p. 4). Within this, it was assumed that policies-as-formulated were clearly defined and identifiable, such that deviance from their aims and goals might be easily discerned (Hill, 1997, p. 133). This approach tended to assume that whatever deficiencies and deficits were associated with a policy accrued on its journey away from elite centres of power and downward toward the front-lines of implementation and delivery. These assumptions represented a ‘top-down’ or ‘managerial’ understanding of policy, in so far as they express something of the perspectives and assumptions of elite policy-actors and managers (Barrett & Fudge, 1981), viewing the ‘problem’ of implementation almost exclusively as one of control and compliance. The field of implementation research thus became the site of debate between such ‘top-down’ approaches, and opposing ‘bottom-up’ frameworks (Sabatier, 1986). Proponents of a ‘bottom up’ approach (Barrett & Fudge, 1981; Elmore, 1979; Hanf, 1982) emphasised the need to understand more about the organisational context of implementation, and put forward a view of policy as the negotiation of a complex arrangement of conflicts and relationships. In this view there was a need to ‘get away from a single perspective of the process that reflects a normative administrative or managerial view of how the process should be’, focusing more on the empirical complexity of implementation as it actually occurred, and ‘on the actors and agencies themselves and their interactions’ (Hill, 1997, p. 139). Lipsky’s (1980) theory of ‘street-level bureaucracy’ offered one such approach, conceptually grounded in a wealth of empirical material from front-line policy delivery.

Street-level bureaucracy

‘Street-level bureaucracy’ refers to those sites and spaces where the public meets face-to-face with low-level employees of government (or government-funded) services – that is, where they encounter ‘street-level bureaucrats’, those service workers who ‘interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs’ (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). It is also a way of referring to the routine activities and practices that occur in these spaces. Street-level bureaucrats typically have a degree, sometimes a substantial degree, of discretion in the way they go about their work. This makes street-level encounters interesting for a variety of reasons; they are places where policy is made or materialised in everyday routine activity (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13); they are also sites where power is exercised (Dubois, 2012), social identities are made (Watkins-Hayes, 2009), and citizenship defined (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Encounters in street-level bureaucracies teach the public ‘political lessons contributing to future political expectations’ (Lipsky, 1984, p. 9) and ‘socialize citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community’ (Lipsky, 2010, p. 4). In making policy in and through practice, street-level bureaucrats directly shape citizens’ experiences of public services and the state.

When it was first published in 1980, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* drew attention to such spaces and asserted their fundamental importance as sites of policy-making (Brodkin, 2012, 2015; Hudson, 1993; Rowe, 2012). At that time, among researchers of the policy process, and within the wider context of policy-implementation research, street-level organisations and the people that worked in them tended to be constructed as a particular kind of problem. In drawing a clear distinction between policy and implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), implementation research tended to view street-level sites as deviant locations where already-defined policies somehow went awry, were deformed, their true aims lost or subverted. In contrast with this normative, top-down understanding of the policy process (Barrett & Fudge, 1981; Hill, 1997, p. 129), Lipsky presented a

very different view, of policy 'not as a fixed construct, but as an indeterminate one' (Brodkin, 2012, p. 942), arguing that,

the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively *become* the public policies they carry out (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii).

In contrast with a view of policy 'from the perspective of centrally elected governments and their administrative elites' Lipsky offered the view from the street, of policy as it looks to low-level officials and users of services (Rowe, 2012, p. 11). From this perspective what had previously been understood in terms of the 'gap' between policy and its implementation, or as a problem of control and compliance, instead became the analytical and empirical problem of 'how to understand complex organisational behavior' (Brodkin, 2012, p. 941). The task for street-level policy researchers was to understand 'street-level work from the *inside out*', focusing on 'what organizations actually did in the name of policy' (Brodkin, 2012, p. 943), and paying attention to the factors, forces and dynamics shaping street-level practice.

The indeterminacy of policy, and the corresponding significance of street-level organisations, is not, from Lipsky's point of view, a problem that can be remedied or altogether resolved, but rather a more fundamental feature of what policy *is*. Policies, as they are officially formulated, are often ambiguous and contradictory. This might be because they are the result of conflict and compromise, where the form of legislative resolution 'is to pass on intractable conflicts for resolution (or continued irresolution) at the administrative level' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 41). In a different way, official policy is often the result of accretions and adjustments which may never have been rationalised, or small 'adjustments to the way existing activities are to be carried out' (Hill, 1997, p. 135). The official rules and regulations guiding a particular area of street-level work 'may be so voluminous and contradictory that they can only be enforced or invoked selectively' (Lipsky, 2010,

p. 14). Policy is also indeterminate because of the irreducibly 'human dimensions of situations'. It is not always so easy for street-level bureaucrats to decide what the rules, even when selectively invoked, might mean in the context of singular, specific human situations that are often 'too complicated to reduce to programmatic formats' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 15). What discretion that street-level bureaucrats have is located here, amid the conflict, contradiction, ambiguity and, therefore, inevitable and necessarily indeterminate nature of official policy.

During the 1980s, predominantly in the United States, a street-level perspective was adopted by research addressing a wide range of policy areas, from education (Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1980) and the legal profession (Brintnall, 1981), to municipal service provision (Thomas, 1986) and welfare services (Hasenfeld, 1985), among others. By the early 1990s, however, it had become a neglected perspective (Hudson, 1993), but one that has over the past decade or so seen a revival of interest, not only in the United States but also in the United Kingdom, other Anglophone countries, and across Europe. In particular 'street-level bureaucracy' is emerging as an important perspective in the analysis of activation and active welfare states (Brodkin & Marston, 2013). In part this reflects a desire to understand more about the street-level dynamics of this relatively recent policy turn and its related policy *content*; however, it is also a result of other *operational* developments and changes in governance which, it is argued, make street-level organisations doubly important sites where both the policy *and* politics of welfare reform are mediated (van Berkel et al, 2011; Brodkin, 2013a).

Street-level bureaucracy and the governance of activation

In discussing the governance of social security in Britain, Carmel and Papadopoulos (2009) draw a distinction between formal policy and operational policy. The formal policies of activation and conditionality would be those which describe their substantive content – the welfare-to-work programmes and changes to conditional requirements outlined in the last chapter. Operational policy refers

to the way that these policies are to be delivered or carried out. This is often addressed in terms of the governance of such services (van Berkel et al, 2011), understood as 'the organisational arrangements and procedures for policy delivery' (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2009, p. 94). The turn toward activation and conditionality has been achieved through a variety of developments in both formal *and* operational policy. In operational terms, there has been a marked shift, in the U.K., first toward managerialism in the running of public services, then to contracting out, and finally toward marketisation and the construction of large-scale quasi-markets in welfare-to-work services (Wright, 2011). The specifically operational and governance reforms accompanying the development of active welfare states are important and significant on their own terms, and have generated extensive debate and a wide body of literature, much of it also comparative (van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; van Berkel, Graaf, & Tomáš Sirovátka, 2011; Lødemel & Moreira, 2014; Newman, 2007; Sol & Westerveld, 2005; Wiggan, 2009). Within this, however, the literature also highlights the need to understand the relationship between governance and implementation, and the potential consequences of operational reform for the 'content' of activation as it is delivered on the ground (van Berkel, Graaf, & Tomáš Sirovátka, 2011; Brodtkin & Marston, 2013).

To understand the role of street-level activation workers in contracted-out welfare-to-work programmes it is necessary to situate them with respect to the managerial and quasi-market environment in which they work. In the broadest terms managerialism – elsewhere the 'new managerialism', or 'new public management' (for a discussion of the different terms see: Clarke et al, 2000, pp. 6–10) – refers to the attempt to reconfigure public organisations such that their institutional form and practice more closely resemble those of the private sector. These terms refer to a normative and ideological agenda (Clarke et al., 2000, p. 9; Pollitt, 1990) concerned with prioritising matters of efficiency and cost effectiveness (or, cost cutting) in the delivery of services, but are also used

descriptively as shorthand for the different developments in public sector organisation and practice, dating from the 1980s onwards, through which this is to be achieved (Clarke et al., 2000). The creation of the Employment Service as an executive agency is one example. Functioning semi-autonomously from central government, its operational freedoms were matched with financial accountability measured and managed through performance indicators and targets (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2009; Price, 2000; Wright, 2011, p. 87).

Following the development of new public management, there emerged a trend toward contracting out and the marketisation of service provision. Wright (2011) identifies three stages in the development of welfare marketisation in the UK. The first step involved the incorporation of market values into the provision of public services, such as the introduction of performance indicators and targets in the management of the Employment Service and Jobcentres. This took place between 1990 and 1997. The second stage involved the increasing use of contracting-out for specific, particularly area-based, services. This is the era of Employment Zones and the early New Deals during which there was a mix of provision, with some welfare-to-work initiatives delivered directly by Jobcentre Plus, and others contracted out to private and voluntary sector providers. The third stage involved the construction of large-scale quasi-markets in welfare services, roughly from 2006 onwards –sometimes this stage is dated to the recommendations contained within the Freud (2007) report, which alongside its extensive reliance on the trope of ‘dependency’, recommended stricter conditionality, more extensive use of private and voluntary sector providers, and the creation of a single working-age benefit for all claimants, and the rationalisation of existing welfare-to-work contracts into a single service of ‘support’ (Larsen & Wright, 2014).⁷

⁷ After advising the New Labour government on its welfare reform agenda, in 2009 Freud switched his support to the Conservatives, later becoming Parliamentary Under-secretary of State for the Coalition government. His proposals for a single support service influenced the development of the Work Programme.

As van Berkel et al (2011, p. 261) note, these reforms, important in their own terms, are also of interest to researchers concerned with ‘the actual “production” of [activation] in the organisations involved in implementation processes’. Brodtkin (2013b) suggests three ways in which implementation and street-level organisations have been conceptualised. Firstly, there is a one-dimensional view of street-level organisations, as those spaces in which ‘official’ policy is implemented and, through street-level discretion, distorted. This is the view adopted by early normative iterations of implementation studies which viewed street-level organisations as ‘deviant’ spaces (Brodtkin, 2013a, p. 20; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Secondly, the two-dimensional view of street-level organisations abandons these normative assumptions, ‘flips the script and treats policy as an indeterminate construct...in order to see how policy is constructed on the ground’ (Brodtkin, 2013a, p. 21). This is the perspective introduced by Lipsky (1980) and ‘street-level bureaucracy’. Finally, a three-dimensional view of street-level organisations sees them as mediators of both policy and politics, ‘wherein politically contested policy projects may be advanced indirectly through administrative means, including through managerial reforms that alter the arrangements and conditions of street-level policy work’ (Brodtkin, 2013a, p. 23). As has been argued elsewhere, ‘[n]ot only are governance reforms not neutral’ with respect to their influence on the content of social policies, but ‘these reforms also often explicitly *intend* to have an impact on programmes and services’ (van Berkel, Graaf, & Tomáš Sirovátka, 2011, p. 237). Slightly differently, Brodtkin argues that what she calls ‘managerial reforms’ might be understood ‘as a form of politics by indirection’ (Brodtkin, 2013a, p. 25) and, drawing on Pierson (1994), suggests that reforms to operational policy might be understood as purposeful attempts to obfuscate political conflicts and controversial policy intentions: managerial strategies ‘may be used to smuggle in small changes that, in the aggregate, advance broader political projects’ (Brodtkin, 2013a, p. 27). In either case, whether open and explicit, or indirect and obfuscatory, it is argued that with respect to activation, the simultaneous development of both formal and

operational policy redoubles the importance of studying its implementation in street-level spaces.

The politics of management emerges as a particularly important point of focus in recent street-level studies of activation programmes. One important feature of contemporary welfare-to-work programmes, and a consequence of contracting out and marketisation, is the prevalence of individualised performance targets and managerial surveillance for street-level advisors (Brodkin, 2011a; Soss, R. Fording, & Schram, 2011; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2013; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Changes to the operational delivery of welfare services mean that it is less the case now that '[s]treet-level bureaucrats tend to perform in jobs that are freer from supervisor scrutiny than most organizational jobs', or that 'work norms prevailing in these jobs minimize such scrutiny' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 50). On the contrary, recent studies, particularly those from the United states, have found that street-level workers are subject to wide-ranging and often intense managerial surveillance (Brodkin, 2013; Soss et al., 2013; Watkins-Hayes, 2009), and this relates directly to the operational context in which the work is carried out, where street-level organisations are under pressure to meet specific performance measures in order to receive payment. Street-level studies of activation, in their most recent iterations, are equally concerned with the way that street-level organisations mediate both policy and politics, and within this the role of management is crucial.

This chapter has so far considered the origins of street-level perspectives in policy research, drawing attention to the emphasis on street-level organisations as places where policy is made, rather than simply implemented. It has also drawn attention to way that activation is shaped by developments in both formal and operational policy; for these reasons there is a growing interest in street-level organisations as places where different waves of policy reform meet and interact, and in street-level sites as places where both politics and policy are mediated. Within the emerging street-level literature on activation the importance of performance management and monitoring emerges as a strong theme. In the following section

this chapter offers a more thematic review of some of the street-level literature; in doing so it draws attention to how some of the core themes of *Street Level Bureaucracy* have been addressed by specific studies, with a focus on social assistance and employment services (although not exclusively). These are the themes of conflict and coping; client processing; and street-level identity. Following this thematic review, the chapter concludes by drawing attention to some differences and disagreements within the street-level literature. These are disagreements concerning the nature of the street-level bureaucrat as a subject, and the different ways that the street-level encounter is conceptualised.

Conflict and coping

In drawing attention to street-level sites as places where policies are made, and their indeterminacies resolved through practice, studies of street-level bureaucracy also point to how the street-level outcome of policy indeterminacy is decided through conflict and struggle. The discretion that street-level bureaucrats exercise is not conceptualised in abstract terms, as the free decision-making of unencumbered agents, but as something situated, embodied, and subject to a variety of pressures. The picture of street-level policy-making that emerges from *Street-Level Bureaucracy* is of something that is, potentially, overdetermined, in the sense of being the symptomatic outcome of multiple, often conflicting, forces and pressures. Various, street-level policy conflict is 'located in the struggles between individual workers and citizens who challenge or submit to client-processing' (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii); clients of street-level bureaucracies pursue a variety of strategies for dealing with the bureaucrats who work in them (Kingfisher, 2011; Lipsky, 2010, p. 9), who likewise devise different ways of controlling and processing clients (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 117–120). Street-level organisations also often have conflicting goals; goals which are client-centred and goals which are organisation-centred, as well as goals which relate to different wider reference groups within the community (Lipsky, 2010, p. 41). The conflict arising from ambiguous or contradictory agency goals can also find expression in conflict

among street-level bureaucrats themselves (Watkins-Hayes, 2009), or between street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors/managers over the 'legitimate' service aims (Lipsky, 2010, p. 16). For street-level bureaucrats this situation can also mean 'a protracted struggle with themselves' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 203), which might be a struggle to cope, to 'work in a way consistent with their own preferences' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 19; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009), or even to 'retain a concept of their own adequacy in the job' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 82). Intensifying these integral conflicts of street-level work is the fact that it is mostly carried out under conditions of resource constraint (Lipsky, 2010, p. 33). Street-level bureaucracy is, in this way, a 'dilemmatic space' (Hoggett, Mayo, & Miller, 2008) replete with struggle and conflict.

Client processing

Client processing is an important dimension of street-level work, and another area where street-level bureaucrats develop routines and simplifications as coping mechanisms. However, although client processing often involves *simplification*, it is by no means *simple*. As Lipsky writes,

[p]eople come to street-level bureaucracies as unique individuals with different life experiences, personalities, and current circumstances. In their encounters with bureaucracies they are transformed into clients, identifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if, and treating themselves as if, they fit standardised definitions of units consigned to specific bureaucratic slots. The processing of *people* into *clients*, assigning them to categories for treatment by bureaucrats, and treating them in terms of those categories, is a social process...An important part of this process is the way people learn to treat themselves as if they were categorical entities (Lipsky, 2010, p. 59).

The transformation of people into clients involves forms of classification (see also: Chapter Four) which are also simplifications of their experiences, personalities, and circumstances. This is not a one way process; the forms of classification and categorisation are propagated by street-level organisations are also adopted and often internalised by clients – one of the ways in which street-level bureaucracy

teaches 'political lessons' by assigning identities and reinforcing social norms (Dubois, 2012, p. 5). As Lipsky suggests, in many respects this is a relational, intersubjective, and negotiated process. However, it is also necessarily shaped by the different positions of street-level advisors and clients, and the relations of power between them. As Lipsky emphasises, street-level clients are 'nonvoluntary', a 'point which is obvious in coercive public agencies such as police departments, but [that] also applies when the coercive dimension of the relationship between agency and the client are less clear' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 54). In many cases street-level services are ones which cannot be accessed elsewhere, and where participation results from need rather than choice, a situation which creates particular relations of power and dependence between street-level workers and their clients (Hasenfeld et al., 1987). In the case of conditional activation, participation in welfare-to-work programmes is mandatory, but it is also the case that the aims of clients might in some cases partially align with those of the activation service. Research on mandatory activation programmes thus finds that the power dynamics of worker-client relations are sometimes ambiguous, and the experience of coercion depends to some extent on whether or not the client identifies with the programme and its aims. For example, Blaxland (2013) explores the way that both formal activation policy and street-level welfare-to-work programmes construct claimants in particular ways, addressing mothers primarily as workers (albeit ones without a job) and welfare recipients, privileging these identities over and above their status as parents (or, indeed, other types of identity). In this context, claimants who did not recognise themselves as workers or welfare claimants first and foremost tended to resist this construction of their identity, and with it the programme and its demands; however, other claimants *did* recognise themselves in the terms presented by the programme, aligning themselves with it. Blaxland understands this in terms of 'interpellation' (Althusser, 2006) and the creation of policy subjects through such moments of recognition (and refusal). Importantly it is the 'interaction between the mother, the adviser and the policy [that] create[s] the 'fit' that makes an interpellated subject'

(Blaxland, 2013, p. 794). Client processing at street-level is complex, and despite the overtly coercive nature of mandatory programmes, relations but also experiences of power can be ambiguous and dependent on the particular configuration of relations and interactions.

Service users are often highly aware of the social norms and roles expected of them by street-level organisations, especially to the extent that these coincide with broader moral and moralising categories present in the wider culture, such as the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' (Howe, 1994), 'the good immigrant' (Dubois, 2012, p. 66), and the 'good mother' (Hasenfeld, 2000; Korteweg, 2003, 2006). On the one hand, the literature emphasises the way that whilst such categorical identities are often imposed on the clients of street-level bureaucracies (Dubois, 2012; Kingfisher, 1996), their availability as widely-recognised cultural scripts means that they can also function as resources that (some) clients can use in their negotiations with street-level advisors. Kingfisher (1996, 1998) discusses this in terms of the 'hidden transcripts' touched on in the last chapter; whilst in their interactions with welfare agencies, her participants 'performed' their deservingness, this was often a calculated strategy on their part, an everyday form of resistance underpinned by a more questioning 'hidden transcript' they shared with peers. However, it is important to emphasise that this kind of resistance depends on other resources and forms of support, and is not a strategy that all clients are able to adopt. It might depend on the support of peers (Kingfisher, 1996) or friends and family members (Howe, 1990). Sometimes the performance of 'deservingness' can fall flat, or be to no avail, and on other occasions, rather than being a tactic of everyday resistance, instead indicates a submission to powerful norms that is experienced as a form of suffering (Howe, 1994).

Street-level identities

In addition to being spaces where client identities are made, imposed, and resisted, street-level organisations are also important to the construction of the

social and working identities of street-level bureaucrats themselves. This is a point made by Lipsky in his discussion of 'advocacy and alienation' (2010, p. 71), in which he addresses some of the motivations of street-level workers: '[t]hose who recruit themselves for public service work are attracted to some degree by the prospect that their lives will gain meaning through helping others' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 72). Street-level bureaucrats are considered to share a broad orientation to public service (variously conceived) and for Lipsky this also entails a certain set of beliefs about the value and purpose of their work, which he refers to as 'the myth of altruism' and the 'ideology of benign intervention' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 71). Street-level bureaucrats work hard to maintain this myth, but the conflicts and dilemmas encountered during the course of their work can make it difficult to maintain. To the extent that the conflicts inherent to their role limit the scope for advocacy, street-level bureaucrats can become alienated from their work. This aspect of street-level bureaucracy has been developed by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, 2003) who argue that understanding the values and motivations of street-level workers is essential to understanding their discretionary practice. Against a view of the street-level worker as a state agent, making discretionary decisions about the application of rules, they argue that many street-level bureaucrats are first and foremost citizen-agents; in approaching any single, discrete situation or dilemma, street-level bureaucrats are guided first and foremost by their identities and values, making use of whatever discretionary power they have to apply rules in ways congruent with their broader conceptualisation of their role and its purpose.

Although street-level work might be a site for the construction of working identities, there are different views on the importance of this for street-level discretion and policy-making. Whilst for Maynard-Moody and Musheno identity has analytical significance, for Brodtkin (2011) the struggle of some bureaucrats to work in a way congruent with their beliefs is 'the exception that proves the rule' – the rule being the fact that identity is secondary to the broader managerial system

of incentive and disincentive to which street-level bureaucrats are subject, what elsewhere she calls the 'street-level calculus of choice' (Brodin, 2013c). Watkins-Hayes (2009) complicates this picture, raising important questions about the interactions between identity, motivation and management in the delivery of street-level services. In her ethnography of a welfare-to-work programme she identified three distinct orientations – social worker, survivalist, and efficiency engineer – among street-level workers, and these corresponded to very different ways of approaching the same street-level role. She coins the term 'situated bureaucrats' to explore the ways that organisational rubrics intersect with complex local, gendered, and ethnic identities to produce specific subjective orientations to the task of street-level work. Importantly she also reveals the way that these orientations can change over time, and in response to organisational and operational reform.

The street-level bureaucrat as subject and agent

In some ways the concepts of discretion and coping might be understood as two sides of the same coin: in discretion the street-level bureaucrat is presented as the decisive agent; in coping, they are the subject of pressures and forces greater than themselves which constrain, influence and shape their discretionary practice.⁸ Lipsky characterises a wide range of street-level routines and practices as coping mechanisms, as ways of negotiating and reaching compromise between different conflicting pressures. The importance of discretion, but also of coping, raises an important question about the relationship between the two; the answer to this question depends, more fundamentally, on the conceptualisation of the street-level bureaucrat as a subject. On this point, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* is theoretically open

⁸ Although as Lipsky notes in the preface to the 30th anniversary edition of *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, the importance of coping is relative to the structural constraints that street-level bureaucrats face: 'Frontline workers whose jobs are relatively free of restrictive structural constraints will still develop routines in response to their work requirements. But the routines will not be developed primarily to cope with a difficult work environment' (Lipsky, 2010, p. xvii). He goes on to note that *Street-Level Bureaucracy* largely addresses situations where constraint is significant; as this thesis will make clear, this is very much the case in street-level activation services.

or ecumenical in its approach, exhibiting what Hudson (1993, p. 394) calls a 'Goffmanian eclecticism'. Street-level bureaucrats have been variously presented as acting on prejudice or their perceptions of justice (Fletcher, 2011; Lipsky, 2010, p. 69), in both cases guided by socially situated subjective perceptions about their role, their clients and the situations they are in (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). But nor are they indifferent to the pressures of management, performance measures, targets and other more calculative concerns (Brodin, 2011a; Fletcher, 2011; Soss, R. Fording, et al., 2011; Soss et al., 2013). If there is an overriding theme in Lipsky's characterisation of the street-level bureaucrat, it is that they largely motivated to make their lives easier by simplifying their work and reducing their workload to manageable proportions. However, this general characterisation sometimes sits at odds with glimpses of workers who strive to pursue a particular agenda through their work, and who seek to reconcile it, against countervailing pressure, with an idealised notion of public service. If in places the street-level bureaucrat appears a contradictory and under-theorised figure, this might be read as a consequence of such questions regarding the street-level bureaucrat *as a subject* being ones which are largely tangential to the main aim of the book, which is to establish the importance of street-level spaces as a site of policy making, and to offer a broad theoretical framework for understanding policy as it is made in such spaces. As such questions regarding the relations between subjective aims and identities, the pressures street-level workers face, their coping mechanisms and discretionary practices receive less attention.

In applying a street-level perspective, and in trying to understand the ways that particular context-specific conflicts are negotiated, the complex *overdetermination* of street-level practice presented by Lipsky is often simplified and certain factors emphasised above others. This often depends on the analytical focus; it also depends on an (explicit or implicit) theorisation of the street-level bureaucrat as a subject. So, for example, in drawing attention to the disciplinary power of performance management and performance targets there is a version of the street-

level bureaucrat as a rational actor, responding in calculative fashion to a system of incentives and disincentives (Brodkin, 2011a; Soss et al., 2013). In this view street-level bureaucrats are also subjective or socially constructed agents, but this agency is subordinate to the 'calculus of choice' in which it is situated (Brodkin, 2013c, p. 152). Elsewhere, in work that draws attention to the subjective experiences street-level bureaucrats, there is instead an emphasis on identity and the importance of values and cultural norms in guiding discretionary behaviour (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003). Here, abidance to either a system of rules or incentives is contrasted with abidance to cultural norms and values; in this view the decisions and actions of street-level workers 'are guided as much by meaning as by function' (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, p. 20). Perhaps the most sophisticated conceptualisation of the street-level bureaucrat is the one developed in the attempt to explore the 'formulation of professional identities, their connection to bureaucratic discretion, and their relationship to the wider social context in which they are embedded' (Watkins-Hayes, 2009, p. 10); in this view the street-level bureaucrat is a sociological subject, viewed in terms of situated agency and structural constraint. Discretion is viewed as the expression of identity, and subject to the influence of a variety of factors and constraints. This thesis is interested in the experiences of street-level bureaucrats, as much as with the outcomes of their practice. In this respect it is interesting to consider how the street-level calculus of choice is socially constructed by actors at street-level; furthermore, the thesis is interested in how systems of incentive and disincentive are experienced and interpreted by street-level agents.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the street-level approach to policy analysis, and situated it with respect to studies of the policy process and implementation studies. In reviewing the street-level literature on activation, attention has been drawn to the importance of operational as well as formal policy at street-level. This is expressed in the street-level activation literature in the focus on

management control and supervision. This chapter has also identified key themes across the wider street-level literature, such as client processing, conflict, and coping, and has also drawn attention to differences and disagreements with respect to how the street-level bureaucrat is conceptualised. On this point, I have argued that the street-level literature has tended to emphasise the importance of street-level workers' subjective values and identities, *or* the external constraints, pressures, and calculative situations they face. Whilst it is possible to discern different and sometimes conflicting conceptualisations of the street-level bureaucrat, these are often implicit and as such relatively underdeveloped. Responding to this, the following chapter seeks to develop a conceptual framework which foregrounds the relationship street-level workers have to their role; such a framework will be used to explore the lived experiences of street-level activation workers in a way which accommodates both the subjective values and identities they might have, but also the organisational pressures and demands that they face. In developing this framework I draw on the sociological work of Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 2000) alongside a series of psychoanalytic and psychosocial concepts. This framework is also useful for understanding the experiences of client processing highlighted in this chapter. In particular, it helps to understand the specifically intersubjective and relational dimensions of client processing within the wider political and ideological context outlined in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four – Conceptual framework: the psychosocial field

Introduction

This chapter introduces the conceptual framework of the thesis, delineating its broad theoretical approach, and defining its key concepts. This theoretical approach might best be described as ‘psychosocial’, in the sense of being ‘concerned with the mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations within which they are enmeshed’ (Reay, 2015, p. 10). Psychosocial studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship, and its boundaries, genealogies and theoretical debts are the subject of ongoing debate (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Hoggett, 2008; Walkerdine, 2008). However, in examining the ‘suture’ of individual and social worlds (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Miller, 1977) or, indeed, the intermediate ‘transitional space’ of their separation (Hoggett, 2008; Hollway, 2011; Winnicott, 1971), there is a common concern with the role of affect, emotion, and unconscious processes in mediating social and organisational life. In addition to resources drawn from sociology and critical theory, psychosocial approaches to social research have found in psychoanalysis particularly fecund theoretical ground from which to explore such processes (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). In this vein, this chapter explores the affinities between certain psychoanalytic concepts and Bourdieu’s (1977, 1998, 2000) body of sociological theory, arguing that this conceptual synthesis is particularly helpful when it comes to understanding the relation that street-level advisors have to their role, but also the embodied experiences that welfare users have of conditionality and activation.

Social policy and ‘welfare’ have proven particularly fertile ground for psychosocial research, and this is a growing area of scholarship (Cooper & Lousada, 2005; Froggett, 2002; Hoggett & Campling, 2000; Stenner & Taylor, 2008). Arguably a psychosocial analysis of conditionality and activation is especially apposite given the increasingly individualised and individualising thrust of these

policies (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007), which target both the conduct *and* affective dispositions/presentations of welfare recipients (Friedli & Stearn, 2015). Psychosocial theorisations of the welfare subject have proven valuable in drawing attention away from the formal, discursive, and rhetorical agendas of welfare 'reform', and toward the real dynamics and lived experience of its materialisation (Hoggett, 2001; Wright, 2016). In considering the street-level encounter between welfare service user and street-level bureaucrat, there is also a growing psychosocial literature addressing the emotional life of organisations, particularly those which deliver welfare services (Armstrong, 2014a; Cooper & Lousada, 2005; Hoggett, 2005, 2006; Jones, 2013).

This chapter begins by outlining its core conceptual framework, which is derived from the work of Bourdieu. The concepts of field, habitus, and capital are introduced, as well as those of *illusio*, disillusionment, symbolic power and symbolic violence. The chapter then addresses some recent criticisms of this conceptual body of work, which point to its relative neglect of feeling, affect, and emotion. Some sociological work on emotion relevant to the thesis is introduced, as well as recent theoretical work highlighting the structural homologies between Bourdieu's theoretical project and that of psychoanalysis. The chapter then argues that certain psychoanalytic concepts can contribute to an understanding of the role of feelings and emotion in the street-level encounters between advisers and welfare recipients, in a way which remains congruent with the overall framework. The synthesis offered here builds on recent theoretical developments to offer an original perspective on street-level encounters and dynamics. Finally, some key psychoanalytic concepts are defined, and their use in literature on social and organisational research is reviewed.

The activation field

This thesis conceptualises the street-level space of activation in terms of a family of concepts drawn from the work of Bourdieu. Specifically, it understands street-

level interactions as occurring in a field – the field of activation – between embodied individuals, conceptualised in terms of habitus. This conceptualisation of street-level space enables the research to address in more detail the specific relation that advisors have to their role, understood in terms of their enrolment and recruitment into the field of activation. Such an approach also offers the possibility of thinking about the different ways in which advisors are adapted and oriented to their role, offering original insights and new perspectives on ‘street-level coping’.

This is a highly integrated and interrelated set of concepts; what analytic purchase each concept might have is gained through this integration into a broader theoretical body of relationships. However, rather than attempt to map or provide an extended account of the activation field, this thesis is more narrowly concerned with some of its specific street-level features, particularly as these are experienced by participants. Concomitantly, greater use is made of some Bourdieusian concepts than others⁹. This chapter also argues for the compatibility of certain key psychoanalytic ideas – projection/introjection, identification, disavowal – with these concepts. Nevertheless, here it is necessary to provide a condensed overview of Bourdieu’s theoretical body of work, outlining certain key conceptual relationships such that the meaning of the specific concepts utilised in later chapters – *illusio*, misrecognition, symbolic violence – is clear.

⁹ As the sociologist Michele Lamont notes, ‘[a]mong Bourdieuphiles, a number of researchers have spent their scholarly lives defending the necessary integrity of the whole package’ (Lamont, 2012, p. 229); that is, they reject an approach which would make use of some concepts and not others, or that would seek to extend Bourdieu’s theory through the pragmatic incorporation/generation of new concepts (for a recent argument against such a ‘pragmatic empiricism’ see: Atkinson, 2011). Against this, however, Lamont argues for the value and legitimacy of just such a pragmatic approach. Indeed, this might be supported by Bourdieu’s own theoretical practice, and his explicit rejection of ‘the reading of the lector [as] an end in itself’, seen as the expression of the scholastic fallacy, an interest only in texts and the relations between them, as opposed to a reading that sees concepts as tools simultaneously wrought through their practical application (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 53–54). This is the pragmatic approach to Bourdieu’s theory taken by Dubois (2012, p. xv), also adopted by this thesis.

Field, habitus, capital

Central to the Bourdieusian theoretical corpus are the concepts of field, habitus, and capital; these are interrelated concepts, able to be defined ‘only within the theoretical system they constitute, not in isolation’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). In order to illustrate the relationship between these concepts Bourdieu often deploys the metaphor of ‘the game’. In this metaphor the field can be understood as the game itself, but also the regulations and regularities that govern the activity of particular players. We can recognise a field when there is tacit acceptance among a group of actors that a certain set of stakes are worthy of interest. A field can be recognised through the common orientation of a group of people toward certain activities, ends, objects, or concerns. Bourdieu refers to this tacit acceptance or common orientation in terms of *illusio*, a concept of particular importance to this thesis, and which will be explored further below. Social life in its entirety might be conceptualised as a field; however this broader social field is also composed of numerous distinct fields, existing in relation to one another, and with differing degrees of relative autonomy¹⁰. Examples of fields from Bourdieu’s work are the field of cultural production, the academic field, the scientific field, the juridical field, and the bureaucratic field, among others. Of particular relevance here, Peillon (1998) explores possibilities in conceptualising a distinct ‘welfare field’, which includes welfare service users and street-level bureaucrats, but also elite political actors who shape the broader terrain.

The concept of *habitus* refers to an individual’s ‘feel for the game’. Central to the concept of habitus is that it is largely unconscious and embodied. Habitus refers to an embodied history; it is the embodiment of history in an individual. For Bourdieu this means that habitus is also a particular embodiment of social

¹⁰ This autonomy is always relative because all fields exist in relation to a broader field of power – the field of power being that which regulates the relations between fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 17–18). The activation field is composed of those actors with a stake in the policies of activation and conditionality. However, not all participants in this field are equal, and this is partially the result of their different proximities to the field of power.

structures. As a set of embodied dispositions, accumulated over time, the habitus of an individual is the result of their own personal history, and the effect of their trajectory through different locations in social space. In this sense it is a 'structured structure'. However, it is also a 'structuring structure', in the sense that the habitus defines the scope of what a person is able to do in a given position, in a given field. The dispositions that have been accumulated define how one might understand, interpret, but also act within a particular field, and from a particular location in social space: habitus relates to a field in terms of a 'kind of practical sense for what it to be done in a given situation – what is called in sport a "feel" for the game' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25).

The final concept in this triad is capital. There is an extensive social science literature on 'social capital' which has become quite influential in some domains of social policy (for a critical discussion of this literature see: Fine, 2002, 2010), but the meaning of this term in Bourdieu's work is quite specific. Indeed, one of the main points about capital when considered in relation to field and habitus is that it is not possible to speak of capital in the abstract, as something which someone might possess independent of their habitus or its relationship to a particular field. Capital can be understood as a form of power; however, this power is always relative to a given field – in this sense Bourdieu speaks of cultural capital, academic capital, intellectual capital etc. Capital refers to the resources one might be able to deploy in a given situation. As an example, academic accreditations are one very important form of capital. Within the academic field itself, particular forms of academic accreditation will be recognised differently (accompanied by different forms of prestige, signalling different histories and orientations), and will allow different moves and transitions to be made. Bourdieu's concept of capital is relational – the power of a particular form of capital is defined by the relationships within which it is to be deployed (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Importantly, the power of capital depends on recognition – its potency is gained when others recognise it as legitimate. When this is the case, Bourdieu refers to it as 'symbolic capital', capital that is operative in a particular situation or field (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Academic accreditations are an important form of capital in several spheres, not only the academic field, a power derived from this symbolic recognition. Degrees and qualifications from the academic field regulate entry to professional and occupational domains. Within this, they will also determine the particular point of entry to these other field (e.g. degrees from particular institutions might determine the likelihood of entering at a precise destination in a professional field, either more or less prestigious etc). In terms of 'the game', capital might refer to the tokens, chips, or cards held by a player (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99). The value of these tokens is relational, and dependent on recognition; nevertheless, these can be converted and exchanged between fields.

The concepts of field and habitus are central to the conceptual framework of this thesis. In particular, these concepts are central to the exploration of how street-level advisors are invested in and oriented toward their work. In understanding these orientations, the thesis relies on the concept of habitus outlined above, but also on that of *illusio* and disillusionment, which will be explored further in the following subsection. The concept of capital takes on a less prominent role in this thesis; in part this has to do with a focus on the nature of the activation field itself, and of advisers' different investments in it, rather than following the course of particular trajectories through the field vis-à-vis their struggle with competitors. However, the discussion of capital draws attention to a very important feature of Bourdieu's theoretical work, which is the symbolic nature of power, and the crucial importance of (mis)recognition (by others) in defining what a person is able to do.

***Illusio*, disillusionment, and hysteresis**

The *illusio* can be defined as that which binds field and habitus together (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 151). Elsewhere, it is referred to as the 'fundamental belief in the interest of the game and the value of its stakes' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11). If a field is

constituted by different actors, with different positions in social space, the *illusio* is that which orients their practice and *unites* them as actors in a particular field. In discussing this form of orientation Bourdieu adopts the psychoanalytic idiom of investment – *illusio*, as a form of enchantment, is ‘to be invested, taken in and by the game’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 116) – and draws a direct comparison with psychoanalysis in emphasising the *libidinal* nature of this investment (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 166). In looking at how individuals become invested in particular fields it is important to pay attention to the particular form taken by their social and socialised desires (Aarseth, 2016; Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 165–166), desires which reside in the habitus and its dispositions, and which will have been shaped by the experiences of previous fields, positions in social space, and ultimately by the original domestic space itself (the space with which psychoanalysis has traditionally been preoccupied).

In entering a field, a habitus becomes invested in its *illusio*. One criticism levelled at Bourdieu’s work is that in focusing on this *fit* between habitus and field (on their mutual constitution) it has tended to accentuate the integration of both (Silva, 2016a). Whilst Bourdieu discusses the various determinations of investment at length (in terms of the prior dispositions of the habitus, and the available space of positions open to it), the problem of disinvestment – or withdrawal from the game – is largely unaddressed. The consequences of this for thinking about the role of the emotions are discussed at greater length in the next section. Here it should be noted that this process of *disinvestment* or *withdrawal* is a central concern of this thesis. This is of particular concern because the thesis addresses data both from those currently situated within the field of activation, but also those who, for various reasons, have left it to pursue other forms of work in different contexts. For Lipsky, the ability of street-level workers to ‘retain a concept of their own adequacy in their job’ provides a crucial limit to their ability to continue in the work (Lipsky, 1980, p. 82), however, the street-level literature itself has relatively little to say about this limit. In this research there is a focus on understanding more about the limits to street-level bureaucrats’ coping mechanisms, as well as what it

means to 'fit in with' and find either enjoyment, or at least some level of satisfaction in the role of advisor. Counterposed to *illusio*, the concept of *disillusionment* can be defined as 'to lose one's "belief in the game", to cease to experience it as worthwhile or meaningful' (Crossley, 1999, p. 815). In paying attention to what makes the difference for those advisors who felt comfortable or remain in the role (the feeling of 'fit' or 'fitting in'), and those who do not, important features of the street-level activation field and its *illusio* might be revealed.

Such a framework has proven useful in some sociological studies of public and voluntary sector workers in organisations undergoing change and transformation. In particular, it has been used to understand the difficulties and discomfort experienced by public sector workers as they are subjected to the arrival of new public management in their organisations, an introduction which entails a radical reordering of priorities, effectively the construction of a new game and new *illusio* (McDonough & Polzer, 2012). Colley (2012) uses the concept of *illusio* to understand the emotional and ethical turmoil experienced by workers in the Connexions youth support and advisory service during a period in which the aims and purposes of the organisation were subject to change and transformation. She describes how the introduction of economically driven targets replaced a more client-centred organisational ethos, effectively altering the stakes of the game and its *illusio*, especially for front-line, street-level advisors, many of whom held a 'deep-seated and long-term commitment and investment' (Colley, 2012, p. 325) in the notion of caring public service work. This resulted in distress and emotional suffering, as 'the shattering of *illusio* and the incongruence of habitus with the new stakes in the field resulted in a disengagement which made it very difficult, even impossible, to learn how to practice in a manner that was both ethical and compatible with government and institutional targets' (Colley, 2012, pp. 332–333).

In these accounts, workers who were already employed by an organisation experience a series of difficulties and dilemmas as their organisations are subject

to massive change. These two studies are useful, because they deploy the framework of habitus, field, and capital in situations in which the rules of the game are subject to change and transformation, at the behest of powerful policy actors, and where there is a mismatch between habitus and field. Similarly Artaraz (2006) uses these concepts to discuss the ways that the different occupational groups originally brought together under the Connexions agency – Careers Advisors, Teachers, Social Workers – reacted to a shift in focus of the organisation. The studies suggest the usefulness of this approach for the conceptualisation of conflict at ‘street-level’ – conflicts, borne largely by street-level workers, over the meaning, purpose, and definition of their role, and also of the ways that individuals in these organisation can and do ‘subvert the service’s ethos through their daily practice’ (Artaraz, 2006: 925). Whilst in these studies the habitus finds itself in a field that is undergoing change, in this thesis these concepts are deployed to explore the different ways that advisors feel more or less ‘in’ or ‘out of place’ within street-level services.

Classification, symbolic power, and symbolic violence

This thesis is interested in street-level activation encounters as sites of classification, classificatory struggle, and the exercise of power. Given the importance attached to welfare subjects being/becoming (defined as) ‘active’ and fulfilling their behavioural ‘conditions of conduct’, the thesis is interested in how ‘activation’ and the correct sorts of ‘behaviour’ become recognised and classified as such by advisors. Bourdieu defines what he calls symbolic power in these terms:

Symbolic power, whose form par excellence is the power to make groups and to consecrate or institute them ...consists in the power to make something exist in the objectified, public, formal state which only previously existed in an implicit state (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 14).

Amongst other things, welfare conditionality and activation require that claimants meet certain conditions. Street-level decisions about how, or whether, such

conditions and requirements are being met are also decisions which consecrate or institute the existence of certain groups, in this case 'active' or 'inactive', 'compliant' or 'noncompliant' claimants (and, perhaps, lurking in or behind these 'principles of vision and division' there might lie others: strivers and skivers, shirker and scroungers etc.). In this sense, the thesis understands the power wielded by advisors to also be a form of symbolic power, and the thesis is interested in the extent to which this form of power is accepted as legitimate by those involved, or contested and made the subject of 'classificatory struggle' (Tyler, 2015).

In this way, for Bourdieu, processes of classification and categorisation are intimately bound up with the exercise of power; indeed, classification is one of the main ways that power is exercised, particularly power in its least visible, least contested forms. This is the power that resides in 'doxa' and 'commonsense', as that which 'goes without saying' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 167), is tacitly accepted, and forms the very basis for conscious understanding and interpretation: symbolic power is 'the power to impose and inculcate [the] principles of construction of reality' (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 13). Closely associated with this notion of symbolic power is that of symbolic violence; this is a form of domination that has no need of explicit threats of overt violence. Rather it is a form of 'gentle violence' that achieves its effects through consent and (mis)recognition: 'the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192). Elsewhere it is defined thus:

Symbolic violence is that form of domination which, transcending the opposition usually drawn between sense relations and power relations, communication and domination, is only exerted through the communication in which it is disguised. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 237 n.47)

Symbolic violence operates through forms of consent and assent; it is a violence that is efficacious only to the extent that it is submitted to; however, this submission is obtained through an embodied sense of its legitimacy, and a belief

(or, perhaps, investment) in the categories and schemes of classification through which it operates. These notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence are important to the thesis; they provide the means through which accounts of client processing in street-level activation services can be situated with respect to forms of classification, and to the experience of class and classed subject positions power outlined in Chapter Two.

There is something ‘magical’ about the operations of symbolic power and symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, this ‘magic’ resides in the reliance of such power on forms of belief. Elsewhere (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 117–126), he describes the ‘social magic’ achieved by rites of institution (such as the awarding of titles) in which a series of social relations (and a particular trajectory through social space) become ‘consecrated’ in an individual, who is henceforth able to call upon this history as a form of embodied symbolic capital. In the act of consecration, the contingent history through which it is made possible is erased and made invisible; certain effects of social structure come to be seen as the essential properties of individual, properties which justify the act of consecration itself (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 170). For Bourdieu this ‘magic’ is an effect of belief, and relies on a simultaneous recognition (of the consecration as legitimate) and misrecognition (of the broader structure which makes it possible) (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170). These relations between belief and the (mis)recognition of social relations offer one means of interrogating the ‘meaning’ of conditionality and activation as particular forms of social relation imbued with power.

This discussion of symbolic power has thus far emphasised the importance of ‘principles of vision and division’, which is to say, practices of classification and modes of understanding. Concomitantly, in this thesis attention is paid to the interpretations and, indeed, analysis that participants have of their own situations, and the principles which underpin these. However, very little space has so far been given to questions of affect, feeling, or emotion. Although ‘principles of vision and division’, beliefs, doxa, and ‘commonsense’ are for Bourdieu always

embodied in the habitus, as several scholars have pointed out (Probyn, 2004; Reay, 2015; Robbins, 1991), there remains an emphasis on their cognitive dimensions, with rather less consideration given to either the affective or emotional aspects of habitus. As Probyn (2004) puts it, 'Bourdieu himself is rather vague on the place of emotion within the habitus. His attention to the physicality of the embodied habitus does, however, promise a way of thinking about emotion and affect as simultaneously social and physical' (Probyn, 2004, p. 225). In the following section this chapter addresses recent work which has drawn attention to affinities between some aspects of Bourdieu's sociological theory, and certain psychoanalytic concepts.

Bourdieu, emotion, and psychoanalysis

One criticism levelled at Bourdieu's theoretical work is that it does not give adequate consideration to the role of affect and emotion (Reay, 2004, 2015; Sayer, 2009; Sweetman, 2003). Another related criticism is that the emphasis on habitus as both a structured and structuring structure has, in places, especially in earlier work, tended to accentuate the integration of habitus, as well as the integration of habitus *and* field, at the expense of being able to address fragmentation, dissonance, ambivalence, or dis-integration (Silva, 2016a). Both issues have recently drawn the attention of sociologists and psychosocial theorists, and there is an emerging literature investigating the tensions and affinities between Bourdieu's theoretical project and psychoanalysis (Darmon, 2016; Fourny & Emery, 2000), which, it is argued, can help to address these limitations (Reay, 2015; Steinmetz, 2006). In this section I review some of this literature, and explore important points of affinity between these theoretical approaches. In particular I draw attention to some psychoanalytic concepts that have guided this thesis, and situate them with respect to the broad framework outlined above. These are psychoanalytic concepts which have to do with conflict within the subject, and which it is argued, are useful in understanding the psychosocial domain of welfare interactions and

experiences. These are the concepts of identification, projection, introjection, and disavowal.

Emotion and power

There is a significant body of sociological work on affect and emotion; indeed, it can be argued that the social sciences have recently undergone an 'affective turn' (Clough and Halley, 2007; Thompson & Hoggett, 2012). Within this large body of work there are a variety of different approaches and orientations. The term 'affect' – as opposed to emotion or feeling – can be traced back through two distinct lineages; one to the work of Tomkins (1984), for whom affect names an 'innate biological drive' rather than the more culturally coded 'emotion'; another, via Deleuze (1992) to the philosophical work of Spinoza and his account of emotion as 'the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished'. In this latter orientation, there is a focus on 'affect without a subject' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 123) and on the ways that affect is 'onto-formative, meaning that it constitutes subjects and objects [and] sets up relations between subjects and objects' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 159). This understanding of affect plays a particularly prominent role in the work of Skeggs (2004, 2005; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012), in which it is used to trace the way that affective relations work to produce particular kinds of classed subject positions; but also to highlight how tracing affective relations can reveal struggles in and against these positions.

With a rather different orientation is literature addressing emotion and emotional labour, inspired by the work of Hochschild (1979, 2012). In contrast with affect studies, this work is concerned with the commodification, management, and manipulation of emotion in the context of waged-labour, particularly in service work (Dowling, 2007, 2012). Here the subject and their relations are already defined (e.g. service employee, manager, and customer etc), and feeling and emotion mediates these relations. Rather differently than affect studies, this work is concerned with emotion and emotional presentation as a kind of resource that

employees can – and are encouraged to – control and manipulate in order to achieve particular commercial ends. Similarly, working with Bourdieu's concept of capital, Reay (2004) has argued for the existence of a specifically gendered form of 'emotional capital'. This work introduces the notion of 'feeling-rules', more often than not implicit rather than explicit, defined as 'what we imagine we should and shouldn't feel and would like to feel over a range of circumstances' (Hochschild, 2003, p. 83). Here, the concept of feeling, or emotion, is of something that is socially governed, with clearly discernible rules and codes. Tonkens (2012; Tonkens et al., 2013) adopts this framework and applies it to the situation of activation, arguing that the move to greater activation also entails changes to the 'feeling-rules' of citizenship; changes which can produce a clash or conflict when there are different expectations about the appropriate rules (Tonkens, 2012). This work also highlights the potentially positive emotional experiences that activating welfare-to-work programmes can provide, specifically in context of volunteer work which provides welfare recipients a means to regain their self respect (injured by the position of 'dependency') but also the fragility of these feelings and the potential for further injury (Kampen et al., 2013).

In some respects the notion that affect and emotion, rather than things which impress themselves on already-formed subjects are also productive – of subjects, objects, and the relations between them – and the notion of emotion as something that moves and moves through and makes subjects (Ahmed, 2004) is useful for this research. In places, the thesis does adopt the language of 'affect', recognising that in some instances participants are moved by forces for which they do not (yet) necessarily have names. However, Wetherell (2012, p. 159) draws attention to the way that the conceptualisation of 'affect without a subject' can risk neglecting the embodied subject as a special site where affective force is patterned by individual subjectivity. This thesis adopts the view that the individual embodied subject is such a special site and that sometimes feeling and emotion are indeed objects over

which people can or can try to exert some control, often in line with perceived feeling rules.

However, whilst informed by both the literature on ‘affect’ and ‘emotional labour’, for the most part where this thesis is concerned with emotion it is with the more colloquial, every day sense of ‘having feelings’. In particular, the thesis is concerned with the feelings that participants – both advisors and claimants – find hardest to place. These are often ambiguous feelings, which don’t always have a clear object, or ambivalent feelings, and situations where the participants felt contradictory things. The thesis, then, is interested in conflicting feelings, and feelings about conflict, which it understands in terms of the conflicts within and between habitus and street-level field. In the discussion of symbolic power above there was a noted emphasis on cognitive processes, although as Jones (2013) argues, there is also a close connection between power and emotion, particularly within and between organisations and their clients:

Emotion and relationships are central because they are central to how organisations, and specifically governing organisations, work. Organisations depend on people persuading one another to follow particular courses of action, by drawing on resources that sometimes include coercive power, or self-regulation based on acceptance of differences in power and status, or using elements of desire as tools of persuasion. All of these resources operate at the level of *people* doing the persuading, choosing and self-regulation – within structural constraints. The workings of organisations are thus mediated through embodied relationships, and experienced in emotional terms. But recognising this does not mean that governing and organisations are being reduced to the irrational, inexplicable or ineffable. Emotions are powerful, and power operates through emotions. (Jones, 2013, pp. 6–7)

Emotion and power are closely connected because at the level of embodied relationships people are connected to each other, but also to organisations, through feeling. In following this definition of these relationships, this thesis attends to feelings as a way of exploring both relations (to other agents, and to the organisation, or field) and power. In drawing attention to difficult feelings,

feelings about difficult situations, or the feelings that participants find hard to place, it also draws attention to the uneven or ambiguous hold of power – something which the focus on cognitive processes might otherwise conceal. In exploring the feelings that are difficult to place, rather than on a more abstract sense of ‘affect’, or on those emotions that are for the most part successfully contained and controlled, this thesis finds certain psychoanalytic concepts useful. The following subsections introduce these concepts, and connects them to the broadly Bourdieusian framework already outlined.

Coping mechanisms as compromise formations

This thesis is concerned with the lived experiences of activation and conditionality. As indicated in Chapter Two, recent research has drawn attention to the way that, for claimants, these are often intensely affective and emotional experiences, marked in particular by feelings of anxiety, fear, insecurity and worry (Garthwaite, 2014; Patrick, 2017). Albeit in a different way, the position of street-level advisor is no less marked by difficult feelings and emotional conflict (Hoggett, 2005). One of the major themes of this thesis is how the regime of conditional activation operates and is materialised in emotional terms, for street-level agents as much as for claimants. In focusing on the emotional dynamics of street-level activation, and the affective interface between individual and institution, the thesis makes particular use of the concept of the ‘compromise formation’. This concept is useful in exploring a central theme of the street-level literature, namely the coping mechanisms adopted by street-level bureaucrats.

Understanding coping mechanisms specifically in terms of compromise formations (compromises within the habitus, and also between habitus and field) draws attention to the *felt*, as opposed to calculative, dimensions of coping. Coping can be understood something unconscious, that follows from a particular ‘feel for the game’, and that is processed in emotional terms. Rather than emphasise a wholly rational or calculative ‘street-level calculus of choice’ (Brodkin, 2011a,

2013c), it foregrounds the role of emotion and (socialised) desire (Aarseth, 2016) in shaping advisers' responses to street-level demands and dilemmas.

In psychoanalysis the compromise formation names a symptom which is the result of an emotional conflict – the conflict between two (or more) opposing wishes, or between a wishful impulse and a repressive force. The compromise formation is sometimes distinguished from the reaction formation (where the symptom is a reaction against the wish, e.g. expressions of hatred for the secretly loved object), and the substitute formation (where the libido is displaced onto a different, substitute object), because it is a formation which manages to retain both the wishful impulse *and* its opposition, rejection, or repression, in one symptom. Bourdieu adopts this term in order to specify the ways that an individual habitus becomes invested in and attached to a particular field – a field for which it might, at least at first, be only partially suited (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 100). This is a process which Darmon (2016, p. 117) describes in terms of the 'dialectics between individuals and institutions'; there is, in Bourdieu's use of the concept, a mutually conditioning movement between individual habitus and institutional field; between the desires and dispositions brought to the field by the habitus, and the demands and modifications imposed on habitus by the field. Importantly this movement occurs through what Aaseth (2016) calls 'socialised desire' (desire shaped by and directed toward particular social relations) and the cathexis of libidinal investment. The habitus becomes attached to a field, in part, because it wants something from it, and because the field might be able to satisfy its desire in some way. However, at the same time, the field is able to 'take advantage' of habitus and its desire, fashioning them in line with its own ends:

One can equally well say that agents take advantage of the possibilities offered by a field to express and satisfy their drives and their desires, in some cases their neurosis, or that fields use the agents' drives by forcing them to subject or sublimate themselves in order to adapt to their structures and to the ends that are immanent within them. In fact, the two effects are observed in each case, no doubt in unequal proportions, depending on the field and the agent, and, from this point of view, one

could describe each singular form of a specific habitus...as a kind of compromise formation (in Freud's sense). (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 165)

In conceptualising the attachment of advisors to their role in terms of desire, and in understanding their particular occupational habitus in terms of a compromise between this desire and institutional (field) requirements, this concept sheds light on the affective, rather than the calculative (see: Brodtkin, 2011) dimensions of street-level coping. As I will argue in Chapter Six, specifically with respect to 'creaming and parking', this has important consequences for how we might understand the meaning of such coping practices.

The concept of 'compromise formation' is also particularly useful in highlighting the ambivalent dimensions of street-level work. Hoggett (2005, 2006) has drawn attention to the way that street-level organisations are necessarily ambivalent organisations; in this account, the ambivalence arises from the contradictory and conflicting public aims of such organisations, their 'ambiguity and multiplicity of objectives' (Lipsky, 1980, p. 164), but also the different kinds of public sentiment that become invested in them. As outlined in Chapter Two, welfare and 'dependency' are the subject of highly charged and emotive forms of discourse (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Hoggett et al., 2013) with which street-level organisations often become associated and expected to contain (Hoggett, 2005). The psychosocial concept of the compromise formation draws attention to the ways that this containment operates *in and through* the habitus of advisors. In addition to exploring the desires and investments that advisors bring to their role, Chapter Six is equally concerned with the impositions of the street-level field on advisors, and how these are subjectively registered and experienced.

Defence mechanisms and the non-unitary self

The concept of the compromise formation highlights the negotiation of conflicts between habitus and field, but in focusing attention on coping, and on the accommodations made by habitus, it continues to foreground processes of

adaptation and integration (Silva, 2016b). However, this thesis is equally concerned with the problems and, in some cases, *failures* of integration; with fragmentation and the dis-integration of experience, and with contradictory feelings that are sometimes difficult to name or place. As already indicated, in the case of advisors this is addressed in terms of disillusionment, or withdrawal; in some cases a break with the field becomes necessary in order to preserve the integrity of habitus and its experience. However, with respect to the experience of claimants these concepts arguably have less purchase, and this is because of the very different way that claimants become enrolled and positioned within the street-level field.

Whereas advisors enter the activation field by applying for a job, claimants become subject to its demands and requirements when they apply for benefits. Clearly these are very different sorts of 'application', and entail altogether dissimilar sorts of investment, desire and relationships to necessity. Chapter Seven is centrally concerned with the experiences of claimants, which are no less marked by forms of desire, investment, and coping needs, but of a very different sort to advisors. In particular, claimants must not only cope with the problems that necessitate their claim for benefits – in terms of 'getting by' (Lister, 2004) – but also, as Chapter Seven will explore, with the additional demands and requirements of conditional activation. While it is possible to understand some aspects of claimants' coping in terms of habitus and its negotiations with the street-level field, it is also the case that claimants' different position means their scope for practical accommodation with the field is differently constrained. Importantly, they have significantly less scope to simply 'exit' or withdraw from the field and any conflicts they might have with it, although their experience of activation is no less – arguably more – characterised by ambivalence, dissonance, discomfort and conflict than that of advisors.

In understanding what claimants do (how they cope) with the contradictory pressures they face, the difficult feelings they are forced to contain, and the

uncomfortable positions they are expected to occupy, the thesis makes use of the psychoanalytic idiom of defence mechanisms as a means of coping with conflict. Conflict and its negotiation is the central organising motif of both psychoanalytic theory and Bourdieusian sociological theory. As Fourny and Emery (2000) argue, this is more than a superficial resemblance, but expressive of a more fundamental 'structural homology' between the two (2000, p. 111), an argument also developed by Darmon (2016). However, if this homology can be defined as 'a resemblance in difference' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 140), then this difference lies in the kinds of conflict that are addressed, and where they are located. From the sociological perspective of field, habitus, and capital, the relevant conflicts are those which take place between agents in a field, between fields, or between habitus and field. From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, the relevant conflicts would be those which take place on the terrain of the subject, or habitus, itself. With respect to these it might be argued that '[p]sychoanalysis offers a much richer array of concepts for analyzing the idiosyncratic sense that different individuals make of shared social conditions' (Steinmetz, 2006, p. 453). One consequence of the 'psychosocial' approach adopted by this thesis is that these domains of conflict are understood to be related, and that conflicts in one can be expressed, transposed, or contained within the other. The argument is that psychoanalytic concepts, particularly those related to defence mechanisms, can be useful in understanding how forms of social conflict are contained and managed by an individual habitus.

Conflict is central to the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the subject because the psychoanalytic subject is always conceptualised as split, divided, or 'non-unitary'. Indeed, this is foundational to the psychoanalytic project, which begins with the 'discovery of the unconscious' and the tripartite division of the subject into id, ego, and superego. Particularly relevant to this thesis are those processes whereby conflicts and difficult feelings are diverted and managed by divided, non-unitary subjects. Particularly useful for this thesis are the Kleinian (1946)

concepts related to ‘splitting’, as well as the psychic processes related to denial, disavowal, and perversion (Layton, 2010, 2014; Žižek, 2008).

Projection, introjection, and projective identification

Klein’s work has been particularly influential among British psychosocial studies (Woodward, 2015, p. 75) precisely because of the way it emphasises relations between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds (Clarke, 1999). In distinction with Freudian theory, it also sees the primary drives – ‘feelings, passions, emotions which are directed at others’ (Clarke, 1999, p. 26) – not as innate biological mechanisms, but as formed in the social environment and ‘shaped by interaction with others’ (Clarke, 1999, p. 33). There is an emphasis on the mediations between psychic and social worlds through fantasy/phantasy, and Klein ‘develops a picture of the human condition in which we escape from internal anxieties by projecting them into external figures’ (Hoggett, 2006, p. 181). Important terms in the Kleinian lexicon are projection, introjection, and projective identification. Projection can be defined as the ‘externalisation of an internal process’ (Freud, 1991b, p. 231) particularly as a means of defence (ibid, p. 241). Introjection describes the process whereby objects in the external world are taken into the self; indeed, important aspects of the ‘self’ and its identifications are formed in this way (Freud, 1991b, pp. 133, 422). For Klein, projection and introjection are understood primarily as defences against anxiety, and are important processes whereby the ego is able to achieve stability and integration. The ego, through processes of ‘splitting’, is able to manage anxiety by getting rid of the threats posed by unpleasant feelings – in projection some aspect of the inner world is split off and put outside the self, onto another person or object. ‘Projective identification’ refers to a similar process, but one in which the process of projection is such that it induces particular feelings or emotions in the person who is its object:

Whereas projection is a relatively straight forward process in which we attribute our own affective state to other, for example, we may feel depressed and view our colleagues in the workplace as being

‘miserable’ or blame others for our mistakes, projective identification involves a deep split, a ridding of an unpalatable part of the ‘self’ into, rather than onto, someone else (Clarke, 1999, p. 27)

These concepts – of splitting, projection, and projective identification – are particularly useful in understanding the way that habitus is able to manage the threats and anxieties provoked by ‘bad’ objects in its world. In projective identification, there is also an emphasis on the way that projection can, in certain circumstances, put feelings into other people, or make them feel in certain ways, or as if they *are* certain types of thing or person. In Chapter Seven these concepts are used to explore the ways that some claimants manage situations of threat and anxiety when they have already ‘played their cards’ or exercised their agency in the ways they know how. The concepts of projective identification and introjection are used to understand the way that welfare recipients are sometimes made to feel things, or made to feel as if they *are* a specific type of ‘bad’ object in their interactions with advisors. These concepts are useful in exploring some of the ambivalence surrounding activation identities, and the uncertainties of identification (as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ welfare subject).

The perverse social defence and magical voluntarism

For Klein, ‘splitting’, and the process of ridding oneself of ‘bad’ internal objects is a form of denial (Klein, 1935, 1946). Denial, disavowal, and the related defence of perversion, play an important role in Chapter Eight of this thesis. In some ways, denial might be related to the concept of ‘misrecognition’. The concept of disavowal is slightly different, and refers to a situation in which a subject both knows and does not know; it describes a defence in which the apprehension of a difficult and unpleasant aspect of reality is simultaneously acknowledged and denied¹¹; Freud observes of one his patients that ‘the attitude which fitted in with

¹¹ It was in the attempt to understand this phenomenon which led to Freud’s theoretical postulation of the ‘splitting of the ego in the process of defence’ (Freud, 1991a) to which Klein’s work is heavily indebted.

the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality existed side by side' (Freud, 1928, p. 156). As opposed to denial, or misrecognition, this concept helps to understand some of the ambivalent attitudes encountered in activation services. This disavowed attitude to reality can be characterised as perverse, which the psychoanalyst Lynne Layton (Layton, 2010, 2014) suggests has become an increasingly prominent feature of neoliberal subjectivity in a context where individuals are encouraged to deny their frailties, vulnerabilities, and dependencies in order to identify with an idealised version of themselves as invincible, independent, and ready to compete. The impossibility of completely denying interrelatedness and dependency can lead to such a split, ambivalent, and disavowed relationship toward the external social world. Developing a similar line of argument, the critical psychologist Smail (1995, 2005) has identified 'magical voluntarism' as a particular psychological feature of neoliberal ideology; this is a form of psychological reasoning which attributes unhappiness and mental distress exclusively to the thought processes of individuals (exemplified in therapeutic terms by the use of short term Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), as opposed to their material conditions of existence and their place within a wider set of social relations, which are structured by relations of exploitation and oppression (Fisher, 2014). This might be linked to recent work drawing attention to the 'coercive positivity' operative in activation programmes, whereby individuals are encouraged to take responsibility not only for their job search activity, but also their attitude and affective dispositions (Friedli & Stearn, 2015). There is a wider and emerging literature, on the de-politicisation of mental distress, as well as the pressure to present oneself as 'positive' in order to remain employable and marketable (Berardi, 2009; Cederström & Spicer, 2015, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2010; Southwood, 2011).

For Žižek (2008) disavowal plays an important role in the operation of ideology, which he locates at the level of practice, rather than professed belief. For Žižek, ideology is properly understood in terms of the unconscious belief which underpins practice or action, as opposed to the explicit or conscious articulations

of actors. In acting 'as if' something were the case, actors reveal the unconscious operation of ideology, which is disavowed at the level of consciousness. These notions are useful for understanding street-level situations, such as those described by Lipsky, where the rhetoric of formal policy and the realities of everyday practice don't necessarily, or even rarely, coincide. In this vein, Crawford and Flint (2015) explore the discourse of housing practitioners working within a highly constrained environment, in which the explicit aims of their organisation and role are, in practice, impossible to meet. They describe just such a disavowed relationship to organisational reality in which practitioners both know and don't know, and act 'as if' their objectives were a realistic possibility. In this situation, the pressure to remain invested in the 'imaginary system' of formal policy objectives leaves the workers, and their organisation, incapable of addressing the realities of the situation as they find it.

There is a useful psycho-social literature addressing the emotional life of organisations, much of which draws on the work of Menzies Lyth (1988) and her concept of 'social defences against anxiety', developed in her pioneering study of the everyday practices of hospital nurses – a form of work in which there is a daily confrontation with powerful, anxiety provoking stimuli. In this work Menzies Lyth argued that many aspects of the day-to-day practice of nurses was organised around the avoidance of certain difficult feelings their work provoked. This idea has influenced studies of a number of different types of organisation (Armstrong, 2014b; Hoggett, 2010; Long, 2008), including welfare services, where the concept of 'social defence' has come to refer to 'a way of explaining the organised but often unconscious ways in which those providing welfare services erect defensive systems to protect themselves from their unacceptable feelings' (Hoggett, 2010, p. 203). As Hoggett (2005, 2006) has elsewhere argued, the concept of 'social defences' resonates strongly with Lipsky's emphasis on the reliance of street-level bureaucrats on coping mechanisms (Lipsky, 1980, p. 82), but does so in a way that reconfigures the 'demands' placed on street-level bureaucrats to

include the feelings provoked by their work. The coping mechanisms of welfare workers are not only related to the *formal* demands of their work (e.g. targets, organisational aims), but might also be the result of ‘defences against seeing and facing suffering, feeling the suffering or thinking about it.’ (Hoggett, 2010, p. 203). Using this concept of ‘social defences against anxiety’, both Hoggett (2010) and Long (2008) have explored specifically perverse social defences that can arise in organisations, which bear striking similarity to the situation described by Crawford and Flint (2015). Hoggett (2010) draws attention to the role of managerialism and the overriding importance placed in an abstract set of performance objectives in generating a perverse attitude toward reality. Performance measures, he argues, can come to act as a fetishised substitute for the real ‘outcomes’ which they supposedly measure.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the conceptual framework of the thesis, which can be defined as ‘psychosocial’. In so doing, it has provided a novel synthesis, building on recent theoretical work, of Bourdieu’s theoretical oeuvre with concepts drawn from psychoanalysis. This framework, it has been argued, offers a cohesive set of concepts through which to interrogate the various concerns of this thesis; namely, the way that street-level advisors are invested in and oriented toward their work; the way that power operates in both advisors’ and claimants’ experiences of conditional activation; and the way that this power might be registered through attention to the felt dimensions of everyday experience.

Chapter Five – Methods

Introduction: reflexive ethnographic sensibility

This chapter describes the key features of my methodological practice, detailing the ways in which I sought to answer the research questions. The chapter also highlights some of the contingencies contributing to the design and development of the research, which draws on data from thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews, direction observation, as well as (auto) ethnographic reflection on my own experiences as a street-level advisor.

In some respects the broadly ethnographic approach adopted by the research was an explicit methodological choice, in so far as an ethnographic sensibility, with its attention to the detail, intricacies, and entanglements of everyday life is particularly suited to the critical study of street-level policy-making as a form of embodied social practice (Dubois, 2009). In other respects, however, it might also be regarded as a *necessary* consequence of the research questions, conceptual framework and, especially, a methodological commitment to reflexive research. With respect to the latter, whilst it is a less than straightforward task to specify with any precision or exactitude the ways in which my prior direct participation in the field shaped the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, it would perhaps be more difficult to argue that it did not. This research began, some eight or so years ago, with my employment as a street-level advisor; absent this experience and the research would not have taken the particular routes through the field that it did. Among other things, this chapter seeks to make some of the landmarks on this journey clear, such that my presence in the research is reflexively situated and to some extent made available as an object in the field alongside others (Bourdieu, 2003).

Here it should perhaps be mentioned that I knew several of my participants. This is to say, I knew them to a greater extent than would have been possible were they

simply recruited for the purposes of interview research. Specifically, I had spent nine months working closely alongside eight of the interviewed advisors, in an intense and closely-knit working environment. Street-level activation work is often highly pressured, emotionally taxing, and stressful. It is carried out in open-plan offices, in close physical proximity to others, and there was a strong sense of camaraderie among my colleagues. This, at least, was how I remembered things, but it was a memory shared and confirmed in many of the interviews. Being of a similar age, and in broadly similar circumstances, many of us also spent time together socially outside of work. Knowing the participants meant having some sense (I would hesitate to say *knowledge*) of their background, trajectories, but also their expressed thoughts, feelings, attitudes, hopes and disappointments, in so far as these were presented as part of our shared sociability. This knowledge, or rather this sense, undoubtedly informed and influenced the interviews, and this chapter later reflects on my different experiences of interviewing former colleagues, other advisors, and claimants in different contexts.

I also knew what it is like to do street-level activation work. This was very much an embodied 'carnal' knowledge (Wacquant, 2005, 2015), which is to say a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), or a practical sense for what street-level activation is about. This research was not, however, an 'enactive ethnography' (Wacquant, 2015) in the sense of an apprenticeship, or the undertaking of an embodied journey into a new or strange field registering, through observant participation, the effects of the field on habitus. I had already made such a journey, and even had my attempts to return to the field for observation been successful (as this chapter will describe, they were not), it would not have been as a participant, and the journey would not have been the same. Rather, my ethnographic position with respect to this research was as an insider (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Labaree, 2002) or as an 'opportunistic complete member' (Anderson, 2006). Rather than entering and learning about the field as a novice, the reflexive and ethnographic challenge of this research lay in making an epistemological break with the common sense, which is to say the embodied practical sense, or the

‘epistemological unconscious’, of the field (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991) in order to be able to observe and make it an object of interpretation and analysis. In this respect the role of theory (as introduced in the previous chapter) was important from the outset, and the research pursued an abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2009) moving back and forth between concepts, experience, and data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Although I began the research with a sense of the field, among advisors not everyone had the *same sense*, or experienced the field in the same way. More obviously, claimants also occupied very different sorts of position, and had quite different sorts of experiences of activation than did I or other advisors. To the extent that my experience was of analytic and interpretive use it was often in terms of registering and exploring such differences. The value of the insider experience of complete membership, for this research, was not that it gave me some kind of direct insight into ‘activation’, ‘conditionality’, or ‘street-level work’ and what these are like for other people, but that it attuned me to some of the relevant and salient differences within the field, and among its participants. The research is auto ethnographic, but for the most part not in the descriptive or evocative sense (Ellis, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), but more in the analytic sense described by Anderson (2006) where the value of having been a ‘complete member’ lies in the opportunities this affords for the specifically theoretical exploration of insider meanings and social relations.

This ethnographic methodological approach can be described as relational (Desmond, 2014). A relational approach to social enquiry is one that privileges the analysis of relations over entities; in contrast with substantialist methodologies, which begin with the assumed existence of entities, relational methodologies proceed from the premise that what exist first and foremost are relational processes (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Desmond, 2014; Dobson, 2015; Emirbayer, 1997). A relational ethnography is one that studies ‘fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people,

and cultural conflict rather than group culture' (Desmond, 2014, p. 548). In the context of this research this meant attending to the field of activation, rather than a single street-level site; studying the limits and boundaries of this field, and the conflicts within it; and focusing on the ways in which people became or were made into street-level advisors or claimants. In line with this approach, the previous chapter outlined a framework composed of relational concepts. Moreover, this relational and ethnographic approach is particularly suited to street-level research, in which there is a similar emphasis on the conflicts (and dilemmas) through which policy is made in practice, as well as on the ways in which 'the claimant' is processed and socially constructed through encounters with street-level agencies.

Contingent designs

For nine months during 2008 and 2009 I was an employment advisor on a welfare-to-work programme, for an employer, 'Activation Works', which has delivered various welfare-to-work contracts including, later, the Work Programme. In this role I was allocated a caseload of claimants, conducted 'mandatory work-focused interviews', ran workshops, and saw voluntary clients. I searched for jobs, cold-called employers, wrote and supervised the writing of job applications, CVs, and cover letters. In line with the requirements of the role I recorded everything I did on caseload management software, from reminder letters and text messages to conversations on the phone or in person. From a desktop drop-down menu I noted attendance, registered 'good cause' or selected 'failure to attend'. I referred clients to English classes, to a resident physiotherapist, a psychologist, and to groups and workshops, as well as signposting to other outside services. I updated 'personal action plans' and ran benefits calculations. I filled out paperwork for working tax credits, return-to-work credit, in-work credit, and wrote to the local authority requesting housing benefit 'run on'¹². I made enquiries and requests for

¹² When someone's income changes as a result of going into work this will have a knock-on effect for their other entitlements, Housing Benefit being among the most important. 'Run-on' refers

‘reasonable adjustments’ to the workplace. I also had a personal monthly target¹³ of job outcomes and, when I consistently failed to achieve this, started applying for other jobs, resigning from the role shortly before my probationary period was due to end¹⁴.

When, in 2013, I began this research it was envisaged as an ethnographic project. In part this followed from my working background, disciplinary training, and methodological commitments. But it also reflected an expressed need, within the street-level literature, to understand street-level practice from ‘the inside out’ (Brodkin, 2011b, 2012). In particular, the intention was to return to the sorts of street-level office in which I had previously worked and observe the day-to-day interactions between street-level advisors and benefit claimants. In addition to conducting such observational fieldwork it was envisaged that I would be able to recruit participants – both advisors and claimants – for interviews through my presence in such street-level agencies, perhaps having the opportunity to run repeat interviews and document a small number of cases in greater depth. When the time came to embark on fieldwork I systematically approached the main welfare-to-work agencies in my immediate locale, gradually extending my scope to other regions of the U.K. I contacted local Jobcentre Plus offices (or, attempted to), then regional offices, but also the DWP. I contacted prime Work Programme providers but also a host of smaller, local subcontractors. I wrote emails, left messages, and made use of personal contacts; I attended conferences and industry events in order to make new contacts, but also to observe the way street-level services were depicted by managers in these public contexts.

to a four week period during which, following a change in circumstances resulting from a return to work, Housing Benefit will continue to be paid at the previous rate.

¹³ At the outset this was seven per month but was at some point reduced to six in order to reflect the overall low performance of the programme amid the wider economic difficulties of the time.

¹⁴ The probationary period was the standard six months but in my case, and that of others recruited at a similar time, had been extended by three months, again to reflect the overall low performance of the programme. I resigned without another job to go to. Ironically, even though my contract would have ended anyway, by resigning I became ineligible for JSA for a period of three months.

Through this process I found one small local Work Programme subcontractor who was willing (or able) to assist with the research¹⁵. Following email correspondence and a face-to-face meeting my plans for observation were put to one side, and it was instead agreed that I would be able to interview two advisors and approximately twelve clients back-to-back over two tightly scheduled days; although this meant I would need to continue recruitment and fieldwork elsewhere (several interviewees didn't show up) this organisation was extremely welcoming and helpful – exceptionally so, in the context of my broader fieldwork experience, which in the case of street-level organisations was largely characterised by mistrust and suspicion. Such difficulties of access are a common place for ethnographers, especially those with an interest in closed organisational spaces (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010). Similarly, the recruitment of particular defined groups (e.g. employees or claimants) can be difficult without the cooperation of bodies and organisations through which they might be accessed. For these reasons I made the decision to turn to my own personal contacts, approaching former colleagues, some of whom also put me in contact with other advisors (past and present) that they knew. Similarly, when it came to the recruitment of additional claimants I also made use of personal contacts from various different contexts. In particular, I was able to recruit three claimants through a community drama collective with whom I had the opportunity to watch and discuss a performance of the forum theatre play *Benefit*, several of whose members had both experience of and an interest in issues related to the research.

¹⁵ That many of the providers I contacted might not have been able to grant me access became apparent as the fieldwork progressed. It was further confirmed in an interview conversation with a former colleague who, in addition to having been a street-level advisor, had also later worked in head office as a supply chain manager. He told me that there was a contractual requirement to run all such requests through the DWP. Local offices would have been expected to check with their head office first, and such requests would certainly be regarded with suspicion and, if not introduced and sanctioned by senior personnel in the DWP, automatically rejected without consideration. Another participant, with professional contacts among the senior management of one prime Work Programme provider, also told me that subsequent to recent requests by me but also other researchers, a memo had been circulated to all prime and subcontracting providers reminding them that such requests should be referred to the DWP. This was after I had already completed fieldwork with the one subcontracting organisation to grant me access. My attempts to develop the appropriate gatekeeping contacts within the DWP and my enquiries about access to JCP were entirely unsuccessful.

Five other claimants were recruited through their involvement with community activist organisations and networks.

In this way, what had been envisaged as a conventional site-specific, perhaps multi-sited ethnography, based in one or two street-level offices, instead became much more interview focused, but also much less bounded: participants were recruited from across the United Kingdom, and their involvement in the street-level activation field also became more temporally dispersed, with the inclusion of both current and former advisors. At the same time, the fieldwork returned me to my own experiences in a much more direct way than had been anticipated; interviewing former colleagues (including a former line manager) with whom I had worked closely for several months inescapably drew my own experiences into the research in so far as the interviews often addressed a situation and context in which I had also directly participated. This shared context, and my own position and experiences within it, also became a point of reference for some participants (particularly but not limited to former colleagues) when discussing their own positions and experiences. In adapting to the contingencies of the field the research design changed throughout the process of fieldwork, but in several respects remained ethnographic. Drawing on in-depth interviews with both advisors and claimants, the research made reflexive (auto) ethnographic use of my experiences as an advisor. Some of these experiences were revisited in interviews with former colleagues. In lieu of field notes I was able to make use of personal records as sensitising documents, such as diary entries and personal correspondence relating to my period of street-level employment. These focused on my response to workplace matters, and in particular to management communications regarding performance and practice. The research also sought to treat the process of interviewing in ethnographic terms, remaining sensitive to the specific contexts in which interviews were conducted and the way these contexts might have shaped the interview itself.

Sample: changing positions in a changing field

In this section I provide some further details about the sample. This is not, nor was it intended to be, a representative sample. In line with the relational research methodology, participants were not treated as static members of a particular class or group, but as situated and moving participants in a dynamic field. This section aims to describe some of the complexity and variation within the sample, and give a sense of the different sorts of position within the street-level activation field occupied by participants. A total of thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out (see: Appendix A). Thirteen of these were with street level advisors from contracted-out welfare-to-work providers; of these, three were current Work Programme advisors and ten were former advisors. Of the ten former advisors, three had only very recently left the role or field (within a month of two of the interview), and seven had done so at different points over a period of several years. There were a variety of different experiences among advisor-participants; some had worked as advisors on a couple of different welfare-to-work contracts (in one case over nearly a decade, since the early 2000s), whereas others only had experience of one programme, such as Pathways to Work or the Work Programme. The shortest duration of employment as an advisor was six months. Some had remained an advisor for the length of their involvement in the field, whereas others had remained in the welfare-to-work field but been moved or promoted to other positions (as training advisors, to different managerial roles, but also to other regional or head office functions). In addition to these advisor interviews, I also interviewed one DWP employee who worked as a call centre operative, fielding calls from JSA and prospective JSA claimants; this participant was also an active trade union member, and the interview touched on current issues related to working conditions within the DWP and Jobcentres Plus¹⁶. As outlined in the previous section, two of the advisor-participants were accessed through their employer; eight were former colleagues; four were accessed through

¹⁶ Unfortunately I was unable to recruit any Jobcentre Plus staff.

contacts and snowball sampling. Making up the staff/advisor interviewees were ten women and four men. At the time of their employment as an advisor, most participants began whilst in their mid twenties, although three advisors had started the role later, whilst in their thirties or forties.

Of the sixteen interviews with claimants twelve were currently claiming JSA, and four ESA. Eight (all JSA claimants) were recruited for me by the Work Programme provider, with interviews arranged by them, and taking place on their premises. The remaining eight (four claiming ESA, four claiming JSA) were recruited and had interviews arranged by me as outlined above. The distinction between participants who were claiming ESA and those claiming JSA was complicated by the fact that, for several participants, this was not their first claim. At least three of the current JSA claimants had also in the past claimed ESA. Similarly, at least three of the current ESA claimants had previously claimed JSA. As lone parents, two of the participants had been claiming Income Support until their youngest child turned five, at which point they were transferred to JSA. In terms of their current engagement with activation services, nine were currently clients on the Work Programme; four had not yet been referred to the Work Programme, but were having their claim (and 'activation') dealt with by Jobcentre Plus; and two were currently on a Community Work Placement, having been referred in one case by their Jobcentre Plus advisor, and in another by their Work Programme advisor. One ESA claimant was currently in the Support Group, and not required to participate in mandatory work-focused activity. Of the claimant interviewees, ten were women and six men. Most participants were in their forties, although the ages ranged from the early twenties to fifties. Again, this provides a snapshot of claimants' situations and 'classifications' at the time of research, but it is important to emphasise that there were also past experiences of claiming the same or different benefits, as well as past experiences of other welfare-to-work programmes. In this way many claimants had been subject to different levels and forms of conditionality at different times.

Fieldwork: reflexive interviewing in the interview society

The fieldwork for this thesis, informed by previous experience as a participant, was nonetheless focused around interviews. The ubiquity of the interview as the preeminent qualitative research method has been much remarked upon, with some going so far as to suggest that now, owing to this very ubiquity, it is perhaps the case that 'interviews have a limited usefulness as a means of understanding and investigating social life' (Back, 2012, p. 27). The argument (which is a polemical one, albeit more equivocal than this isolated quotation might suggest) is that in many respects the interview has become a widely recognised cultural form – that we now live in 'the interview society' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997) – with its own rules and popular expectations, and the concomitant danger that what gets produced in and through interview encounters are often the very 'frames of reference and social characterizations that sociology produced in the first place' (Back, 2012, p. 26). In this account the interview society can produce a self-referential trap in which the ubiquity of the form has come to condition what we discover (construct or produce) through its use. A kind of common sense faith in the interview as method likewise risks the reduction of social encounters to words and transcripts, flattening the life contained within them.

In discussing 'the interview society' Atkinson and Silverman caution the social researcher against taking at face value 'the image of the self revealing speaking subject' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 322), instead drawing attention to the way that interviews can only take place on the condition that one narrates a self, and often a particular sort of self – these are necessarily constructed, partial and performative encounters. Rapley (2001) has argued that it is also necessary to attend to interview encounters as co-constructed, which is to say 'inherently social encounters, dependent on the *local interactional contingencies* in which the speakers draw from, and co-construct, broader social norms' (Rapley, 2001, p. 303). Here the interview is but one kind of social encounter among others, and what is produced

in it equally implicates and involves the interviewee, interviewer and their situational context.

In one sense Back's argument aims at broadening social research's methodological horizons – that is, encouraging it to look *beyond* the interview, and to develop 'forms of attentiveness that can admit the fleeting, distributed, multiple, sensory, emotional and kinaesthetic aspects of sociality', (Back, 2012, p. 28), arguing that '[n]ot being limited to what people say explicitly enables us to train a kind of attentiveness to tacit forms of coexistence' (Back, 2012, p. 29). At the outset this research, for different reasons, also adopted a cautious stance with respect to interviews; following from its commitments to an ethnographic sensibility, there was a caution about avoiding the attitudinal fallacy (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014) and the assumption that what people say has any straightforward relation to what they do.

What I want to suggest here is that in this research, interview encounters were occasions in which it *was* possible to attend to such fleeting, emotional and tacit forms of coexistence, and that this was often possible precisely because they were also interviews *in and of* the interview society. Rather than producing a kind of self-referential trap, the ubiquity of the interview form, in this particular context, was a reflexive resource on which the research was able to draw, enabling it to reflect on some of the 'local interactional contingencies' (Rapley, 2001) shaping the encounter. In this way, the research attended to its interviews themselves as embodied forms of social interaction and social practice, and not as instances of speech assumed to coincide with practices occurring elsewhere (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). This is a reflexive form of attentiveness, which in psychosocial terms is also an attentiveness to what, in psychoanalysis, is called transference and counter transference (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). The argument here is that such a psychosocial understanding of reflexivity recasts the predicament of 'the interview society' as an opportunity to interrogate the specific interactional forms brought to particular interview encounters, particularly along felt and emotional lines.

If you wanted to find an exemplar of 'the interview society' then activation programmes would be a good place to look. Those organisations and areas of social life concerned with employment, employability, and activation are also places where 'the interview' plays a particularly prominent role and has a special kind of importance. They are places where the presentation of the self according to formal, codified, and customary rules has been elevated into a (quasi) professional practice. This is something that, to some extent, I already 'knew' before fieldwork began, but it became particularly clear (or was something I began to reflect on more) as I went about conducting my own kind of interviews with different participants in a number of settings. In the course of this research I interviewed claimants who had just arrived from their 'mandatory work focused interview' and were on their way to, or had been pulled out of, an 'interview skills workshop'. Some claimants came to my interview immediately following either a mock job interview or, in one case, a real one. When I interviewed claimants it was often about these other sorts of interview they had. I interviewed advisors in their place of work, about their own job interviews and entry into their role, but also about the work-focused interviews they had with claimants.

Without wanting to conflate these different forms of interview (which are different forms of social encounter), it remains possible to understand street-level spaces of activation as organised around a series of highly structured one-to-one interactions (many designated as 'interviews'). During fieldwork it very much seemed that this immediate interactional context had a marked influence on my research encounters. It often seemed that participants brought with them an *expected form* to the research interview – which is to say, the visible shape and form that individual participants seemed to give to their interviews – and these expected forms were in many cases suggestive about the social relations being enacted within the research encounter, but also beyond it. In many cases with claimant-participants the research interview (especially those on provider premises) somehow came to resemble a mandatory work focused interview, job interview, or something in between. Some participants seemed to turn their

answers to a variety of questions toward recent actions they had taken, as if they were providing me with evidence of their job search (I felt as if I had been cast in the role of advisor – a role I had experienced, and knew well, but which in this context made me feel uncomfortable and, sometimes, frustrated). Other questions, against my intention, elicited a potted work history and a breakdown of their skills. Interviewing one advisor about their role, in the office in which they worked, I felt as if I had been placed in the position of manager or job interviewer; their descriptions of working practices and working experiences seemed to take the forms taught and encouraged by advisors – myself included – during ‘interview skills workshops’. Some questions elicited examples of competencies, in a form reminiscent of the STAR¹⁷ model for answering job interview questions. Difficulties, problems, or bad feelings were rounded off with a positive anecdote about what they had learnt from the experience. In this case, the participant had begun the interview describing their recent experience standing in for a manager away on maternity leave; this had been a valued experience, and the participant hoped at some point to be able to enter a management position more permanently. In this case, it was as if this wish permeated the research interview, which seemed to become, in effect, a practice interview or proof of competency for the desired management role. In some ways these interactional forms only became visible to the extent that they differed from one another: outside of provider premises interviews felt much less constrained, and more often took confessional, conspiratorial, or testimonial forms.

Rapley (2001) draws attention to the way in which the interviewer is also responsible for producing interviews as particular kinds of social occasion; in so far as I was able to observe this in my own research practice, it was in those instances where my influence, expectations, or wishes about the interview met with resistance, failure and, occasionally, embarrassment. Whereas with some former advisors the interview immediately proceeded along confessional lines, in

¹⁷ Situation, Task, Action, Result.

interviews with current advisors, or advisors still committed to the idea of the role, my attempts to elicit a more confessional mode of interaction sometimes met with a professional rectitude, exposing my own interactional inclinations and expectations in the process (to myself, as much as anyone). In a different way, on some occasions the tightly controlled interview forms (those resembling the job interview, the mandatory work focused interview, or the demonstration of professional competence) broke down or ceased to work fluently in the research context. These were revealing, instructive moments. Interviews with former colleagues sometimes presented a different problem, in that they required moving from more familiar and sociable forms of interaction into a mode that *I* deemed more appropriate for recording, transcribing, and quoting. With many former colleagues the most comfortable form of interaction was a form of reminiscence; on other occasions, however, I had the impression that being interviewed by a former colleague was to be placed in a distinctly uncomfortable and vulnerable position (one participant explicitly told me as much); it also wasn't always clear whether my relationship with these participants had another kind of influence on what they told me, and how they told it to me: I knew (or thought I knew) more about them, but they also knew (or thought they knew) more about me and what I might want to hear. Sometimes this resulted in strange interview encounters where participants, having read the information sheet, but also perhaps the Welfare Conditionality website¹⁸, provided what I can only describe as 'artificial' answers to my questions, in the sense of consciously fashioned or noticeably crafted, reproducing an academic or policy jargon with which they were clearly both uncomfortable and unfamiliar. I had a similar sense of artifice, although of a more defensive sort, in some interviews with claimants (here I am talking about those that were recruited for me by the provider), where I sometimes felt cast in

¹⁸ This research was funded by the ESRC through the Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support, and Behaviour Change project. A link to the project website was included in my email correspondence with potential participants, and on the participant information sheet: www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk

the role of nosy or threatening outsider against whom they had been dispatched to defend their advisor's integrity and honour.

No doubt the differences between all of these interactional interview forms are relational, intersubjective, and indicative of other social relations of power, as well as feelings of connection, vulnerability, trust, suspicion etc. I would argue that it is possible to attend to such interactional interview forms precisely to the extent that they are sometimes unexpected, uncomfortable (or, indeed, too comfortable), failed, or resisted. In psychoanalysis this sort of attention is understood in terms of transference and countertransference¹⁹; in sociology it is understood in terms of reflexivity. From a psychosocial perspective this reflexivity can also be an emotional reflexivity, attentive to transference (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012, pp. 157–158), and to the unconscious social forms brought to the interview (which can be more or less controlled, and controlled or uncontrolled in particular ways) and the affective experiences of the researcher (which might also include things like boredom or frustration, being moved or feeling helpless). In this way the interview is always understood to be about more than words; people speak, narrate, and discursively construct their 'self' in an interview, but there are also moments of inarticulacy and uncertainty. People bring their feelings to interviews, and interviews are the occasions for feelings, no less important or instructive for being mundane (again sometimes my participants seemed to feel, and sometimes I felt frustrated, bored, or helpless). They also bring social expectations and assumptions about the interviewer, and about what an interview is, or what it is

¹⁹ Both forms of projection; the analyst attends to the relational forms of interaction that the analysand brings to analysis. In so far as the analyst remains largely silent, and is a 'kind of present absence or absent presence' (Green, 1997, p. 321), these forms indicate other patterns of relating that the patient has learnt elsewhere, which they bring to the analysis and project onto the analyst. The countertransference refers to the emotions and forms of relating evoked in the analyst by the analysand – that which they project onto the patient. The implicit argument here, which follows from the framework outlined in the last chapter, is that such forms of projection, transference, and countertransference can be understood in a more social, sociological, or psychosocial sense; as indicative of *social* patterns of relating, rather than 'individual' or psychological ones.

for²⁰. In the context of activation programmes ‘the interview’ is indeed a ubiquitous form; however, treating this as one more instance of ‘the interview society’ risks conflating the very different ways in which we are encouraged, taught, and coerced into narrating our selves for others in various contexts, and in this research attention to these different forms (of encouraged, enforced, or coerced narration) was an important occasion for ‘transferential’ reflexive analysis.

The interviews for this research were conducted in different settings and locations. Those interviews arranged by the Work Programme provider were conducted on provider premises, either in a vacant office made available for the purpose, or in a public cafeteria located within the same building complex. Otherwise, interviews were held in a range of public locations selected or negotiated with the participants, mostly in cafes, bars, and fast-food restaurants. One interview was conducted in an office on University premises. The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device.

Ethics

This research followed the ethical guidelines of the Social Research Association (“The SRA | Ethics guidelines”) and ESRC (“Research ethics - Economic and Social Research Council”). In particular, it followed the principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and the minimisation of potential harm to participants. All participants were provided with information regarding the research, in the form of a plain language statement (see: Appendices), and written evidence of informed consent was obtained. Participants were provided with my contact details, those of my primary supervisor, and of the university ethics committee, and made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. In one case the interview was conducted by telephone; on this occasion the plain language statement and consent form were sent to the participant as email

²⁰ As does the interviewer. As previously described, sometimes my own expectations or wishes about the interview only became clear to me when they were resisted or went unfulfilled.

attachments. The consent form was also subsequently read to the participant over the phone, and verbal consent for the interview (and its recording) captured on the audio recording. In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants all names have been replaced with pseudonyms. I have extended this principle to participants' employers or welfare-to-work service providers, and have excluded information relating to the location of specific provider offices.

This research can be justified with respect to its significance for the wider community, which includes the scholarly community but also the participants. This significance is derived from its focus on the lived experience of certain aspects of (ongoing) welfare reform. Its ethnographic and contextualised approach has the potential to provide a rich account of the everyday realities and experiences of welfare conditionality and activation, from the perspectives of both advisors and claimants. This focus provides the basis for detailed, contextualised understanding of what conditionality and activation mean to people in practice. It provides an avenue through which these experiences might be registered in wider policy and political debates. A focus on street-level experience also offers the possibility of understanding how activation and conditionality are practiced, with potential implications for future policy design.

There was a risk, in some cases, that research encounters may have touched on experiences which participants found uncomfortable or distressing. Some people have had very unpleasant experiences of conditionality and activation, experiences which are compounded by other experiences of poverty, insecurity (e.g. with respect to housing), oppression and exclusion. In some cases interviews did touch on upsetting experiences. It was also possible that interviews might have been occasions in which participants discussed pressing problems or difficulties they were facing. Prior to interviews I made sure I had details, or access to details, of relevant local services e.g. the CAB, money and debt advisory services, the Samaritans' phone number, and other local advice services to which I could signpost participants, although there were no occasions in which it was

necessary to do so. There were occasions during interviews in which participants became upset or angry; on these occasions in the first instance I offered support and, on one occasion, paused the interview such that I could focus on the participant and, later, reiterate the principles of informed consent. While the discussion of difficult situations can itself result in emotional distress, the interview conversations mostly addressed public interactions; the unpleasant feelings and experiences addressed by the research were of an 'everyday' sort which might reasonably be expected to occur in a variety of conversational contexts. The research did not address sensitive or intimate topics the discussion of which might result in more lasting distress or emotional harm. The nature of participants' experiences, whether positive or negative, was a key feature of the research, and such temporary discomfort as was sometimes produced can be justified by the value of making such experiences a feature of the way we assess and analyse activation and conditional welfare policy.

The discussion of client-worker interactions with advisors did carry the risk that malpractice might be disclosed. In this context, this risk related more to fraudulent forms of malpractice, rather than forms of abusive behaviour, which might be more of an issue in other sorts of welfare interaction which are either more physical, or intimate in other ways, particularly where the service-user population might be defined as vulnerable, which was not the case here. The ethical risk posed by disclosure of malpractice is the risk posed to the participant's security at work. Here the SRA guidelines refer to the work of Klockars (1979) who argues that in cases where disclosure of harmful or illegal behaviour is the result of a moral assumption between the participant and researcher of certain role obligations not to disclose, the morally competent researcher is bound to respect such obligations. There were no such disclosures during the research fieldwork, however on some occasions participants did discuss experiences or practices during recorded interviews which they later wished to retract, or instructed me not to use for the research; in these cases these parts of the transcript were removed and not treated as data.

Analysis

As previously discussed, one challenge posed by the research was how to treat and make use of my own past experience (as an 'opportunistic complete member') alongside subsequently collected 'original' data. There is no doubt that my prior position, and my existing impressions, experiences, and (pre)conceptions shaped and influenced the direction of research (Bourdieu, 1990b). These experiences undoubtedly drew me to particular themes, issues, and concepts in the policy, street-level, and theoretical literatures that seemed to me particularly resonant or apposite. In this way the analysis, as it was conducted for this research, is perhaps best conceived as a continuous reflexive process initiated by my 'full' participation in the field, and extending throughout the duration of research. Here, the reflexive (auto) ethnographic approach taken by the research enhanced the depth and rigor of data collection and analysis. That street-level participants were aware of my employment background aided rapport building, and facilitated the gathering of rich data about their day-to-day practices and experiences. It also meant that the researcher-participant relationship was shaped by this partially shared 'insider' status, often marked by the use of jargon and other linguistic, discursive forms of short-hand, or reference to assumed or tacit knowledge (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The (auto) ethnographic approach thus enabled (i) transparency about the research relationship, and the conditions shaping data collection and (ii) the contextualisation of such forms of short-hand and tacit forms of knowledge (Boyle & Parry, 2007; Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012), allowing (iii) greater analytical rigor and depth. This was a form of 'analytic authoethnography' (Anderson, 2006) in which analysis proceeded throughout the process of data collection. This process was aided by the use of field notes (following interviews), documentary records and email correspondence, and conceptual and methodological memos made throughout the research process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

The research interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Some of these I transcribed myself, and others were sent to professional transcription services.

Although I did not transcribe all the interviews myself, I did listen to the recordings alongside the transcript and any relevant field notes; in many cases this was an occasion for making further memos and notes on the interview, often focusing on its overall shape or flow, rather than discrete sections of speech or text. Once interviews had been transcribed they were coded using Nvivo software. Coding proceeded along two tracks; making use of field notes and conceptual memos, the transcripts were coded conceptually; at the same time, the transcripts were thematically coded such that new themes or concepts might emerge. Following the identification of links and connections among the data, and a corresponding plan for writing (in the form of chapter plans), the transcripts and codes were revisited and in some cases recoded. During this latter stage some techniques from analytic induction were applied, searching for contradictory or alternative cases which contradicted the findings (Duneier, 2011; Katz, 2001a). This provided an opportunity for further conceptual development and refinement.

This process of analysis can be described as abductive. This is a process of 'moving between everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts, and social science explanations' (Mason, 2002, p. 180). Shank (2006) describes the abductive logic governing field work as a 'reasoning to meaning'. This is a form of reasoning that makes use of existing theories to follow up hunches, read signs and omens, and search for the meaning behind surprising observations. Abductive logic incorporates aspects of inductive reasoning, and has similarities to what Katz (2001a, 2001b, 2002) calls analytic induction, and O'Reilly (2005) calls iterative induction. In each case analysis and data collection proceed together; there is a dialectical movement between theory, experience, and data. Abductive reasoning during fieldwork can involve the plausible explanation of surprising observation using existing theories; or, it might involve the probabilistic inference of either causes or consequences of given occurrences. It is a form of reasoning which allows the fieldworker to pursue leads and hunches in a theoretically informed manner, and to generate new theories and hypotheses on the basis of empirical material. The kinds of finding, conclusion, or interpretations reached in this

manner might be characterised as weak or ‘peculiarly fallible’ when compared to other deductive or inductive forms of analysis (Lipscomb, 2012); however, its value lies in the extent to which it is a *generative* style of analysis and interpretation that advances theory and data together, and is productive of novel insights and new lines of enquiry. It is a form of analysis particularly suited to ethnographic research.

Conclusion

This chapter has described some key features of my methodological practice, detailing the ways in which it responded to the call, from street-level scholars of activation, to attend to the everyday realities of street-level policy-making as it is lived and practiced. In doing so it highlighted some of the contingencies contributing to the design and development of the research. In outlining the reflexive ethnographic approach adopted by the research, the chapter also situated my own position as researcher vis-à-vis the field and the research participants, drawing attention to some of the ways in which my own experience shaped, influenced, and oriented the research. The chapter has also introduced the research sample, and described my experiences of conducting fieldwork, negotiating access, and undertaking participant recruitment. In exploring its use of autoethnography in more depth (its rationale and implications), this chapter has also outlined the particular way in which rigour and trustworthiness were understood by this research. The use of autoethnography is understood to strengthen the reflexivity of the thesis, in terms of situating the researcher with respect to the research object, it allowed the research to reflect on the way background and past experience informed the research and shaped the research process (Berger, 2015). This was an important in terms of reinforcing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986). This chapter has contributed to the research credibility by demonstrating a prolonged engagement with and persistent observation within

the field, as well as enhancing its dependability and confirmability through the provision of an audit trail and reflexive contextualisation.

Chapter Six – Entering, adapting, and exiting the field: street-level advisors between *illusio* and disillusionment

The best and the worst

It was a role that, as an advisor, that I really, really, really enjoyed. I suppose meeting people that I don't normally meet, meeting people that I feel like have had a lot of disadvantage, made me appreciate all the privileges that I've had in my life in terms of role models and support and opportunity, and yeah, it gave me something, I really felt like I had something to offer, to instill those kinds of values and aspirations in other people. That's why I stayed in that role for a long time and still, kind of, work in the area of welfare to work. (Nicola, advisor and manager, 2002-2008)

I went in really hopeful, I went in thinking like, this is the best job ever, we're actually going to make a difference, we're going to get people off benefits, we're going to help them sustain themselves and their family, learn the importance of work, and actually this could change the culture of the country in a way, and be really good on both the local level and on a wider level. And so I think I went into the job really excited, really hopeful, and that didn't pan out, I became quite resentful, really sad, and really like, hating myself. (Emily, advisor, 2008-2009)

This chapter is about the experiences of street-level advisors, and here Nicola and Emily describe very different experiences. For Nicola, involvement in welfare-to-work was a source of pride through which she had forged a continuing professional identity. Emily, on the other hand, resigned after only six months, not for another permanent job, but to sign on with a temping agency until she found one. Despite its short duration, her time as an advisor still managed to arouse strong feelings. 'I'm ashamed,' she told me. 'I'm ashamed of the fact that I was in that world, that I used people as a commodity to make money. Yeah, so I don't talk about it. I think it was the worst job I've ever done.'

Positioned somewhere between Nicola's enjoyment and Emily's shame, the other advisors I spoke to in the course of this research often had complicated thoughts

and feelings about their involvement in welfare-to-work. Most, like Emily, came to the role hopefully, looking for something that they could invest in and feel proud of. This chapter is concerned with the particular ways that these advisors both invested in, and came to disinvest from, the street-level activation role and the welfare-to-work field. It looks at the social desires and fantasies which advisors brought to the role, the beliefs and points of view mixed up with such desires, and the ways in which these were often frustrated, disappointed, and occasionally challenged and altered during the course of their work. This chapter, then, explores how advisors were invested in their role. It also asks: what conflicts do advisors face? How do they cope with street-level conflicts? And, are there limits to coping and if so, what are these?

In answering these questions, this chapter draws on interviews with both current advisors (at the time of the research), and former advisors who had left the role, often as a result of their disillusionment with this kind of work. In so doing, it is able to highlight some of the differences between those advisors who felt able to cope in the role, and those who did not. The argument this chapter develops is that work-first conditional activation, whilst attracting some employees who have a primary interest in providing help and support to individuals, is in fact dominated by a marketised logic and the imperatives of profitability. Coping with this requires a very specific kind of investment in the role, one which recognizes the authority of these imperatives as legitimate. In concluding, the chapter argues that the managerial imperatives of the field are a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000). This is a form of violence which operates with the consent of those on whom it is exercised (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). By interviewing those who ultimately rejected the street-level activation role, and who have questioned its forms of authority, the chapter is able to highlight some of the prohibitions and proscriptions of street-level activation work.

Entering the field – paternalist imaginaries and the activation *illusio*

Advisors came to the welfare-to-work field from a range of backgrounds. Some were, like me, recent graduates with little prior knowledge or understanding of welfare-to-work, whilst others had several years of work history in a related field or similar people-facing role. This section explores some of the ways in which advisors became, or continued to be, invested in the field and its *illusio* (Bourdieu, 2000); it looks at the hopes, motivations, social desires and fantasies that advisors brought to the role, as well as some of the beliefs and attitudes mixed up with these. Many advisors, whatever their background, talked about being attracted to the role because they wanted to do something helpful for other people. This emerged as a strong theme across numerous interviews, and here I quote several advisors to give a sense of how widespread was this particular form of investment in street level activation work:

I originally took the job because the job advert was all about, do you want to change peoples' lives, do you like motivating people, that sort of thing, so that was my initial draw. The salary was good, so that was also a draw. (Harry, advisor 2007-2010; other roles 2010-2015)

The reason that I applied for the job when I saw it advertised was partly I was taken in by the advert, so the advert it was about helping people to get into work. And I think at the time having worked being an advocate with people with learning disabilities trying to get them into employment, I saw this on a grander scale of trying to get people back into work. (Chris, advisor, 2007-2010)

It was my friend that said, I think you'd be amazing at welfare-to-work for people and help them to get to work and really motivating them, giving them confidence. I'd never really heard of it before; so I almost got through it through refer-a-friend.²¹ (Deborah, advisor, 2012-2015)

²¹ This was a scheme, run during a period of rapid recruitment accompanying the roll-out of new contracts, whereby existing employees were given vouchers or other rewards when they 'referred' a friend to an advertised position who was successful in getting the job.

[My friend] suggested that I apply through the refer-a-friend scheme. Because he said that he really enjoyed the job, and that for the reasons that I'd gone into teaching, as in helping people, I'd get a real kick out of it. So I thought, I was having quite a lot of bad luck with the teaching jobs, so I thought well, you know, I need something and maybe this could be something I do for a little while before I find a teaching job. (Robert, advisor and other roles, 2009-2010)

I was attracted to it because it was more of an advisory role than I was in before [Jobcentre reception]. So it was a lot more one-to-one rather than, kind of, crowd control. But, yeah, I got an idea of it...it was attractive working closer and being able to work more one-on-one with the customers. (Katie, advisor, 2010-2015)

I think the thing that appealed was that I can work one-to-one with people and develop them, it didn't really matter what their circumstances were, I just wanted more experience of that, and that's what that would give me. (Alexandra, advisor 2008-2010, other roles 2010- 2015)

I remember exactly how I came to do that job. I was sat in my mate Megan's kitchen [another advisor], ... complaining about the hell that I perceived working in television to be, you know, and I was like, I don't like working in television, it's full of idiots and I'm not doing anything "real", and you know, I want to contribute to the world, I want to help people. (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

Amid their differences in background and experience, advisors' accounts of what led them to apply for the role of street-level advisor converged around a desire to work face-to-face with people in a helping capacity. Advisors tended to have, in terms of their basic investment in the game and its stakes (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), a sense that the field offered the possibility and opportunity to 'help' people in ways they perceived to be good and worthwhile.

In terms of the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Four, this investment in the activation role might be understood in terms of field, habitus, and social desire. 'Every field,' writes Bourdieu, 'is the institutionalization of a point of view in things and in habitus' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 99). Individuals select and are selected by a field on the basis of their habitus and its dispositions – their embodied habits

of thought and feeling. Advisors saw in the field an opportunity to express and satisfy some of their social desires (Aarseth, 2016), and the field of activation recruited for and made use of these. New entrants are not required to have a habitus that is fully formed or completely adapted to a field, but one 'that is practically compatible, or sufficiently close, and above all malleable and capable of being converted into the required habitus' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 100). Here, an orientation toward working-face-to-face with people, and a sense that the role of employment advisor would allow them to do this, seemed to be one element of this basic compatibility.

For Lipsky, too, street-level bureaucrats often have a particular kind of investment in their work, and are motivated by the prospect of helping others. This foundational belief that a service is indeed helpful Lipsky calls 'the myth of altruism' (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 71–72). In the case of street-level activation, the notions of 'help' and 'helping' which drew advisors in, and which the field had selected, were more specific than an abstract or general orientation to 'public service', and the myth of altruism accompany this kind of street-level activation work had its own specific forms. This can be seen in the quotations opening this chapter, where Nicola spoke of wanting to be a role model, 'instilling values and aspirations' in her clients; similarly, Emily spoke about coming to the role imagining that she would be 'teaching people the value of work'. This desire to help, and the imagined or fantasized form that helping would take, were for many advisors premised on a very particular understanding of the problem(s) associated with 'being on benefits', which were variously imagined to be ones of culture, motivation, confidence, or aspiration. This kind of paternalist social imaginary was widely shared among advisors, which I again illustrate with quotations from several interviews:

I think the main difficulty with [clients] is lack of expectation of themselves and no-one ever, yeah no-one expected anything of them, they therefore not expecting anything of themselves. (Nicola, advisor and manager, 2002-2008)

Yeah so I had a few clients that just lived in areas where nobody worked, so I didn't just have to convince them, I'd have to convince the whole block that they, that it was good for all of them, to go back to work, or I'd have to find the one that was most motivated so they could promote the benefits of work and motivate the other individuals, so yeah. (Harry, advisor, 2007-2010)

It's a culture sometimes, isn't it? They haven't really had a job before, their parents might never have had a job, their friends don't have jobs, so why would they? But then, in that is also mental health and comes as part of that maybe. I don't know. It's a whole big picture of why people claim benefits. (Simone, advisor, 2007-2010)

I think the drudgery of work can be a big off putting one. Because work is not fun a lot of the time. And it's not necessarily because someone is lazy, it's often because they've had no other example of teaching, and habits set in hard and fast. You know, when you are growing up in that environment and you've done that your whole life, to try and change that behaviour, it can be a real hard task. Now, of course, there'll also be a portion of people that have cottoned on to the fact that they are probably financially probably just as well off if they sign on, and of course those people should be challenged and you know, I guess encouraged or forced or whatever you want to get back to work and contribute but...I mean why else are people not in work? (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

Many advisors' expressed beliefs about the field and its 'objects' were largely congruent with the ideological constructions of the welfare claimant and their situation outlined in Chapter Two. Advisors spoke in terms broadly in tune with 'anti-welfare common sense' (Jensen, 2014), and its notions of dependency (Murray et al., 1999) or demoralization (Mead, 1997). As such, the desire to help that advisors brought to the field was often a form of social desire organized around a very particular kind of social imaginary, a fantasy about the helping situation and their potential role within it.

As a condition of entry to a field and participation in its *illusio*, Bourdieu argues that entrants hold to the particular construction of reality organizing the field, one 'grounded in a prereflexive belief in the instruments of construction and of the objects thus constructed' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 99). Similarly for Lispy investment

in street-level work as a form of 'help' is founded upon the belief that a particular service model benefits clients (Lipsky, 2010, p. 71). In their accounts of embarking on street-level activation work, advisors exhibited a belief in the existence of a population of welfare claimants whose needs might best be understood as problems of 'culture,' 'motivation,' 'confidence,' and 'aspiration,' to be addressed by forms of paternalistic moral education of the sort exemplified by Emily's notion of 'teaching people the value of work', or Nicola's idea of being a role model and 'instilling values and aspirations'. This was a largely prereflexive belief that the problems of poverty and unemployment which the activation role was ostensibly designed to address were significantly attitudinal, behavioural, or cultural, to be remedied through various forms of individualized motivational and edificatory interventions. To the extent that advisors were aware of problems of inequality, structural advantage or disadvantage, these were often imagined in terms of role models, expectations, aspirations, or their lack. As such it was possible for advisors to conceive that they were in a position to address such problems by embodying for others the advantages they perceived themselves to have had, in terms of paternalist role models. As such, these imaginaries are also the expression of advisors' sense of their own social position and competencies. The social fantasy which advisors brought to the role often positioned them in a paternalist relation of supervisory guidance over subjects perceived to lack certain moral or cultural orientations, which advisors imagined they both possessed and were able to 'teach' or otherwise impart.

However, returning to Emily and Nicola, and the quotations opening this chapter, whilst both spoke of a moral or paternalistic investment in the role, for Nicola this remained relatively untroubled, and even reinforced and rewarded in the course of her work ('it gave me something, I felt like I had something to offer'). For Emily, on the other hand, as for some other advisors, this form of investment was altogether more difficult to sustain. In the course of performing their role some advisors became disillusioned with the job, their position, and its capacity to

'helpful'. That is to say, in the course of doing their jobs some advisors came to question either the potential of the role to be helpful in the ways they had imagined, or more radically and reflexively, to question some of the premises on which their notions of help had been based. Such forms of reflexive questioning in the habitus usually arise from some form of conflict or crisis, in terms of a lack of fit between habitus and field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) or intra-habitus conflict (Mouzelis, 2007); for Lipsky the contradictions of street-level work, specifically those which force the worker to subordinate their orientation to what he calls 'advocacy', can likewise lead to alienation (Lipsky, 2010, p. 71). Below, these dynamics are understood and explored in terms of disillusionment. The next section looks in more depth at the ways in which advisors became (reflexively) disillusioned with their role, and how this disillusionment related to specific forms of street-level conflict revolving around the targeted nature of the job, and conditional, work-first activation. The concept of disillusionment draws attention to some of the limits to coping in street-level work, a theme that is explored throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Between *illusio* and disillusionment

'To be become disillusioned,' writes Crossley, 'is to lose one's "belief in the game", to cease to experience it as worthwhile or meaningful' (Crossley, 1999, p. 815). The advisors that I interviewed had varying degrees of investment in the welfare-to-work 'game', which is also to say that they exhibited varying degrees of disillusionment. At the time of the interviews some, like Emily, had broken with and withdrawn from the field, going on to find altogether different sorts of work. Others, like Nicola, although no longer working at street-level, were still deeply invested in the field, the role, and its worth. I also interviewed recent leavers and current advisors who were – in a very practical sense – still invested in their (former) job, but who nonetheless held some reservations and criticisms about street-level activation and their involvement with it.

In this section I discuss advisors' different degrees of disillusionment before exploring how, despite holdings reservations, some advisors managed to adapt to the field and make compromises with it – not as they had imagined or wished it might be, but as they encountered it in practice. Initially entering the activation work with vague but idealized notions of providing 'help' or 'support', the practical realities of doing the job often forced on advisors a confrontation with what 'help' and 'support' were going to mean in practice. Whether this resulted in disillusionment and withdrawal, or adaptation and compromise, in looking more closely at these investments and their vicissitudes it is possible to explore in greater depth what constitutes the street-level activation *illusio* in practice, and at the dilemmas, conflicts, and contradictions this holds. This section, then, begins to answer the question of what conflicts street-level advisors faced, and how they coped with these.

Of the various difficulties and dilemmas that advisors faced, two in particular stand out. These are the performance-driven, targeted nature of their role, and the focus on conditional work-first activation. The relationship between these different aspects of street-level activation work is also important, and some of the more fraught dilemmas facing advisors were the compound problems of *both* targets *and* work-first conditional activation. Some of these compound problems will be mentioned later in the chapter, but first I want to address each issue separately. The purpose here is twofold: firstly, to offer some descriptive contextualization about target-driven work-first activation, and then to explore these issues theoretically in terms of what they meant for advisors' investments, disinvestments, adaptations and compromises.

Targets and performance management

Contracted out welfare-to-work services are paid on the basis of their performance in terms of 'job starts' – a job start being when, during the course of their

engagement with a provider²², a client starts work and stops claiming an out-of-work benefit (either ESA or JSA)²³. When organizations bid to deliver the Work Programme (or other welfare-to-work contract) they do so knowing the rates of payment and have a delivery plan including projections of how many outcomes they will achieve over the duration of the contract. There will be defined number of outcomes the organization needs to achieve to make the contract profitable or, in the case of non-profit organisations, financially viable. Organizational targets are passed down to advisors as monthly individual performance targets, which are closely monitored and tracked. Usually the contract of employment will be conditional on performance measured in terms of job starts – in the organization for which I worked successful completion of the six month probationary period was conditional upon meeting this target, as was continued employment in the role once the probationary period had ended. Failure to meet the target meant failing to pass probation or, for those who had already done so, a period of intensive managerial supervision – ‘performance support’ – ending either in improved performance or the termination of their contract.

Although the target of ‘job starts’ was by far the most important indicator of performance, it was by no means the only measure against which advisors were judged. Performance management featured prominently in advisors’ descriptions of their role, both as a form of surveillance, and as an administrative burden – the recording of information for contractual purposes took up a large amount of advisor time, something which they often resented, and viewed as detracting from

²² Although not necessarily. As described in the introduction, in my office advisors were encouraged to hunt through their caseload looking for ‘outcomes’ which had either already occurred, or were about to, without the direct involvement of an advisor – this might be with newly-engaged or yet-to-be-engaged clients, or clients who were no longer active on a caseload. Such practice was largely rationalised in terms of ‘sustainment’: if we could make contact with someone who had recently or was soon to start work, then we could offer them ‘in-work support’.

²³ During the Work Programme contactors’ performance was also measured in terms of sustainment, defined as sustaining employment for at least six months. Over successive waves of contracting-out the amount of money paid to providers up-front (before outcomes) was steadily reduced, and the amount tied to outcomes and sustainment outcomes (employment lasting six months) increased.

a focus on individual clients. The information recorded for contractual and organizational purposes was also used to monitor individual performance. Here, Judy describes the different 'minimum service levels' ('MSLs') against which her performance was measured, telling me that in her workplace there was:

...a lot of monitoring, an awful lot of monitoring. There's also things that [the prime], that, you've got to, it's called an MSL list, there's a list of about fifteen MSLs but we've got to record, we've got to make sure that we're compliant to ninety five percent, everyday. So it's things like, the MSL 4 is to ensure that every client on your caseload has a future appointment. Ok? MSL 11 is, you have meaningful contact with every client on your caseload within the last two weeks; and if your MSLs drop below the ninety five percent, well, it's just we can't, you know? (Judy, advisor, 2010-2015)

Judy also told me about her struggle to keep up to date with these various measures. Although 'best practice' was to record each of her actions at the moment they took place, the reality of her face-to-face work with clients meant that this wasn't always possible. Sometimes appointments with clients might involve difficult or emotional conversations; she might be interrupted at any moment with a phone call, or need to take time and prepare for her next appointment. Making sure future appointments were booked within the required timeframe was often complicated by the need to reschedule appointments. The administrative duties associated with the role were widely experienced as burdensome by advisors, but were important in organizational terms because they were the means by which the provider demonstrated that it was meeting its contractual requirements. However, these measures also served an important function in terms of monitoring and managing particular offices and individual employees. Nicola, an advisor who later became a manager, spoke about the role of such measures in 'optimizing' advisors' performance:

It was about trying to achieve our operational target because that was my job. And in doing that, I needed to get everyone to optimize their own job outcomes, and the same with the other KPIs [key performance indicators], the engagement, you know: new customers onto the

caseload; customers attending, you know, customers attending appointments, all of that. (Nicola, advisor and manager, 2002-2008)

Focusing on the ways in which such monitoring was used to manage advisors, among the various measures described by advisors were: how many client appointments advisors had in a day; how frequently they were in contact with clients; how many job interviews had been secured; and even how many mock interviews had been undertaken. In the office in which I worked such proxy measures were referred to as 'activity levels'; if you weren't 'performing' in terms of your main target of 'job starts', then managers would routinely pull information from the database about these other proxy measures in order to identify discrete ways in which this main target might be achieved.

The managerial focus on 'MSLs' (or 'KPIs') other than 'job starts' had consequences for street-level practice. A great emphasis was placed on the number of appointments booked or completed per day; consequently advisors were routinely encouraged to increase 'engagement' and 'activity' by booking in additional appointments with clients beyond their stipulated mandatory minimum. During my own time as an advisor the double booking of clients was also actively encouraged. The logic here was that missed appointments would not result in wasted time. If both clients did turn up then we could direct them to the 'job station' or give them tasks to do while they waited. Double-booking, although stressful for advisors, and disrespectful and inconvenient for claimants, was nonetheless seen as a straightforward way to increase 'activity'. Seeing groups of clients together was similarly viewed as good practice, and the need to make high volumes of applications was emphasized. Common practices included printing out lists of phone-numbers (from the yellow pages or other directories) for clients to cold-call looking for work; or, providing them with a list of postal addresses and printing out hundreds of 'spec letters' (speculative applications consisting of a CV and cover letter) for them to send. These activities and practices were referred to in terms of 'high activity levels', and seen as 'good advisor behaviours' and the

key to 'high performance'. It is in this sense that the disciplinary regime of activation works on clients through advisors (Soss et al., 2013): the 'activation' of clients follows from the 'activation' of advisors, and advisors are similarly subjected to an individualized 'behavioural' logic, and viewed as either more or less 'active'. The intensity of activation experienced by claimants (e.g. pressure to attend 'extra' appointments) can be viewed, in part, as a consequence of the intense (micro) managerialism to which advisors are subjected.

The various practices which resulted from an overriding organizational focus on defined and measureable actions can be described as forms of routinisation and simplification. Whereas Lipsky describes routinisation and simplification as a common *street-level* coping strategy (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 83–86), here it is a *managerial* strategy with which street-level advisors also have to cope. The managerial imposition of routinisation, and the logic behind it, is described in some detail by Harry, who pejoratively referred to it throughout his interview as 'the science'. I asked Harry to describe for me what he meant by this term:

So the business decides that there are various, well not even the business, *the contract and the business* decides that there are a number of quantifiable metrics that, if followed, will end up with the end result of [clients] not being on benefits anymore. So what does that mean? That means that an advisor sees x amount, or a certain amount of clients, because if they see a certain amount of clients – sorry, we'll go back one step – if an advisor *books in appointments with a certain amount of clients*, because if they do that a certain amount will turn up, that certain amount of clients turn up, because if they all turn up, then a certain amount will be engaged with the programme, so you've got a certain amount that are engaged with the programme, and that basically assumes that if they're all engaged then a certain amount of people will be making x amount of job applications, and if they make those job applications they'll have x amount of interviews, and if they go to those many interviews then they'll get a job. So that's the sort of 'science' that's been built around it. (Harry, advisor, 2007-2010; other roles 2010-2015)

Harry describes a quasi-Taylorist production line in which the pathways to successful performance were defined in terms of quantified metrics – the volume of clients, the volume of appointments, and the volume of applications. Harry was an advisor who prided himself on being attentive to each of his clients as individuals; he saw ‘the science’ as something encouraged by managers, also adopted by other advisors, but that he strove to resist. In this sense, although Harry was dominated by the managerial regime, he remained invested in activation work, but struggled from within the field to define its stakes and aims (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102).

To the extent that advisors had entered the role with notions of working one-to-one with individuals in a helping capacity, then the focus on targets and other proxy measures of performance was sometimes experienced as disillusioning. As Harry describes, such a focus encouraged advisors to think, not in terms of individual clients, but rather in aggregate terms – about their caseload, appointments booked, the overall number of clients seen, and the volume of applications made. Such a focus, ostensibly introduced to make sure that ‘minimum service levels’ were met for all clients, resulted – from the point of view of some advisors – in a de-personalized and ineffective service. In addition to reducing their autonomy, this focus was often felt by advisors to be in direct contradiction with their initial reasons for wanting to do the job. It was quite common for advisors to contrast their initial expectations of ‘helping’ people with the realities of working in a targeted environment:

Alexandra: So I think I just expected a softer environment, and it was really quite jaded and hard.

Jim: Can you explain what you mean by softer and by hard?

Alexandra: So by softer I mean maybe I expected a little bit more counsellory, like career counsellory, so it was more of a discussion and it was really taking on board what the person wanted and not just, here’s

a position you can do, so do it²⁴. That's what I was expecting, and by hard I suppose I just mean it was very target driven, so it was almost taking emotion out of it and processing. You have to hit four in a month, so who's top of the league in your caseload and what are you going to do? It was very processy, more than you do the right thing and eventually it'll happen. So I suppose that's what I mean by soft and hard. (Alexandra, advisor and other roles, 2008-2015)

Alexandra makes clear the pervasive influence of targets in street-level activation work – not simply a feature of the job, but something that defined the atmosphere and environment in which the work was done. She also points to the way that a focus on outcomes entailed a form of client-processing which was less attentive to the client and what they wanted than she had expected. There is also a suggestion that this contributed to a more authoritarian and paternalist advisor style – instructing clients to do things without necessarily listening to them. Where Harry identified a strong managerial regime and its rationale – ‘the science’ – Alexandra describes some of its effects on advisor-client relations. Advisors often spoke about the limitations that a focus on ‘performance’ placed on the ways that they approached and interacted with individual claimants. In particular, it limited the scope of appointments to a short-term focus on job outcomes:

I thought I would get the opportunity to really spend time with people, understand what it is about them that was causing difficulty in their lives, and get the opportunity to work with them in a meaningful way. The time constraints and the scope, and the remit of the job meant that was impossible. The focus always had to be about how are we going to get them back into work? Voluntary work wasn't really an option. Getting them training wasn't really an option. (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

I wasn't one of those advisors who could do sixteen clients a day. See them, assess what they needed, and send them off to do it. I was more of an advisor having come from a support background as a support

²⁴ Welfare-to-work organizations are not in a position to hand people jobs; rather, they are largely focused on helping clients make applications to publicly advertised positions (and while they might negotiate with large employers with numerous vacancies to give interviews to a group of selected ‘pre-screened’ clients, these clients will still need to go through the interview process). What I take Alexandra to mean here is that the client is shown a job vacancy that they are instructed to apply for.

worker, as an advocate, where I did things for people who needed things doing for them. I was more somebody who wanted to help people get what they actually wanted, rather than the target driven culture which ... I was told regularly, just get them a job, get them a job. (Chris, advisor, 2008-2010)

Returning to the theme of investment and disillusionment, the advisors who found the targeted aspect of the role particularly challenging were those who were more invested in their role as being akin to what Chris refers to as 'support work'. Chris in particular thought that his role should be defined primarily by the needs and wishes of his clients. 'I saw it as being helping people back into work, and didn't realise then the amount of pressure that would then come with that.' From this perspective, the pressure to achieve targets led to a situation in which the needs and wishes of clients were subordinated to the needs of the organization. Chris further describes how the focus on targets shaped the sorts of job that advisors would encourage clients to apply for:

So the difficult part was actually having to get people into jobs that they didn't necessarily didn't want, that I didn't necessarily think were good for them. Even though yes we could argue that employment is good, and any employment, and money. But I also found that I think we were operating under a bigger picture, which was: get people into work, get them off benefits, get them off benefits, get them into work. Reduce housing benefit, reduce this, reduce that. Whereas I went into the job to get people their dream jobs and achieve positive outcomes for them. (Chris, advisor, 2008-2010)

Here Chris articulates his disinvestment from and growing disillusionment (Crossley, 1999) with the welfare-to-work field. He entered the field wanting to help people find jobs that would be good for them, believing that this is what the field – and his role in it – would be about. The pressure exerted by targets to move people into jobs that, in his judgment, were not necessarily suitable for them led Chris to reassess the nature of the field itself, which he began to perceive as being more about 'getting people off benefits' as an end in itself, rather than about finding people work in order to improve their situation and wellbeing. In so far as he remained within the field, Chris struggled to realize his own vision of what

'activation' was going to mean (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102). Here, there is a lack of fit, and a struggle, between Chris' habitus – his embodied inclinations, dispositions, and expectations – and the field of activation. This experience, which Bourdieu calls hysteresis (2000, p. 160), has been identified among employees of changing organizations, particularly as they become dominated by new managerial and performance regimes (Artaraz, 2006; McDonough & Polzer, 2012). Here I suggest that this experience can also result from confounded expectations – when the reality of a situation and its requirements is found to be at odds with the expectations and dispositions brought to it. Advisors tended to remain engaged and invested in activation work to the extent that this conflict and struggle seemed worthwhile, or even possible. However, as the next section will explore, there were certain conditions under which it became very difficult for advisors to maintain or even believe in the possibility of such a position.

Targets and performance management encouraged forms of working and interacting with clients for which many advisors were unprepared. In recent literature these features of street-level work tend to be addressed in terms of their 'calculative' dimensions and effects (Brodkin, 2011a, 2013c; Fletcher, 2011), such as their encouragement of the de-personalised approach to caseload management and client processing outlined above. What I would also like to highlight, however, are the implications of targets for how advisors felt about their role and working environment. Above I quoted Alexandra, who spoke of the target regime permeating through the working environment and its ethos. Similarly, other advisors spoke of the target regime as a constant presence that threatened and loomed over them, and the resulting stress and anxiety were widely remarked upon in interviews:

It was stressful because of the targets. So you always had in the back of your mind, you know you could be changing someone's life but unless they started a job and you had the piece of paper to prove it, and the box was ticked on that piece of paper to prove it, it didn't mean

anything. So you always had that hanging over your head. (Harry, advisor, 2007-2010; other roles 2010-2015)

The dilemma, I suppose, is, you know, that you're not going to meet your target, and you know what impact that's going to have on you personally, because it was always that your job was on the line. So, as a personal dilemma, that's the stress, and that's the impact. (Isabelle, advisor, 2008-2012)

It was, yeah, a bit sickening actually, in a way, to just constantly have this pressure of, you know, looking at the board and your numbers are down, your numbers are low, and just feeling like I'm not going to make it. (Emily, advisor, 2008-2009)

In these different descriptions of the targeted working environment there is a similar emphasis on targets as both pressure and threat. Forms of performance measurement and monitoring saturated the everyday working lives of street-level advisors, many of whom spoke about stress, anxiety, and feeling sick. In large part, such stress and anxiety resulted from the direct threat to advisors' own job security should they fail to perform. However, as the following section will explore, it could also result from a felt sense that they were under pressure to act against their own dispositions and judgments – against their *habitus* – in ways which they sometimes felt to be unethical and damaging to claimants.

Street-level work often involves a proliferation of different organizational and administrative demands (Lipsky, 2010), and activation work is no different. However, it is clearly not the case that street-level advisors negotiate between these different demands under conditions 'freer from supervisor scrutiny than most organizational jobs' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 50). Rather, advisors were subject to intense and quite prolific forms of managerial monitoring. This is highlighted elsewhere in the literature (Brodin, 2011; Fletcher, 2011; Soss et al, 2013), and was in Chapter Three discussed in terms of changes to operational governance, marketisation, and new public management in welfare services. During fieldwork interviews a turn in the conversation toward the various administrative measures and metrics to which advisors were subject was liable to produce a sharp intake of

breath, or a roll of the eyes. This was a situation commonly bemoaned among my colleagues and in interviews – both in terms of the burdensome and time-consuming requirement to record innumerable small actions and interactions in very specific ways, but also in terms of the felt sense of constantly being watched and monitored.

There are two things it is worth highlighting here. Firstly, the extent to which management and the surveillance of street-level advisors is itself one of the major pressures with which they must cope – advisors must actively participate in their own management and surveillance through the intricate recording of work activity. Interestingly, as will become clear in Chapter Seven, in this respect the situation of advisors mirrors that of the claimants who they, in turn, monitor and survey. Secondly, the requirements of monitoring were often felt by advisors to take precedence over the ostensible aims of their work, and their particular investments in it – namely, providing ‘help’ and support to individuals. In the remainder of this section I further draw out some of the consequences of this situation. In particular I draw attention to the way that several advisors held reservations about targets – and found them disillusioning – not only because they prevented them from doing certain things (e.g. in terms of personalized interactions), but also because of the things they felt compelled by them to do – namely, to put undue pressure on their clients. This sort of dilemma, or conflict, in its most acute forms, was not simply the result of performance management, but of its combination with work-first conditionality. After exploring this combination in more depth, the chapter will turn to address the question of street-level coping. The argument I will develop is that the ability to successfully cope with activation work depended to a large extent on advisors’ habitus, and in particular whether they were able, in terms of their dispositions and proclivities, to seriously invest in activation as a game structured around performance measures and work-first activation – whether, in other words, they were able to take performance

measurement and its *illusio* seriously (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98).

Conditionality and work-first activation

Targets became especially problematic for some advisors in the context of conditionality and a work-first approach to activation. Advisors from different programmes judged that some of the clients referred to them should not be required to look for or prepare for work given their health conditions or other circumstances. Whilst not expressing disagreement with conditionality in principle (most advisors expressed support for conditionality in principle), in practice they found that it created situations they found uncomfortable and disillusioning. Again, this was a widespread experience among advisor-participants, and here I quote from several interviews to give a sense, both of the breadth of this feeling, but also to introduce the significance of the work-first approach for advisors' discomforts and disillusionments:

I thought that I would try and get jobs for the people that were able to potentially get one. But there was a lot of the time that it was disillusioning because you were forced to make plans for people that I genuinely didn't think it was going to work for. 'No' wasn't really allowed as a concept there either. So everybody had the potential to work. And I'm sure that's what management were trained as, management were trained to say that. (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

I think some of the people that are being referred here definitely shouldn't be here because... we've got two years to work with clients, and to move them into work or they're here for two years. Some of the people that come, that are on health related benefits, they're not going to move on, towards work, in that time, and they shouldn't be here, they should be left to deal with their illnesses and their health issues. (Judy, advisor, 2010-2015)

You had your job security on one side, and also your ego as well, I mean to do well, and all that kind of stuff ... But equally you're with, there's people who have got loads of, who just aren't job ready, or willing to work, or have issues and family, you know, loads of issues, and you just ... And sometimes, if I'm really honest, I probably pushed

it too far. Kind of pushed and pushed and pushed ... And I felt guilty after. But that's because you have the target in the back of your head. So you have to put pressure on someone to work when they weren't actually really ready. (Simone, advisor, 2008-2010)

Being an employment advisor suited me in terms of the, I had a natural desire to both help the people who came to see me and my team mates ... [but] ultimately the commercial side of it and the targets did not suit me, and that's why I became an engagement advisor²⁵. I didn't want to push people to work if I didn't feel they were ready. I was risk averse, and I wasn't a hungry enough salesy type person to go and do that. (Robert, advisor, 2008-2010)

Here, several advisors describe an uncomfortable situation created by the combination of targets and performance-driven working practices, conditionality, and a work-first approach to activation. In each of these interview quotations advisors describe a complex nexus of forces, resulting in a double coercion: advisors felt pushed and coerced, by the managerial regime of activation, into pushing and coercing their clients. The resulting discomfort can be understood in terms of a mis-match between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160), and it is important that this feeling of compulsion was closely linked to the sense of having to act against their own judgments, inclinations, and dispositions. In particular, one important element of this dilemma was the advisor's own judgment that the condition of mandatory participation was, *for specific individuals under specific circumstances*, inappropriate. Added to this was a narrow focus on paid work (a 'work-first' approach). Jess in particular describes having to make plans for people regardless of whether she thought them realistic or appropriate. Similarly, Judy perceived that there were people on her caseload for whom a work-focused service was ill-conceived. Simone indicates that the problems clients faced, and which rendered the work-first ethos misguided, were not limited to health, but to a whole host of situations and problems. Advisors coped with this nexus of

²⁵ This was a role created by Robert's employer in 2008. Previously, there had been a single client facing role – that of advisor. However, at the time it was felt that there was too much diversity amongst referrals to the programme, and the 'engagement advisor' role was created to screen clients before they were allocated to employment advisors. This role did not hold a monthly target in terms of job outcomes.

pressures in different ways. Jess describes trying to focus her attention only on those clients she thought realistically could get work, but was frustrated in this approach by an ethos which held that 'everyone could work' regardless of their circumstances. Simone, rather differently, describes going along with the ethos of work-first activation, sometimes 'pushing things too far', feeling guilty as a result. Robert, under the same set of pressures, took an opportunity to change roles within the organization, removing himself from the need to meet targets and situations where he would have to directly act contrary to his own dispositions and 'push people to work'.

The understanding of this street-level activation dilemma as the product of both an organizational set of goals and pressures, and the dispositions and investments of advisors, offers a new perspective on a widely-perceived problem in street-level activation services, namely 'creaming and parking' (Carter & Whitworth, 2015). This is usually understood according to the principles of rational choice; advisors 'cream' the most job-ready clients in order to meet their targets, and neglect or 'park' those with greater needs and difficulties. Looked at from the perspective of these advisors, however, a different set of issues and 'calculations' emerge, ones which are not so easily reducible to a single, universally applicable 'street-level calculus of choice' (Brodkin, 2013; see also, Chapter Three), but which can only be understood by taking the dispositions and investments of advisors into account. This comes across most clearly in the above quotation from Jess, where she describes adopting 'creaming and parking' as a strategy, not to meet her targets, but to act in a way congruent with her dispositions and what she perceived as realistic, reflecting either the needs, wishes, or capabilities of her clients. Here creaming and parking is both a strategy to make life easier, in the sense of working in a way congruent with her dispositions and judgments, but also a strategy to maintain her investment in the field by focusing on individual clients, their needs and capabilities. The alternative, as Robert and Simone indicate, was to push people in ways which might be harmful. Here, 'creaming' is also the exercise of judgment with respect to what the service can realistically achieve for someone;

‘parking’ might, in this context, be understood as a form of protection, a way of sheltering clients from the harsher aspects of work-first activation, and of surreptitiously easing the conditional requirements that (some) clients faced.

‘Creaming and parking’ describes a form of caseload management, and caseload management practices among advisors were complex, and not easily reducible to a single model of incentives and disincentives; such practices inevitably implicate advisors’ dispositions – what they felt comfortable or uncomfortable doing – including their perceptions and judgments. Whilst all advisors were subject to the same pressures vis-à-vis targets and performance management, but also with respect to the broad mix of individuals on their caseloads, both of these aspects of the street-level situation could be viewed and approached differently, depending on a particular advisor’s dispositions and investments in their role. The argument here is not that ‘creaming’ and ‘parking’ was motivated in every case by the same dispositions and concerns guiding Jess or these other advisors; undoubtedly some advisors did adopt an instrumental approach to their caseload, looking at it through the lens of their performance objectives. Rather, what I want to suggest is that street-level practices such as ‘creaming and parking’ do not always have a uniform meaning; indeed, it is possible that such practices can be *overdetermined*, in the sense of being the solution to more than one sort of problem, dilemma, or conflict. Here the problem, from these advisors’ points of view, is the lack of fit between the client (their position and situation) and the service. As this chapter will explore further below, advisors often wanted to be helpful and assist their clients, but in so far as their envisaged actions were not focused on the short-term goal of work, they were discouraged or unable carry them out. The tendency to construct creaming and parking as a problem of preferable or inequitable treatment tends to assume that the ‘resources’ of a service, and the attentions of advisors, are benign: for these advisors, this was not always the case²⁶. ‘Creaming

²⁶ On the other hand, whilst many advisors talked in terms of sheltering some claimants from an intervention they thought limited and inappropriate, on other occasions advisors identified clients who they thought should be doing more, and who weren’t ‘engaging’ or ‘active’ enough.

and parking' was a solution to more than one problem; it helped advisors manage their caseload in order to help meet their performance objectives; but it was also a form of discretionary practice which allowed them to temper what they perceived as the potentially harmful features of the activation programme, thus allowing them to maintain the myth of altruism and ideology of benign intervention (Lipsky, 2010), and their investment in the role.

This argument highlights the importance of advisors' judgments of clients and situations (the two cannot be separated); judgment, from the perspective adopted here, is seen as an expression of habitus. It relates to how the advisor sees the world, but also to their practical dispositions. Advisors' judgments about claimants often took complex forms in which normative values and practical considerations were intertwined in a way suggestive of the embodied, positional, and dispositional nature of judgment (Ignatow, 2009; Lawler, 2004). There were two groups of clients in particular for whom advisors felt the conditional requirements of mandatory participation to be inappropriate: older claimants with a long work history who advisors judged as having 'made their contribution', and those who, despite having been assessed as ready to seek or prepare for work, had health conditions that advisors thought should exempt them from conditionality. Both were groups advisors frequently judged as 'deserving' of less conditional forms of entitlement:

There's people that have worked all their life. Worked, they've contributed their whole life. They're six months, eighteen months away from retiring, and they're mandated to come here, they've never worked a computer, they've never, you know, and I think, that's a bloody sin. (Judy, advisor, 2010-2015)

You were always encouraged to see what somebody could do. Now I completely understand that that is a good way of approaching a

To understand the treatment of these clients as 'preferable', in terms of the focus, time, and resources devoted to them, likewise assumes the benign nature of the intervention; however, if it is possible to understand 'parking' as 'protection', then preferable treatment, or 'creaming' might also in some cases be a punishment. This is a theme taken up in Chapter Eight.

problem, but realistically I felt that with a certain percentage of people, and a small percent, but especially the ones with entrenched physical and mental illness, which were the ones that we were specifically getting, the idea that asking them to go back to paid work was unrealistic. And I couldn't see them sticking it out. Having met with them you could see that their motivation was at an all time low, and seeing me, which was also associated with a sanction in their benefits, wasn't really doing much for their motivation. (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

Advisors often spoke in very clear terms about the problems of conditionality and work-first activation as applied to older claimants and claimants with health problems. Judy felt that the expectations of the activation programme were ill-suited to older clients with a long history of work. Activation programmes largely focus on encouraging clients to make large numbers of applications to a range of different jobs. These are often 'entry-level', low-paid, service sector jobs. Clients are encouraged to have a range of 'job goals', and to diversify these with a view to entering work as soon as possible. One frequently repeated mantra of activation is that any job is better than no job, and that once in work it will be easier to find other, more preferable work. Whilst with younger clients advisors tended to view this as a plausible working ethos, with older clients the potential humiliations of such an approach were more clearly perceived. With respect to clients with long term physical and mental health difficulties, advisors also perceived potential risks and dangers in pressurizing them to return to work – as Jess suggests above, there was the risk that they would not be able to sustain the job. Moving in and out of work like this could have serious consequences for people's income and circumstances. Ending a claim for benefits has consequences for other entitlements, most importantly housing benefit and tax credits, both of which involved complicated and bureaucratic processes which were often liable to go wrong.

There were also situations that advisors found more difficult to describe; earlier this chapter quoted Simone describing clients 'who have got loads of, who just aren't job ready, or willing to work, or have issues and family, you know, loads of

issues'. There was sometimes a reticence in addressing or describing the complexities of clients' situations in so far as this might lead advisors to give the impression that someone was unemployable. As Jess has already indicated, the ethos of work-first activation was that everyone referred to the programme had both the capacity to work and the moral obligation to pursue it. Whilst advisors often brought their own qualifications to this ethos – in terms of health, or age – these qualifications can also be seen as ways of sustaining their investment in the ethos; they were ways of making it acceptable by making it accord more with their own judgments of what was reasonable or realistic. However, among advisors who had made a decisive break with the role, there was less reticence about describing someone as unemployable:

Sometimes you could see when somebody walks through the door... I mean the idea was, the idea was that you would think that no one is unemployable, but when someone walks through the door and they're homeless, they have a drug problem - I had a guy living on Harley St, drug problem, really nice guy, but he was never going to find work, and having to inform on him to say that he...and I use the term inform and I know that seems really, really, like negative but in essence ... in essence you were having to let people know that they weren't turning up for their appointments. (Chris, advisor, 2007-2010)

The confrontation of complex situations and problems was potentially the most disillusioning aspect of the role, especially for advisors who did not see the formal outcomes as adequate measures of their work, or as reflecting the ends which they entered the role to fulfill. Complex situations, of the sort described here by Chris, were ones in which the limitations placed on their ability to 'help' became most apparent; these were the situations where a short-term focus on work seemed most inappropriate and where advisors' own judgments – about 'deservingness', and about what could or should be expected of someone – came up against both the demands of the organization but also the rationale for activation, and the ideologies underpinning it. The perception of some individuals as 'unemployable' was an explicit contradiction of the activation *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977). Whatever someone's situation or circumstances, and however they would be judged by

potential employers, the ethos of the organization held that someone could always be moved 'closer to work'. Ostensibly advisors were there to provide wide-ranging support, but in reality they had neither the time, resources, expertise, nor encouragement (from management) to do so. In these situations advisors were confronted with the possibility that their involvement in the field was not only ineffectual ('a waste of time') but actively threatening and potentially harmful. One of my former colleagues, Jess, later went on to train as a health practitioner. During our interview she looked back on her time as an advisor through the lens of her more recent training, and the experiences it had given her:

And having gone on to do professional training in healthcare, I really feel that now, that for anybody going along to that environment [welfare-to-work] with their mental illness or...who's been through the system for a long time, it was actually quite a threatening environment for them, really. And it wasn't particularly supportive, and you didn't have management that were [supportive], because the more that you go along that path and knowing what it's like to work with people with difficulties like that, you realise that there is no one size fits all blanket, and no work is not therapeutic for all people. (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

Here, Jess articulates a vision and understanding of the welfare-to-work field that directly contradicts her original investment in it. Rather than support and assistance, Jess suggests that for those with the most difficulties, the service presented *a threat*. For Jess this threat arises from the combination of an inappropriate goal (paid work), rigidly and uniformly applied ('a blanket approach').

This section has explored some the conflicts, tensions, and contradictions of street-level work as it was experienced by advisors. It has argued that these conflicts involve the aims and objectives of the organization, the complexity of real life problems, but also the investments and dispositions of advisors themselves. These conflicts weren't the same, or experienced in quite the same way for everyone. As the next section will explore, for advisors who invested in and conceptualized the field as organized around the imperatives of business, the focus on targets and

performance measures was much less problematic. However, some advisors did not always perceive these measures to have legitimacy, viewing them as poor reflections of what they had understood their work to be about. Focusing largely on these advisors, this section has argued that targets and conditional work-first activation were often experienced by advisors in terms of a conflict between management and its demands, and their own dispositions and judgments. Targets and conditional activation created conflicts to the extent that they created situations in which advisors felt that they were being more harmful than helpful.

Compromise Formations

Whilst all advisors spoke about the target-driven and work-first nature of their role, some advisors were more inclined than others to accept this as a legitimate or necessary feature of their work. Where some regarded it as obvious and inescapable, for others it was a surprise, and something they saw as antithetical to the role as they had imagined it. The quotations below from Jess and Katie illustrate these different and opposing attitudes toward targets:

Our job was to give [clients] support, is what I was led to believe, to encourage them back into work. I guess the thing that was not sold within the interview, or at all within the job description, was that it was a purely target-driven organization where a theoretical and idealistic concept is then morphed into something that is target driven, and you'll lose your job potentially if you do not meet the target. (Jess, advisor, 2008-2009)

It's part of the job and you're never under any illusion that it's [not] a targeted environment. I don't think there's any job you can go to where there's not any targets. I don't think any business would work that way. I know it is a person-centered thing but there needs, you're there, it's a contract. You're there to deliver. (Katie, advisor, 2010-2015)

These two quotes illustrate some differences between advisors' orientations toward targets, both in terms of their expectations about the role, and in terms of whether they accepted targets as having a legitimate place in the field. They also point to a difference in orientation which had important consequences for whether

an advisor felt able to adapt, cope, and compromise with their role and its requirements. Jess distinguished between what she was 'led to believe' (as she put it) being an advisor would be about, and what it turned out to be in practice. She had imagined it would be about providing support, but instead it was 'really' about performance outcomes. In this account, the description of the role as supportive or encouraging was seen as a falsehood concealing its true aims and purpose; Jess understood the focus on outcomes to be antithetical to a focus on support. Jess's suggestion of deception was not unique among advisors. Her remarks echo those of another advisor, Chris, quoted earlier in this chapter, describing how he had similarly been 'taken in' by the job description. To be 'taken in' is one of the ways Bourdieu describes a habitus coming to invest in a field, a game, and its *illusio* (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 153; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Both Jess and Chris, in speaking of the way they were taken in, led to believe things, speak from a position of no longer believing, of no longer being taken in: this is a reflexive position, from which they are describing their disillusionment with the field and its *illusio*. For Jess, as for other advisors, the disillusionment she experienced had a great deal to do with targets and performance measures, and the style of working they encouraged.

For Katie, on the other hand, still an advisor at the time of the interview, advisors such as Jess and Chris were simply mistaken – 'under an illusion' – about the nature of the role when they applied and took the job. For Katie, targets are integral to the game and her investment in it. While Katie acknowledged a tension between the focus on outcomes and providing support (what she called 'the person-centered thing') this was not perceived to be an outright contradiction in the way it was for Jess. Katie had, or had made, a rather different sort of investment in street-level activation, which is to say that her expectations about it were different. Whereas Jess perceived the conflict between support and targets to be fundamentally contradictory, Katie was able to work with the idea that 'the person-centered thing' was, ultimately, subordinate to the imperative to operate as

a successful business. This difference is telling, because elsewhere Jess spoke about imagining the role in more therapeutic terms; it was precisely the subordination of support to market-oriented demands which left her feeling disillusioned, and which she ultimately rejected. She had not, at the outset, recognized the marketised imperatives operating in the field. Katie, however, spoke of being unable to imagine the role *without targets*; moreover, what goes unsaid (or unimagined) in her account is the possibility that the field might be organized according to other, non-market principles. She had invested in the field as being a business-like, marketised field from the outset. This is a point and argument to which this section will later return: ultimately advisors' ability to cope with the role and its conflicts required something like Katie's form of investment in it, with the clear understanding that 'support', however conceived, is fundamentally subordinate to performance targets. This is to say, in order to cope advisors had to make accommodations with the specifically *marketised* logic of the field where certain welfare needs became subordinate to the imperatives of profitability.

In speaking of the way that socialized desire becomes invested in a field and its *illusio*, but also disciplined by it, Bourdieu uses a psychoanalytic idiom: when a habitus makes a libidinal investment in a field and its *illusio*, the result is not an equilibrium – a perfect adaptation or static fit – but a dynamic compromise formation (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 165). For advisors who remained invested in the field, a compromise had to be reached between their initial desire – most often in terms of the wish to provide 'help' – and the imperatives of the field as they were encountered in the form of targets, organizational objectives, and conditionality. It has already been mentioned how some advisors resolved the conflict between their habitus, its dispositions, and the field by simply leaving. Whilst this option might also have been attractive to other advisors, it wasn't always possible. When I asked one advisor, Judy, how she would approach her work differently if there were no targets, and her manner of working was entirely up to her, she said simply, 'If it were up to me I wouldn't be working on this programme!' The need to keep their job meant advisors had to find ways of adapting to or compromising

with the field, even when they might wish to leave. Such compromises entailed changes to habitus; these changes were experienced both as impositions from without, and as processes into which advisors entered as agents:

Now, four five years ago I would never have dreamt I would even, I mean, thinking about sanctioning somebody. So your mindset you've got to change because, you've got to move these people on. If I don't move people on or get them closer or get them into work, I'll not have my job, because I've got targets to meet. That's a really, really harsh thing to deal with because you've got to change as a, you've got to toughen up as a person. Or maybe this isn't the right type of working environment to be in. (Judy, advisor, 2010-2015)

Judy returned throughout the interview to her discomfort at having to become a harder, tougher sort of person. Changing her working habits to suit the field went to the core of who she was. Similarly, Nicola told me that

I think the change that's happened to me is, now I make, I'm not so precious about my, kind of, well *I am* precious about my core values but *I have to not be*, I have to not be, I have to think, no, this is a business and we have to run this business, so this is what we need to do and, yes we're not necessarily giving what I or any of the advisors would want to be giving, but that's what we're being paid for. (Nicola, advisor and other roles, 2002-2008)

Nicola appeals to the imperatives of 'business' (as did Katie earlier in the chapter) in order to explain or justify the changes to her habitus following from her involvement in the field. It is interesting that for both Nicola and Katie the invocation of 'business', and by implication the market imperatives of profit and profitability, serves as a form of unquestionable authority; this would seem to be a particular form of street-level *illusio*. Notably, both Nicola and Katie expressed fewer reservations, doubts, and disillusionments. They spoke of being happy in their involvement with the field, and of enjoying the advisor role. However, as for Judy, there is some ambiguity as to whether the changes Nicola has experienced are ones that have been imposed from without, or driven from within. Viewed from the perspective of 'business' Nicola's core values seem (to her) 'precious' and

as something which she must resist or fight against; nevertheless, she still describes them as her core values, and remains precious about them. There is the suggestion of ambivalence in this ambiguity; of a conflict left unresolved. In a slightly different way, another former colleague, Simone, described her experience of street-level activation work in terms of having two personalities, or being two different people at once:

It's like a split personality there actually... I actually often felt like that when I was there. I was like, who am I? Am I a sales person? Or am I a caring, more support workery, interested in people with mental health person? Am I a people person? And we got given the role, yeah, very much this is more sales. (Simone, advisor, 2008-2010)

Whereas Judy and Nicola speak of changing as a person, Simone felt like two different people. However, all three describe their experience of street-level activation in terms of a conflict within themselves (or between parts of themselves). What I would like to suggest here is that these kinds of experiences can be understood in terms of the conflict between a habitus, its dispositions, and the imperatives of the field. There were subtle differences in the way this conflict was experienced by advisors, differences attributable to their particular habitus and the form of its dispositions. However, what I also want to suggest is that to some extent these conflicts are also the internalization of conflicts pertaining to the field itself; as such, there are similarities in the forms of conflict that advisors describe, and in the ways they might be resolved. Judy felt the need to become a tougher, harsher sort of person, more willing to accept the need to sanction someone in the pursuit of 'moving people on'; Nicola spoke of having to compromise – or not be precious about – her core values in order to maintain the proper business-like orientation to the contract ('what we're being paid for'); Simone described a conflict between being 'a people person' or a 'sales person'. In each case the conflict or dilemma related to dispositions as they were when they entered the field, and the dispositions required to remain in it. For both Simone and Nicola this is expressed in terms of accepting and adapting to market-

imperatives (sales, business). For Judy it was about developing a more authoritarian disposition specifically in order to meet performance targets and contractual requirements. Emily, who as I have already described made a quick exit from the field, similarly described her own experience of this conflict in terms of the opposition between people and money:

Emily: I guess that is the reason why I left, because I thought actually, I don't like the person that I'm becoming.

Jim: Who were you becoming?

Emily: I was becoming...I was probably one of those evil corporate people who didn't care about the person, it was all about the end goal, which was all about meeting the target and about bringing in the money. (Emily, advisor, 2008-2009)

Chapter Four introduced the notion of compromise formation in the sense of field and habitus taking advantage of one another, of being intertwined (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160,165). It is therefore not surprising that advisors should experience their involvement with street-level activation as something that changes them (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 161). These changes were experienced in different ways, and reacted to quite differently; what Nicola and Judy describe in terms of a submission to the imperatives of an unquestionable authority (business, the contract), Simone and Emily speak about with more reflexive agency, in terms of a choice about who they were or might become. Nonetheless, whether negotiated through submission or resistance, there remains the sense that the field requires something very specific from them, which goes against their initial dispositions and inclinations. An interesting feature of the way in which some advisors described this experience was the reference to 'types'. For Judy it was the 'tough' advisor or the 'softly-softly' advisor; for Simone the 'people person' or the 'sales person'; for Emily the fear was that she would become a kind of 'evil corporate person'. In these accounts, these different types name a space of possible positions (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 116) (albeit some more difficult to occupy than others, in the

circumstances); they are felt to be different positions open to the same habitus, or even different descriptions of how the same habitus acts or has acted. Such 'types' also played a prominent role in other interviews, but rather than describing a sense of different positions that the same 'self' or habitus might occupy, were instead used to describe a perception of objective 'types' of advisor 'out there' in the world. Here Alexandra describes the different types among the advisors she worked with:

The team I worked with? You had your counsellors who never hit their target, but they would spend an hour and a half talking to someone about their love of photography or something. The poor quality of notes, poor quality of anything, they weren't doing anything, they were just having a chat, making sure they felt okay, so softer, a little bit. You had your hard-nosed bitches, essentially, who didn't care, it was all about the numbers, it was all about hitting the target. They probably would be really good in a sales role or recruitment where it was just a very cold environment. And then you had your grafters, I suppose, which I'd kind of put myself in that category. (Alexandra, advisor and other roles, 2008- 2015)

Again we find the appearance of a soft kind of advisor, a people person, as well as a hard, target-focused advisor. Interestingly, the soft kind of advisor is described as being ineffectual and unsuited to the field. Here what Judy described from within, in terms of a mutable identity, and needing to toughen up to be suited to the role, is described from without as a more or less static position. Unlike other advisors, Alexandra adds the third mediating category of 'grafter', or hard worker, neither too soft nor too uncaring. Despite this third in-between category however, the available space of positions appears very similar, and remains so even when advisors look on it from different perspectives and with different judgments. Emily feared being too target driven, and disparaged advisors who were overly focused on outcomes; her sympathies lay with the sorts of advisor that Alexandra disparages as too soft and ineffectual. On the other hand, Jess described one particularly hard-working 'high performing advisor', Leanne, in highly pejorative terms:

Leanne, who was the one that I saw that was really into it. And actually she was the only one that I saw that was really good at it. And she was a sociopath. She was an out and out sociopath. Seriously. She showed no emotion. She saw people as numbers. (Jess, Pathways to Work, 2008 - 2009)

In her ethnography of a similar work-first activation programme, Watkins Hayes (Watkins-Hayes, 2009) describes three types of advisor: counselors, administrators, and survivalists. Like Alexandra, Watkins-Hayes sees these figures as particular types, or rather, as identities, and in the conceptual language adopted by this thesis, as types with particular dispositions and orientations to their role. Watkins-Hayes also describes the way that these identities are mutable; both administrators and counselors might become survivalists: exhausted by the difficulties of performing their preferred role, they opt to merely get by and keep their jobs. However, where Watkins-Hayes largely focuses on these types as expressions of a more or less stable street-level identity, in this research I would like to draw attention to the experience of mutability, and to the pressures that people felt to change who they were and how they acted. From the perspective adopted by this research, these 'types' referred to possible spaces within the field, each with their attendant dilemmas and difficulties. I would also suggest that such positions are also, to some extent, the projections of advisors. The disparaging of 'soft' advisors can be seen as the active disavowal of certain more empathic modes of interaction. Similarly, Emily's identification of a cartoonish 'evil corporate type person' is as much the projection of her own disavowed involvement in the role onto others, or onto another imagined potential self, as it is the identification of an actually existing type. Whilst advisors often spoke in terms of 'types' in my experiences advisors often adopted – and had to adopt, as part of their role – a range of different positions and interactional styles with claimants. The identification of 'types' into which they could project the more uncomfortable aspects of their practice was one form of coping with the role. These 'types' did, however, bear some relation to the space of possible positions, each with its own particular difficulties.

The difficulties attendant to 'softer' more 'people-focused' positions was failure and ineffectuality with respect to targets and performance measures; the difficulties with respect to 'harder' more target-focused positions was compromised integrity – quite literally, in the sense of a fragmentation or division within the self. This sense of fragmentation was most acute for advisors investing in and conceiving of the role in 'softer' more 'people-focused' terms; for those already invested in the field as a business, or who accepted (and submitted to) the authority of the contract, this kind of dilemma was often much less personal. Here, Isabelle describes some of the dilemmas which, for other advisors, were registered as intensely felt personal conflicts. In this section of the interview we had been talking about what Jess earlier described as the difficulty of 'making plans for people who it just wasn't going to work for'. For Isabelle this was also a perceived problem, but her orientation to the role as the fulfillment of a business contract rendered it much less pressing:

I think you have other welfare concerns about an individual, and potentially, those things need to be addressed, and those, quite often, were beyond your remit as an advisor to address. So, yeah, you kind of thought to yourself, well, I'm being told I have to get all these people into work, but actually, all these people need other interventions before they're ready for that. So I suppose in that sense there is a dilemma. But I was there to do that job, which was to get people into work. (Isabelle, advisor, 2008-2012)

Ultimately, for Isabelle, she was there to do a job, just as Katie and Nicola were there to fulfill a contract. This recognition of the authority of the contract was accompanied by a concomitant withdrawal of recognition from individual claimants, in the sense expressed here by Isabelle – from this position the difficulties of particular claimants fell *beyond the remit* of the advisor, who need look no further than their immediate task of getting people into work. For some advisors this was the orientation with which they entered the field, having a sense of the game and its *illusio* as a kind of business game. For other advisors, however, such an orientation and sense of the game was antithetical to their prior

dispositions and investments, and their initial sense of how the game might be. However, such advisors were, in Katie's words, 'under an illusion' in the sense of mistaken about the street-level field and its *illusio*. For advisors with these kinds of investments adaptation and compromise with the field entailed orienting themselves more toward targets, and accepting or submitting to the field as dominated by market imperatives. For some advisors this was too difficult, and consequently they left the field. Others continued to struggle with this situation, changing in the process. Attention to these forms of conflict within the field, and within advisors, suggests that whilst street-level activation tended to attract some people who considered themselves to be 'people-oriented', the kinds of dispositions accompanying this were often a poor-fit with the requirements of the role, which demanded more instrumental and authoritarian forms of relating to clients, as well as a less expansive sense of what 'support' and 'help' were going to mean.

“No” wasn't really allowed as a concept'

One interesting aspect of street-level activation services is that they are sites of prohibition; these were described by advisors as prohibitions of speech, and particularly kinds of spoken reasoning or explanation. Certain forms of thought and perception were tacitly understood to be out-of-bounds and, when voiced, pathologised. These prohibitions apply to the way that advisors understood the both their own situation and those of their clients. These prohibitions were not explicit, but rather tacitly understood, becoming visible when transgressed. Here, Alexandra explains to me the sorts of things that you weren't allowed to say as an advisor:

If we were underperforming we weren't allowed to say, it's because there are no jobs out there. And this is because, and I understand why, it's because that's an easy excuse to make, but it's also a fact. Less jobs, less numbers of people in work, more competition for jobs, people with reasons why they can't work such as health benefits and CV gaps, less likely to get jobs because they're in a more competitive pool, it's a

complete no brainer. But it wasn't accepted as an excuse at [Prime] because it didn't help them meet their targets so. (Alexandra, advisor and other roles, 2008- 2015)

Similarly, here is Simone:

There was no let-up, there was no, you could never give a reason as to why you hadn't met your target. It was just that you weren't doing the right things; you clearly weren't displaying the right behaviours, as far as they were concerned. (Simone, advisor, 2008-2010)

These articulations of prohibition might be understood as the reflexive descriptions of the symbolic violence operative in the activation field, what Bourdieu calls the 'gentle violence' of management (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 205) the power and force of which is secured by the semi-concealed threat of redundancy. Advisors, as this chapter has shown, are required to adjust their habitus and orientate towards the attainment of outcomes at the expense of exercising their own dispositions and judgment with regard to claimants and their circumstances. This process requires advisors to engage in processes of adaptation and compromise, often experienced in deeply personal terms as having to become a different kind of person, one that recognizes and accepts the authority of the financial imperatives of the activation contract.

Bourdieu defines symbolic violence, of which 'the gentle violence of management' is but one example, as 'the *violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). Advisors were subject to a form of symbolic violence that had the power to redefine the nature of their investment in the field, but also their understanding of the kind of person they were, or wanted to be. Symbolic power, the violence it wields, and the domination it exercises, gains its efficacy through the consent of those over whom it is exercised. This is possible because symbolic power is, in part, the power to define how people see the world, and what they recognize as legitimate. In recognizing the organizational imperatives as legitimate – targets, conditionality – advisors thus consented to their own domination by those imperatives, and the reshaping

of their habitus and dispositions in line with them. However, as this chapter has argued, not all those admitted to the field remained invested in it; most of the interview participants were advisors who had become disillusioned to some degree. It is as a result of the lack of fit between field and habitus, and the ensuing crisis, that advisors were able to articulate some otherwise unspoken premises of activation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 131; Mouzelis, 2007). In articulating these prohibitions, these advisors demonstrate the extent to which, for them, their legitimacy – and the view of the world they express – has been called into question. For these advisors this is no longer a ‘gentle’ form of symbolic violence, but something altogether less subtle.

Targets and forms of performance management dominated the field of activation, and this domination was registered in the experiences of advisors, and is evident in different ways in which they talked about their work. One interesting effect of performance management and targets, noted by several advisors, was that it expressly prohibited certain forms of talk, certain forms of explanation, and by extension certain forms of thought and perception. These prohibitions applied to advisors’ understanding of their clients’ situations, but also their own. The regime of performance management is a particular regime of power that can be understood in terms of symbolic violence; as such, it is effective to the extent that it is accepted and recognized as legitimate. Although dominated by targets, this aspect of the street-level activation field was also a point of struggle and contestation through which some advisors came to question the legitimacy of the principles which govern it. However, the power exercised by performance management is effective to the extent that it makes street-level sites of activation inhospitable to those who would question its legitimacy.

Conclusion

To do the job of an employment advisor required at the very least a minimal belief in the value of work – either its practical value to peoples’ welfare in terms of

income, or its moral value, perhaps both. It also required a belief that people are in need of some kind of support that advisors are in a position – or, with some training and organisational input *could* be in a position – to provide. Without these minimum beliefs, it became very difficult to perform the role. In the course of their work many advisors came to question the legitimacy of both performance management and targets as a way of organizing a person-focused service, but also of conditionality, and the requirement that claimants be either seeking working or ‘making steps to move closer’ to work.

The focus of this chapter has largely been on advisors who became disillusioned with welfare activation work. Many started out as street-level advisors under the misapprehension that the welfare-to-work field was fundamentally about – as in organized around, or structured by – the needs and wishes of unemployed claimants. What they found instead was a street-level situation dominated by the imperative to achieve targets. This chapter looked at the ways that advisors made compromises between their own hopeful investments and the demands of their employer, and argued that to participate in the welfare-to-work field is to be subject to the symbolic violence of performance management, and domination by its logic. In the next chapter, the thesis turns to consider how conditionality and work-first activation were experienced by claimants.

Chapter Seven – Welfare traps and protection rackets: suspicion, surveillance, and the propagation of social insecurity

‘Caught in the middle’

If I go up to my advisor, this is the one that's always wanting to sanction me, and if I says to her, I can just leave that and I'm going to leave it, she'd probably say to me, you've got to do it. And then you go to another advisor that'd say you don't have to do it. But then again, you're scared they tell you [that] you don't have to do it, *you have*, and they sanction you. So you're caught, caught in the middle. I don't know if that can happen but...I don't know. (Bridget, JSA claimant)

Bridget, a JSA claimant, describes being caught in a situation of threat and uncertainty. Whilst Bridget is certain about the nature of the threat – being sanctioned – she is uncertain about its potential trigger. Together, threat and uncertainty produce a stressful situation of insecurity, which is also experienced by Bridget as a trap – something in which she finds herself caught. This is her experience of attending Jobcentre Plus, where she routinely meets with various different advisors. Bridget is keen to find work, and voluntarily made the transfer from ESA to JSA, thinking that if she did so she would be given more support finding the right kind of job. Changing benefits, however, hasn't resulted in a change in support so much as a change in expectations: a change in conditionality. Because she is still experiencing the health problems she had when claiming ESA, Bridget has her own conditions and requirements that any potential job would need to meet. The inconsistency she experiences at the Jobcentre – in terms of seeing different people – means that she is not always certain that these conditions and needs are understood or recognised; the risk of being misunderstood and misrecognised is also the risk of being sanctioned.

This chapter addresses the theme of welfare traps, but not in the sense commonly associated with the term, as used to describe a situation of perverse incentives where welfare recipients are 'disincentivised' from pursuing paid work due to the

supposed pecuniary rewards obtained through state support. This notion of 'the welfare trap', along with its related cast of characters – the lifestyle claimant, the malingerer, the shirkers and the scroungers – though subject to continued empirical criticism, is a much repeated trope in the discourse around welfare reform, often used in justification of the policy measures studied here (Wiggan, 2012). Against this notion of the welfare trap, this chapter argues that it is in fact a policy focus on symbolic victories, guided by zombie concepts, to catch out a cast of imaginary monsters (Macdonald et al., 2014), which constitutes a trap. This is a trap generated by the intensification of conditionality, and the various forms of surveillance and monitoring that go along with it. This chapter argues that behavioural conditionality can take the form of a protection racket, wherein suspicion and surveillance, underpinned by a threat of sanctions, push claimants into defensive activity aimed at warding off threats of stigma and sanction. Activation is, in this way, the activation of stigma.

This chapter asks: how do claimants experience activation and conditionality? What are some of the relational dynamics of activation? What do conditionality and activation mean for claimants in practice? How do claimants experience street-level advisors? Because the dynamics of this process traverse both the social and psychological domains, and the argument is a psychosocial one, this chapter begins with an in-depth account of one particular interview in which I trace some of the complexities of one claimant's experience, showing how many important aspects of this experience operate 'beneath the surface' (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). This chapter draws on the psychosocial framework outlined in Chapter Four in order to understand some aspects of welfare-recipients' agency introduced in Chapter Two. The dynamics of the activation protection racket are explored, starting with one particular case – that of Elizabeth – before indicating how each of its constituent dynamics were present, in different ways, for other participants. In addressing the common experiences of suspicion and surveillance, it is shown how these work to activate stigma amongst participants. In its final section the chapter turns to participants' experiences of uncertainty, and highlights a

tendency toward a compliant 'getting by' (Lister, 2004) in these situations, which might be seen as coming at the expense of more assertive claims to rights, entitlements, or expressions of need. It is argued that conditionality and activation, rather than helping claimants negotiate their respective situations and difficulties, can instead present but one more (set of) problem(s) with which they must cope.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a lone parent with two children, and has been claiming JSA and subject to conditionality for nearly three years. Before that she had been claiming Income Support after her partner left the relationship. Both her children are over five years of age, meaning that she is required to claim JSA (rather than Income Support) and be actively seeking and available for work. Her previous jobs were as an administrator and purchaser in the hospitality and gaming sectors, which had sometimes involved long and unsocial hours, and Elizabeth worried about being able to find a job that she was able to make fit with childcare.

On being introduced, Elizabeth was smiling broadly and seemed full of self-confidence. She was dressed smartly as if for a job interview, wearing dark colours of caramel and black. As it turned out she had only that morning been offered a job interview for a part-time administrative post, one with good pay, and hours that suited her. She seemed full of hope and optimism, a mood which, along with laughter, seemed to permeate the first half of our interview, during which she told me how attending the provider had given her new found confidence. She spoke of how she had been coming to a group for lone parents at the office, and that while somewhat sceptical and resistant at first, she had come to appreciate being made to attend, finding a sense of strength and self-esteem in the fact that she felt able to help other, less confident members of the group:

When Fiona says to come in twice a week, she wanted me twice a week, and then had put me on the lone parent employability group, I was like,

three times! Three times a week! No way. And I did have a bit of a huff about it. But then when I started coming I enjoyed it, and I saw the method to their madness in a way, especially with the lone parent employability group. Because I saw what they were trying to do with that was, you know, because of being a lone parent is isolated, and the lack of confidence and that, they were trying to get women who were in similar circumstances to ... ones that had strength and things to bring the others out of their shell. (Elizabeth, JSA claimant)

During the interview Elizabeth spoke of her initial trepidation on claiming and going to the Jobcentre for the first time, and of the confusion, humiliation, and dismissal she had experienced there. On being referred to the Work Programme her expectations were initially coloured by these experiences, and she again had a period of being passed around different advisors, until finally being assigned to Fiona, who Elizabeth described as taking a strict and almost authoritarian approach to their appointments, mandating Elizabeth to attend the provider several times a week. Characteristically, Elizabeth laughed when she told me about her initial 'huff' at this. She said that while advisors needed to have empathy and show sympathy, she felt that for herself, she now preferred Fiona's strict approach to one that was too 'softly softly nice,' although she conceded this could work well for others.

Elizabeth seemed keen to tell me a transformative story about herself, about the way that her appointments with Fiona had helped to boost her confidence and broaden her sense of what was possible. She liked being around other people, and being able to speak regularly to someone who listened and who, she felt, understood her situation. She also spoke about periods of demoralisation and disappointment, and about the frustration of constantly looking for work without sign of reward (neither job offers nor interviews; an experience Southwood (2011) calls 'non-stop inertia', and Wright (2016) 'activity without results'), but recently things seemed to have turned a corner, and with the forthcoming job interview Elizabeth was again hopeful that she would soon be in work. For most of the interview I had no reason to review my first impressions of Elizabeth as someone

relaxed, confident, and at ease with herself. Unlike some of the other claimant-participants recruited for me by the provider, Elizabeth seemed more than happy to talk at length about her experiences.

Whilst she spoke about difficult circumstances and unpleasant experiences – especially of the Jobcentre – Elizabeth's story as she told it was a positive one, and it seemed evident that she'd had a good experience of attending the provider, and felt herself to be in a better place than some months past. Curious about Elizabeth's remarks about preferring a strict approach – wanting to be 'pushed' – and about having overcome an initial resistance to mandatory activity (coming to see a 'method in their madness', as she put it), I asked her more about the mandatory aspects of claiming. In her answers, it was noticeable that Elizabeth often adopted the perspective of advisors, and sought to explain to me what they were trying to do. In describing her initial resistance to mandatory participation, she did so looking back, seeing her feelings of indignation and resistance as belonging to a past self who had not yet understood what her advisors intended. There was a sense that Elizabeth had previously seen her advisors as (potential) adversaries or antagonists, whereas she now saw them as being on her side (and her on theirs). I asked her what was mandatory about her involvement in the Work Programme, and she told me that although there were definite minimum requirements (a fortnightly appointment) sometimes advisors mandated additional activities on top of these. I asked why an advisor might do that, and what it depended on:

I think it depends on. I don't know what it depends on. Obviously they've got the, they try and get everyone onto all the different sessions they hold like when they have their sessions for interview techniques or interview questions where they go over the competency based interview thing, because more and more companies are using the competency based interview style. So, they do try and get everyone on that. Application forms as well, that's another one ... Those, they tend to try and get everyone on those types of workshops, and they set them up throughout, and obviously they've got so many clients they try and, they do, I have been on ones that have been really quite varied, but then

I've been on ones where I'm the only forty year old in there. I feel like I'm sitting in there with my son and all his pals [laughs]...But they do try and vary it up, and then sometimes like with the lone parents they have specific ones that are all, sort of the same age bracket, looking for the same hours, same types of work ... And they do make them mandatory, to get at least the basics covered.

For advisors, group sessions were one way that they could meet their various performance targets using minimal resources (of time), a strategy also identified in a US context by Brodtkin, who also found that such sessions were often ritualistic in nature, possibly offering 'affective benefits of hope and support for some clients', but frequently 'strikingly disconnected' from the realities of the labour market (Brodtkin, 2013c, p. 155). Elizabeth also suggests that such programmes are primarily designed to help advisors manage their caseloads ('they've got so many clients'), and she also mentions the varying quality of workshops, as well as her discomfort in attending some sessions (of being in a group with the young men she said, 'I'm like, oh my God they're going to drive me crazy!'). However, Elizabeth didn't speak as someone who was being made to do something against her will, or that she felt was pointless; rather, she spoke as someone who went along with the mandatory 'requests' of her advisors, and tried to look at things from their point of view. She also found value in the groups where she was with people she perceived as peers, people in similar situations and facing similar circumstances to herself.

Something about Elizabeth's measured attitude, admitting to negative experiences whilst also emphasising the positive, and as well her apparently open, forthcoming, and relaxed demeanour, and the ease with which our conversation seemed to be going, meant that the turn then taken by the interview caught me entirely by surprise; moreover, it seemed to take Elizabeth by surprise too. I had followed up my questions about mandatory participation by asking what happened if she couldn't attend a mandatory appointment or activity. Elizabeth said that while there was an expectation to attend, 'if it's something that's beyond your control like [laughs] you've been hit by a bus [laughs] or your child's sick

and you don't have anyone to look after [them], they're usually quite flexible.' She also recalled a time when she had been unable to make an appointment:

I have once had that, it was a hospital appointment and I'd been given – you know, someone had had a cancellation – and I'd been called for a hospital appointment and I tried – I did try and contact here on the Monday before it, but my advisor wasn't in so I left a message and I'd sent her an email. And on the Tuesday, I only got an email off her after I'd come back from the [hospital] appointment, saying to get an appointment card or letter ... but by the time she sent it at quarter to nine I was already on my way. So I didn't come in that Tuesday, and I got a letter from the DWP for, that I had missed a mandatory appointment, like a sick thing, a sick note to fill in type thing. But I've only had that once. I didn't think it was particularly fair because I was able to show through my Universal Jobmatch that I still went in and applied for jobs that day, even though I didn't come here for the jobs searching session. When I got home that night, I still did go in [logged in to Universal Jobmatch] and do what I would have done here anyway during the day, so. But that was just the once. I've not had any other.

Compared with (and perhaps in some way desensitised by) other participants' stories of being sanctioned, having their benefits stopped for unknown reasons, or suffering the indignities of attending Work Capability Assessments, Elizabeth's story about receiving a letter from the DWP seemed – to me, at the time of hearing it – unpleasant but relatively innocuous, although as Gathwaite (2014) has shown, even the mundane experience of waiting for mail can, in the context of conditionality and activation, be fraught with fear and anxiety. Nevertheless, during the interview I did not immediately grasp how significant receiving that letter had been, or the powerful feelings of insecurity, unfairness, and hurt that it aroused. I did notice the emphasis Elizabeth placed on having done her job search despite her hospital appointment, which I found interesting in terms of her acquiescence to the Work Programme and its demands. Although not knowing the reason for her hospital appointment, it nonetheless seemed more than reasonable to me that the requirement to complete a job search might be waived on a specific day. Elizabeth, rather than questioning the demand, emphasised her compliance regardless of that day's other events, as well as her repeated efforts to inform her

advisor. With my mind still on these thoughts, I asked her how she felt when she received the letter:

I was a bit annoyed, because I felt that, OK, I could understand if it was something that I had done, you know, on a regular basis or things like that, but it was the first time I'd ever, in a year, and...I'd even phoned in and said, or sent an email and phoned in, trying to advise them beforehand that I wouldn't be making it. And I felt that it was, you know, it wasn't just for something willy nilly, it wasn't somebody's birthday party or something, you know...I had got an opportunity, it was short notice, but I'd got an opportunity to move an appointment up, so I thought that get it out the way. So yeah was a bit frustrated because it didn't stop me, I felt it was OK if it was like a hospital stay where you weren't able to get online and do the job search, so I just, I did get a bit frustrated, I was a bit annoyed at that because it didn't prevent me from doing, because that day I had done, it was just a job searching session...

At this point in the interview a purely textual focus on the transcript becomes highly misleading. Whilst Elizabeth's words sought to qualify, lessen, and diminish her feelings ('a bit annoyed', 'a bit frustrated') as she spoke she had in fact become increasingly and visibly upset. With my mind elsewhere, and also conscious of the time (the next interview was scheduled to start shortly), this realisation came quite suddenly. By the time she repeated the words 'a bit frustrated' and 'a bit annoyed' Elizabeth was in streams of tears and her words had become choked. We both started looking for tissues, rooting through our bags, and as an embarrassed silence descended I made the decision to pause the interview letting Elizabeth regain her composure.

After a break Elizabeth told me, 'I just don't know where that came from, I didn't realise that was something I was holding onto,' and laughed. Behind this comment, which Elizabeth went on to repeat, there might be interpreted a disavowal of her knowledge about what had made her upset. In what follows I want to draw attention to the ways that Elizabeth chose to make sense of her feelings to me during the remainder of the interview, and what she came to identify as their source. At first Elizabeth expressed embarrassment, and sought to

distance herself from what had happened by apologising for getting upset. I attempted to reassure her, telling her there was no need, but also suggesting one possible interpretation of why she'd become upset:

Jim: No, no need to apologise. It's...it's quite an emotional situation isn't it? Because as you've been describing to me you've been trying very hard and it didn't seem fair or like it really...

Elizabeth: Yes you see that's why it feels, that's why I said, it feels demoralising sometimes. When you're doing everything you can, and everything that you've been told to do, and I think it's just...don't understand why you don't have a job yet, you know? Yeah that's what it is. That's what. Demoralising.

At this point, with the next scheduled interview fast approaching, and wanting to leave some time to check that Elizabeth was ok and round things off, I decided that I would close the interview after one last question. When later I listened back to the recording two things struck me. The first was something I had missed at the time, probably because it wasn't anything ordinarily noticeable: either as a slip of the tongue or as a result of lowering her voice, Elizabeth had omitted, or the recording had failed to pick up, the subject in the sentence '...don't understand why you don't have a job yet.' Listening back, I couldn't decide what she had meant. Who didn't understand? Did she mean 'they (her advisors) don't understand?' Or did she mean 'I don't understand?' Or both?

The second thing I *had* noticed at the time, and listening back I remembered how uncomfortable it had made me feel. My last question to Elizabeth was the standard last question, if there was anything else she wanted to say that I hadn't asked her about, or that she thought was important. Once more picking up my interpretation of why she might have become upset, Elizabeth again proceeded to agree with me, only this time more forcefully, and at greater length, and in doing so imputed to me some thoughts and ideas that I had not voiced, and did not hold:

No I'm not, not really. Basically you just summed it up there in the last sentence you says to me about it, that's the hardest thing about it, is you know, as I say, you see them, people that are wanting 'here you go there's a job' and are not doing much, and it's frustrating that you're doing everything you can, by the book, and... I think it's that stereotype that because you're on benefits you're scum like, you know? [Pause] You know all these stupid programmes that they make, *Benefits Street* and this and that, and you're going, I don't... Yes I know they exist but...it...and I feel the people that are really trying and want to get ahead are being tarred with the same brush. And that's I think the most frustrating thing about it, even from the Government itself, of how, you know, yes, with the cuts and things, yes there are people that are scamming or have in the past been able to scam the system and things like that...But people that are genuinely on the system the way it's supposed to be, I find they're the ones that end up penalised more. Because they don't have, what's it called? Street smarts or whatever it is. You know a lot of that are on these programmes, I feel like they classify everyone under, you know, the shoplifting and things, they'll always find a way to survive ...But there's a lot of people that aren't like that, and with the Government cutting, cutting certain benefits, making it push, push, push. I can understand doing that, but there's people that are pushing themselves, you know genuinely trying, they're going, what else can I do? And they say you're not doing enough, not doing enough, not doing enough. It feels a bit...that's what's demoralising. You're going, I am doing that! You know, I'm doing everything, what else can I...? Tell me another way to do it or something else and I'll do it, but I don't know what else I can do...?

Misrecognition, protection rackets, and the propagation of insecurity

Like Bridget at the start of this chapter, Elizabeth also found herself caught in an impossible situation, in this case the situation of stigma, and feeling unable to satisfy the relentless demand to continually prove her deservingness (a demand which was experienced as coming from various directions). In some ways, Elizabeth's interview ended up in a very different place than it started. An initially measured emphasis on positive experiences, optimism about the future, and a story about development and transformation had given way to an angry indictment of the political and media stigmatisation of claimants, a sense of

fruitless and unrecognised efforts, and a story about being stuck under a distorted political-media lens with nowhere to hide from others' disapproving gaze.

However, it also seemed that Elizabeth wasn't just telling me a story about her experiences, but was actively enlisting me into it. Among other things, the interview was also about the need to be seen as deserving, as making the greatest possible efforts, and as being committed to paid work at all cost – in other words, the need for recognition as a particular sort of deserving person. At different points during the interview Elizabeth employed alternative strategies to try to secure recognition as a deserving claimant. To begin with she emphasised her compliance and then enthusiastic participation with the Work Programme provider, distancing herself from initial reservations and resistance. She presented herself as a good welfare-to-work subject who had engaged with the programme and been transformed by the process. Later in the interview, however, Elizabeth recalled a time when this strategy had failed, and this memory seemingly threatened to overwhelm her in the present, threatening her sense of self. Though the event of receiving a warning letter was in the past, the feeling that it evoked was still very much present as something that Elizabeth was holding onto, or that was holding onto her. Such a psychosocial interpretation of this research encounter (as outlined in Chapter Five) draws attention to some of the psychosocial dimensions of activation. As discussed in Chapter Two, activation has been explored in terms of its coercive emphasis on positive affect and feeling (Friedli & Stearn, 2015), and to some extent this is also visible in Elizabeth's account of her experiences. As the interview progressed, and turned to the difficult feelings provoked by the letter, Elizabeth also engaged in the sort of 'othering' practices described in the literature on claimants' experiences of welfare stigma (Garthwaite, 2014; Patrick, 2014; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Here, conditionality and activation both create and intensify situations in which 'othering' is necessary as a means of defence or coping. Adopting the psychosocial concepts of introjection, projection, and splitting (Thompson & Hoggett, 2011)

outlined in Chapter Four, Elizabeth experienced receiving the letter as an introjection – cast under suspicion, she had been identified by the letter as a ‘bad’ claimant. This provoked both anger and shame, which Elizabeth was able to deal with by suggesting that the proper target of the letter were other ‘bad’ sorts of claimant.

What I would most like to draw attention to in this account of Elizabeth’s interview are the ways that the system of welfare conditionality both subjects Elizabeth to continual scrutiny, experienced in terms of suspicion and accusation, but also, and simultaneously, offers her some limited means with which to defend herself, both in terms of concrete practices (compliance with ‘work-focused activity’), but also symbolic representations and fantasies into which she can project the worst aspects of her experience. This develops recent accounts of some of the potentially ‘perverse’ effects of activation, introduced in Chapter Two, where it is shown to be potentially demoralising and deactivating (Wright, 2016b). My suggestion is that the organisational implementation of behavioural conditionality can take the form of a protection racket, in which the claimant experiences a default assumption of guilt (of scrounging, shirking, malingering), accompanied by the threat of violence (sanctions, but also the symbolic violence of misrecognition), which they are able to forestall only by consenting to participation in a seemingly interminable performance of deservingness for their advisors (and for various social others, imagined and real, including research students). As Elizabeth’s story shows neither consent nor enthusiastic participation was ever quite enough to secure definitive proof of deservingness. Although ‘deservingness’ as a project (rather than adjective) predates the advent of activation and behavioural conditionality (see: Howe, 1990), these policies make this into a more formal and ‘official’ project, tapping into and enlisting common ideological representations, worries, and fears. In this account, one of things that activation acts on, or activates, is stigma.

At the Jobcentre: first encounters

As outlined in Chapters Two and Three, the street-level landscape of activation involves both the publicly run Jobcentre Plus, and private and voluntary contracted-out providers. The former administers and processes peoples' benefits, but is also responsible for the delivery of employment support and activation, in most cases for approximately two years, before referrals are made to the contracted-out providers of the Work Programme. That activation takes this form, and is divided between different services, has important consequences for claimants' experiences. For one thing, it means that there are a number of possible journeys through the field, which will depend on the duration of a particular claim, but also location (in terms of where someone will be sent). It is also important in another sense, in that for claimants referred to contracted-out services there are (at least) two organisations with a role in their 'activation' and claim for benefits. Among other things, then, this chapter explores some of the consequences of the governance of activation (see Chapter Three) for claimants' experiences. Before considering the experiences of contracted out services, this section first looks at claimants' experiences of Jobcentre Plus. In later sections it is argued that these initial street-level encounters have an important role in framing later experiences of contracted-out services; that is, the experience of Jobcentre Plus teaches 'political lessons contributing to future political expectations' (Lipsky, 1984, p. 9) and 'socialize citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 4).

Classification and deficient subjects

Underlying Elizabeth's repeated emphasis on the many and various ways in which she sought to comply with the demands of conditionality there lay a powerful fear that her efforts would go unrecognised, and that she would be identified as in some way undeserving. She explicitly linked this to the television programme *Benefits Street* and 'all these stupid programmes that they make' also

seeing media attacks on welfare claimants as taking place in tandem with government attacks. These were literally described as stigmatising by Elizabeth when she spoke of being 'tarred with the same brush' as the sensationalised depictions of claimants on TV programmes and in politicians' speeches. This remark found an echo in the words of Greg, also a JSA claimant who, in talking about his experiences of visiting the Jobcentre told me

I think everybody's classed the same. They know nothing, totally nothing about you. You're just classed as a scrounger. (Gregg, JSA claimant)

This sense of visiting the Jobcentre as an experience of being *classed* by others indicates also the significance for claimants of what Tyler calls 'classificatory struggles' (Tyler, 2015). Claimants often experienced welfare services in terms of being classed and identified by others, subject to the weight of others' judgment, perhaps also their own. These judgments were nearly always negative, and in particular two things stood out about claimants descriptions of their encounter in Jobcentre Plus: being subjected to suspicion and disbelief, but also being treated as if in some way deficient, child-like, or stupid:

You feel as though you're a wean back at school, about to get into trouble for something, that's how you feel. (Lisa, JSA claimant)

They treat you as if you don't have two brain cells to rub together! (Sybil, ESA claimant)

These kinds of judgement and treatment were sometimes explicitly linked to a sense of the power imbalance in their relationship with advisors. For Bridget, this imbalance was not something she immediately recognised, but became apparent more slowly, obscured by her initial perceptions of her advisor as being a nice person:

Just the advisor I've got just likes to sort of... she's in power. At first I thought they were nice and, I was like that, I was fine for the first couple of weeks I'd signed on, I was fine. And then after it I was like,

there's something not right here. And its because, it was just, she's in power and she can tell you what to do and what have you. I don't mind, advise me, but don't treat me like a stupid wee, a wee lassie, when I've been through things in life you shouldn't have been through. That's what I'm getting at, you know what I mean? (Bridget, JSA claimant)

Like Lisa and Sybil, Bridget felt infantilised and treated as if she were stupid, but here these judgements, rather than being strictly interpersonal, are explicitly linked to the *form* of the claimant-advisor relationship when it is based on conditional, work-first activation, where the advisors has the power to issue instructions. Knowing her advisor had this power diminished Bridget's sense of being a peer or equal, and she felt that, although her advisor was a nice person, the fact that her advisor *could* exercise this power in effect diminished important dimensions Bridget's life experience and identity.

Suspicion and surveillance

Claimants' experiences of being treated as deficient subjects in Jobcentres were accompanied by the sense that they were under suspicion, and routinely disbelieved. Jill, a young JSA claimant, told me a story about an early visit to the Jobcentre, when she needed to provide them with some basic personal information:

The people in there are quite snappy with you, quite rude. I had a woman in there, it was Christmas Eve, I had to go in because they had stopped my money even though they weren't supposed to and it caused a lot or problems with my housing benefits. I made an appointment which had got cancelled so I had to go in on Christmas Eve and the woman was arguing with me saying, we can't find you on the system anywhere. I went, I'm on the system, and she was talking down to me. She was like, what's your date of birth? I went 1993 and she went, are you sure it's not 1996? I was like, I'm pretty sure what year I was born in. They could find a Jill for 1996 but not for '93. She was quite rude as if I don't know my own age. (Jill, JSA claimant)

Jill's story is about both being patronised, but also suspected of lying. Claimants were sometimes subject to two quite different kinds of negative identification, which made it hard for them to know how to act. On the one hand they were often treated with suspicion as if they are cheating or somehow fraudulent, and therefore as being in some way crafty or smart; on the other hand, they are also infantilised and treated as if they are stupid. For Jill this was a quandary: she worried about going to the Jobcentre in case she got into trouble. I asked her why she thought she might get into trouble:

I don't know. The way they look at you, you feel quite bad and they make you feel quite small, like a bit of an idiot and it's quite embarrassing. You won't tell them everything because they'll be thinking they're just lying about that or they're just saying that... If the person was not nice I would worry and then I would end up thinking, oh God, I'm just not going to go in so I don't get in trouble about it. (Jill, JSA claimant)

In particular, Jill doubted that advisors at the Jobcentre would believe the difficulties she was having with her job search, and this doubt made her inclined to withdraw from the 'service' (putting her at risk of getting a sanction) rather than seek help for her problems. As someone with dyslexia and problems with literacy, Jill found the requirement to log her job search onerous, and she worried that any mistakes she made would be looked at unfavourably, as evidence of fraudulence, rather than as something for which she might be provided with help and support. Likewise she worried that articulating her problems would be interpreted as making excuses, and as further evidence of her dishonesty. Similarly, Greg describes the reaction of his advisor when submitting his job search log:

If you're on the Universal Jobmatch and you've applied for jobs, you've done your job search history, they'll check out what you've been doing all week before ... and then they'll go, there's a vacancy there. They'll turn the computer round to you, and I'll say, I've applied for that. When did you apply for it? I said Tuesday, check my job search, you

should already know. And they've went through the job search and went, oh aye, there, it's there. (Greg, JSA claimant)

The suspicion that clients routinely encounter in their Jobcentre interactions is also tied to forms of monitoring and surveillance. Here, Greg describes being disbelieved until his job search record has been checked. In their encounters with Jobcentre Plus, claimants tended to describe a series of encounters focused on the forms of evidence they were expected to produce:

From my experience they don't do anything at all apart from keep an eye once a fortnight on their claimants. You know, and report back to the government if they see anything that they consider to be indicative of someone being a benefit scrounger. (Sybil, ESA claimant)

Distrust was central to claimants' experiences of Jobcentre plus, and this cut both ways. On the one hand, there was the experience of being routinely, even systematically distrusted by Jobcentre staff. The focus on monitoring job search activity fed into this, producing encounters which seemed to be largely organised around checking, or checking up. On the other hand, claimants also felt distrust of the Jobcentre and its staff. They did not always feel like they or their problems would be listened to or believed. For Sybil this distrust took the form of a suspicion that Jobcentre staff were waiting for the sign that they could administer a sanction. Negative experiences of the Jobcentre were nearly universal among the claimant-participants. The exception was a single JSA claimant who had only recently (within the last six months) started claiming. In contrast with the other participants, Frank described his experience of the Jobcentre in positive terms:

The process was very quick, it was very salient as well, I had no problems with it whatsoever. The meetings I've had since then have been excellent. My supervisor's been absolutely brilliant, she's advised me about jobs, as long as I've supplied the information and keep in my diary, then it's been OK, and they've actually given me lists of work, they've been very supportive, very encouraging, and they've got a job to do, they need to get you off unemployment, that stigma, that kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, that poverty trap. So they have got a job that's difficult and it's up to the individual people to really make the effort to

secure employment and do their utmost to meet the criteria that they require for you to continue getting the benefits. (Frank, JSA claimant)

In contrast with all other participants, Frank both trusted the Jobcentre, and described it as helpful and encouraging. He also identified with its staff, their aims and difficulties. Perhaps one reason for this stark difference might have been that Frank had been claiming for a shorter duration than many of the other participants (most of whom were, at the time of the research, on the Work Programme, or had complex situations where different claims and breaks in claims meant they had not yet been referred). He also did not expect to be claiming for long, and throughout the interview was keen to discuss a variety of different projects and activities in which he was engaged, and through which he hoped to find work. Unlike most of the other claimants, Frank was also educated beyond degree level (holding a postgraduate qualification) and had, until recently, been employed in a professional role.

Not all claimants experienced their interactions in the Jobcentre in the same way, as Frank's very different account shows. Nonetheless, among the claimants interviewed for this research, most spoke about the Jobcentre in negative terms as a kind of processing centre, or a gauntlet through which they had to pass. By contrast, most of the participants – though not all - had much better experiences of contracted out services (although see Chapter Five for access and sampling). In the next section some of these experiences are explored in greater depth, drawing attention to two features of claimants' experiences of the Work Programme: firstly, despite the worries and concerns of advisors discussed in the previous Chapter, here Work Programme advisors were valued to the extent that they were more inclined to listen and try to understand claimants' situations. Nevertheless, many of the participants suggested that their Work Programme provider, whilst more understanding than the Jobcentre, was still in many important respects, ineffectual. The next section seeks to situate claimants' experiences of contracted out services within the wider street-level landscape of activation, alongside

experiences and expectations that have been produced elsewhere, notably those of Jobcentre Plus described above.

The Work Programme

I actually really like coming here because it helps. Before I started coming here I had quite a lot of problems with the Jobcentre because I can't keep up with my job searches the same way as I can here now. Also being able to come here I have an online diary now instead of having to write it down and maybe losing it. It's more helpful coming here than it was before. (Jill, JSA claimant)

Earlier in this chapter it was described how Jill had considerable worries about attending the Jobcentre, because she thought that she would be disbelieved, and taken for a liar. As a consequence, Jill was reluctant to tell the Jobcentre about her problems (with literacy) or seek help for them. Her experience of the Work Programme could not have been more different, and in her interview she emphasised the different forms of help and support she received, specifically but not limited to help completing her job search, and with writing cover letters and applications. This section describes participants' experiences of the work programme, focusing first on their encounters with advisors, then turning to their perceptions of the service specifically as an employment service. Whilst Work Programme advisors tended to be viewed as more approachable than those at the Jobcentre, there was also a sense that with respect to help with finding work, they were to some extent ineffectual.

'It's a bit more friendly and helpful'

One important difference between Jobcentre Plus and contracted out providers is the flexibility of the latter to organise and arrange their service delivery. In the previous chapter it was seen that in contracted out services advisors are under considerable pressure to 'engage' as many clients as possible, and also to increase the numbers of appointments they have with individual claimants. From the claimant's perspective, this situation can be valuable; advisors are unlikely to

refuse an appointment, and to varying degrees will be flexible if a client wants to come in and use the computers, or ask for help with an application. In contrast, appointments with Jobcentre Plus are rigid and highly structured; advisors have much less freedom to organise their diaries, and Jobcentre Plus does not operate on a 'drop-in' basis. The comparative friendliness and helpfulness of their Work Programme advisors was emphasised by several claimants, albeit occasionally with qualification:

Maria: It's a bit easier coming here.

Jim: In what way?

Maria: It's a bit more friendly and helpful. They give you a bit more advice than just the Jobcentre, so a bit more helpful. (Maria, JSA claimant)

No they're quite good because they're quite supportive, they even help you out. I was still going for interviews, if you go for an interview they expect you to pay for the travel expenses and then they refund you....Yeah, there is an element of somebody rooting for you, that kind of thing. Where you're just getting rejection after rejection after rejection, there is somebody there, they've got a nice attitude, like a supportive attitude. (Paul, JSA claimant)

The dealings that I have had, I've dealt with three people in here and they have all been the same. They take their time and they listen. They are here to help you. They always stress that. They are here to help. Because obviously they want, the more people get back to work, the better for themselves. That's their job. (Sam, JSA claimant)

Maria, Paul, Sam and Jill were all claimants who were recruited, and whose interviews were organised for me, by the Work Programme provider; as such, I expected them to have been selected with some kind of criteria in mind, and to be positive about the provider. In this respect the thing I found most surprising about these interviews was the way the positive aspects of claimants' experiences were often muted and highly qualified. Nevertheless, the favourable comparison of the provider with Jobcentre Plus was a theme across all of these interviews, and was also echoed by Bridget (in an interview *not* arranged by the provider) who

contrasted her (brief) positive experience of one other contracted-out provider with those of the Jobcentre:

Jim: So what kind of help have they [JCP] given you trying to get back to work?

Bridget: The Jobcentre? No. The Jobcentre doesn't do that now. It's all left to [Activation Works] and [Work First]. They send you there.

Jim: What do you know about those?

Bridget: Well I went there. I enjoyed that. It was at the beginning of this year, but you're only allowed to go there for, you go there for about three months. But you're only allowed to be on their system for six months. I didn't know that at the time, so I can't go back. But I found that very helpful. (Bridget, JSA claimant)

Not all claimant-participants found their encounters with contracted out services helpful; notably, the ESA claimants I interviewed, who were *not* recruited through a provider, made much more critical remarks²⁷. Nevertheless, whilst I suspected that many of the Work Programme participants had been selected for me on the basis that they might give a good impression, I had little reason to doubt what they told me for this reason; their experiences, whilst perhaps 'curated' for me, were nonetheless important, and there was a degree of consistency in the way that these participants talked about the differences between Jobcentre Plus and the contracted provider, also echoed by Bridget.

²⁷ The data from interviews with ESA claimants are markedly different to the data from interviews with JSA claimants. These deserve consideration in their own right, but owing to constraints of time and space are not discussed here. Notably, however, with respect to the argument developed in this chapter, ESA claimants were more likely to view and recognise conditional activation along the lines proposed here: that is, as a protection racket. JSA claimants tended to identify with the 'job-seeking role', partly it seemed in order to affirm their deservingness; more often than not, ESA claimants felt that they were already deserving on account of their health condition, and thus adopted a more critical stance with respect to the requirements of activation and 'work preparation'. Their experience was, in these terms, less subject to splitting and disavowal; they recognised themselves as the targets of conditionality and its threats, which they saw as illegitimate, where JSA claimants tended to see conditionality and sanctions as legitimate – just not for them.

It is interesting to consider in greater depth what it was about the Work Programme provider which these claimants valued. Returning to Jill's comments which open this section, it seems that what she found most helpful about attending the provider was help with her job search, and the requirements of monitoring. Whilst it was undoubtedly true that Jill did find her appointments at the provider useful, what I want to suggest is that part of this usefulness had to do with negotiating (and avoiding the worst consequences of) the suspicion, insecurity, and threat produced by mandatory work-first activation and conditionality.

It is in this sense that claimants sometimes found themselves caught up in a protection racket, where the 'protection' came from those individual named advisors, often at providers, who had more time for them, and showed more understanding. I think that this might explain something I noticed throughout the interviews arranged by, and conducted on the premises of the provider, which was that praise or expressions of usefulness were often muted and equivocal.

Here it is also interesting to note the way that the experience of providers was often articulated through a comparison with Jobcentre Plus. Experiences of the Work Programme are, in important ways, framed by the 'political lessons' and expectations set through initial encounters with Jobcentre Plus. These are predominantly low expectations; of being classed and categorised, treated with suspicion, and demeaned and diminished. Jobcentre Plus also introduces claimants to the importance of surveillance and monitoring. It is against these expectations that the contracted out providers are experienced, in some cases, as comparatively more helpful, friendly, and understanding. As Paul said of his provider, 'they're quite supportive, they even help you out'.

'I don't really know how much they can do to help me'

Whilst Work Programme advisors tended to be experienced as friendlier or more understanding, the help that claimants described often related to support meeting

their mandatory conditions. This 'support' was experienced as valuable and useful, particularly in a context where failure to meet these conditions results in a sanction. When it came to the perceived role of the provider in actually helping them secure employment, claimants were sometimes less certain about their usefulness. Paul, an unemployed IT worker in his 40s with twenty years experience, told me that he made sure he did what he was instructed, and that as a result his advisors tended to leave him alone. About the help on offer, he said:

I don't know if it really helps somebody like me, so much. I can understand if somebody doesn't have a job and they got to the Jobcentre and, after a year, right you've got to go to this thing here and, maybe it's for younger people that have never had a job, they don't really know what they're doing. They come here and I can understand why [Work First] would be good because, I've worked for 20 years and I know all about this, job interviews and jobs and training and courses, I know all this stuff. But, say you were 16 or 17, you've just left school with no qualifications, you just sign on and they say you've got to go to this. I can see how that [Provider] would be good for a young person... I don't really know how much they can do to help me. (Paul, JSA claimant)

Here Paul explains and rationalises the requirement to participate in the Work Programme by reasoning that, although of little use for him, it might be more helpful for other sorts of claimant. The sense that the mandatory requirements of activation – attending appointments and workshops – were a pointless waste of time emerged across several interviews. However, rather than express opposition to these requirements, many claimants instead expressed resignation. Like Paul, several other participants reasoned that such requirements might serve a purpose with respect to other kinds of claimant. Maria, a woman in her 40s was made redundant from an administrative role in a bank in 2006; since then she had done various temping jobs, but been unemployed since 2012. She told me that she appreciated being able to ask for help from her advisor when she needed it. She particularly appreciated being able to ask for help with interviews, which she felt was an area that she needed to improve (she had, within the past year, had 'five or six' interviews, but no job offers). However, when it came to being asked to attend

the office in order to do her job search there, in a monitored environment, she emphasised that had her own computer at home, and would rather do it there:

I know there are people that don't do the work but, like myself, I'm doing the work because I want to get a job, and doing the work myself....I've been doing the work and applying for jobs. It's somebody to give me a little bit of help with my application and saying the right thing in the interview [that I need]. Saying 'mandatory' is not relevant to what help I actually need, it's a bit down-grading. (Maria, JSA claimant)

Whilst Maria felt that it was valuable to be able to approach her advisor for specific advice around interviews, the requirement to attend monitored workshops was experienced as an inconvenient imposition. It is also interesting to note the way that looking for work is here understood as a form of work itself – satisfying the requirements of conditionality is seen as a job, one which Maria is happy to do, but preferably under her own direction. Like Paul, she imagines that there could be a reason for such an imposition in the case of other claimants, those 'that don't do the work'. Here, it is worth highlighting the role that these 'other' claimants play in Maria's explanation for why she is forced to attend. As in Elizabeth's story about receiving a warning letter, this might be interpreted as a form of disavowal – although the letter is addressed to her, its message is initially read as having another intended recipient, and meant for someone else.

This specific mixture of resignation, disavowal, and indignation also arose in an interview with another participant, Michelle, also in her 40s and also recently made redundant from an administrative role in a bank. In her case this had been within the last year. Michelle, like Maria, had her own computer, felt competent managing her own job search and applications, and though resigned to the fact, felt inconvenienced that she was made to attend appointments at the provider:

Jim: So perhaps you can help me understand a bit more about [Work First] and what happens when you come here?

Michelle: Not a great deal to be honest.

Jim: What does it do for you, for what's the set up?

Michelle: We did have, there have been general groups with more than one person, one was how to do a CV but I knew how to do a CV before that. So they do have groups and then they point things out, you have space to do things et cetera, but generally, at the moment, I have to come once a week.

Jim: OK

Michelle: And that, basically, is just to use the computer and access jobs, which I could actually do at home, but I have to actually physically come down here. (Michelle, JSA claimant)

Michelle emphasised throughout the interview that many of the things she was asked to do, she felt able to do at home in her own time. She repeated to me that despite this, 'you literally have to come here or you have your Jobseekers docked', digging out her appointment letter for me to read to emphasise her point. This included the standard warning about sanctions

If without good reason you fail to attend or participate in the Work Programme your Jobseekers Allowance and National Insurance Credits will be stopped (or will be paid at a reduced rate depending on your circumstances) for: four weeks; or thirteen weeks if the DWP have previously decided on one or more occasions that your JSA should be sanctioned because you failed to comply with your Work programme requirements, or you committed any of the failure listed below, within 52 weeks (but not within two weeks) of your last failure.

When I had finished reading, Michelle suggested,

But I think it's really for someone who abuses the system a lot, with everybody else, obviously if you're ill, if you phone in there wouldn't be any problems. She has told me that, if you're ill for any reason phone in and let me know. (Michelle JSA claimant)

In these and other interviews at the provider there was a sense of resignation, but also, occasionally, mild indignation and resentment about the mandatory requirement to participate. This was linked to the perception that the activities were pointless, and that advisors, whilst nice and well-meaning, were not always

in a position to really help them find work. Again, where advisors - and good relations with advisors – were useful was in meeting conditional requirements and avoiding sanctions.

There is also in Paul, Michelle, and Maria's descriptions of the Work Programme a sense that is not really meant for them. Paul thought it might be more useful for a younger, less experienced person. Maria thought that the conditions and mandatory requirements were 'down-grading', and appropriate for others who 'weren't doing the work' as she was. Similarly, Michelle reacted to the threat of sanctions by explaining to me that it was really meant for others, 'someone who abuses the system a lot'. However, as explored in the first section, Elizabeth also thought that the system of conditional requirements was for 'others' until she received a warning letter. The sense that they were perhaps an exception, or somehow caught up in a system that wasn't really meant for them, might be interpreted as one way of dealing with the feelings of being demeaned and 'down-graded' by the coercion inherent to mandatory participation. This was both acknowledged by claimants, but at the same time denied; which is to say, the experience of being subject to mandatory participation and conditionality was disavowed.

This disavowal might be understood as an important means through which the consent of claimants is gained and maintained. In characterising the system as a disciplinary regime, really meant for 'other' bad claimants, some participants spoke of being willing to 'go along' with it, because they saw the need to discipline these others. This type of consent relied upon a sense that they were not the system's real targets. One JSA claimant, Sam, felt it unjust that he was subject to suspicion and surveillance because of these others, but responded by expressing a wish that the system were harsher, to further underline the distinction between deserving and undeserving:

Sam: I think there should be more mandatory stuff. To be honest with you, yes.

Jim: Yes.

Sam: I mean at the end of the day. I am just going from my perspective. I don't want to be unemployed.

Jim: No.

Sam: I want to go out and work. And I think the problem is that there is that many people who have exerted this way of life, being unemployed and the benefits system and all the rest of it, and that's the ones that they are trying, maybe they are making the most of mandatory. Things that have got to happen... I am not saying it is going to happen overnight, but that might ease it up for people who are genuinely needing help and genuinely looking for work, to get themselves into a better situation.(Sam, JSA claimant)

Whilst many claimants resented the level of scrutiny they were placed under, some nonetheless came to appreciate it for the reason that it enabled them to demonstrate their deservingness, or distinguish themselves from 'bad' others. Sam thought that more 'mandatory' activation would encourage, or force, the 'benefiters' (as he elsewhere put it) to 'do something' and that as a consequence things would 'ease up a bit' for people like him. When Elizabeth came home from the hospital she still logged onto Universal Jobmatch to complete her day's job search, making sure it was recorded. This might be interpreted as being about providing proof and evidence as much as it was about the likelihood that these actions, undertaken on this particular day, were going to help her find a job. To the extent that claimants therefore see the imposition of mandatory action, conditionality, and the associated threat of sanctions as legitimate, it might also be understood as a form of symbolic violence, through which their domination is secured through consent (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192; see Chapter Four). However, from a psychosocial perspective this consent is also ambivalent; it is given on the basis that conditionality *really* targets others (Thompson & Hoggett, 2011). It is in this sense that I argue that activation, when implemented as a system for

monitoring behaviour, activates stigma and pushes claimants into defensive activity designed to ward it off, involving the mechanisms of splitting (of their own experience), projection (of the experience of being disciplined onto others), and consequently disavowal (recognising they have been targeted; denying that they are the true target). These kinds of defensive positions might also be understood as forms of coping, or with respect to the model of agency introduced in Chapter Two, as a form of getting by (Lister, 2004), where what is being coped with is to the conditional benefit system itself. In this situation the system of conditionality and activation makes use of and reinforces widely recognised ideological tropes about deserving and undeserving claimants.

Activating stigma

The use of stigma as a social and political tool has become a topic of increasing concern both to social policy researchers and to sociologists with an interest in class and its representations, and has been addressed both in terms of cultural political economy and the politics of representation (Jensen, 2014; Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2008, 2015), and the lived experience of claimants (Garthwaite, 2011; Patrick, 2016). There has been a proliferation of stigmatising media representations of poverty more generally, and of welfare claimants specifically, which is an important feature of the political and cultural context for claimants' experiences of street-level interactions (see Chapter Two). During the course of the research it became clear that such representations were more than context – in the sense of setting or backdrop – for interactions, encounters, and lived experiences: rather, they were often at the forefront of claimants' minds and could be seen as animating forces shaping the ways in which claimants interacted with advisors, services, but also with me as a researcher. Elizabeth's keen awareness, during her interview, of the classifications and media representations of shirkers, scroungers, and 'hard working families' – the *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977) that Jensen (2014) calls 'welfare commonsense' – was also evident when she imputed to me a discourse contrasting the compliant and hardworking versus those who expect something

for nothing. In this chapter I have argued that activation, and behavioural conditionality, in subjecting the claimant to suspicion and continuous surveillance, often activated these representations, putting them to work on claimants and helping to secure their compliance, often gained precisely through claimant's struggles *against* identification with such representations, and *against* stigma.

This chapter asked: how do claimants experience activation and conditionality? What are some of the relational dynamics of activation? What do conditionality and activation mean for claimants in practice? How do claimants experience street-level advisors? Activation and conditionality produce complex subjective and relational dynamics – these dynamics weren't simply about the adjustment of incentives, but involved worries, fears, and stigmatising representations of claimants. The lived experience of 'activation' cannot be separated from wider discourses and narratives about dependency. There was sometimes a disavowed relationship to conditionality and activation, where these were seen as legitimate and appropriate for others, but not for the self. Some claimants spoke of feeling demeaned and diminished, not only by their interpersonal experiences at Jobcentres and Work Programme offices, but by the form of these relations – that is, the fact that they were coerced.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that 'activation' can be the activation of stigma. It has been suggested that this activation takes the form of a protection racket whereby the regime of conditionality both accuses and threatens the claimants, but also and simultaneously offers them some means by which to prove their deservingness and protect themselves. This relational dynamic plays a part in the ways that consent for activation and conditionality are gained and maintained. In this case, 'activation' is more about the production of compliance than 'enabling'. In this protection racket the accusation is experienced through the focus on supervision and surveillance, and as in tune with wider media narratives about dependency;

the threat is a sanction. The protection is provided by certain 'good advisors' who recognise the claimant as legitimate and deserving, and by services which offer them the means and support to complete their conditional requirements. Threats produced by the regime of conditional activation can therefore be 'contained' by good relationships with particular advisors, but this also makes advisors potentially powerful and threatening figures. Consequently, advisors were often valued to the extent they showed *understanding*. Less value was placed in advisors as someone who might help with finding work: there was a widespread sense that advisors were largely *ineffectual* in these terms. In the following chapter, the thesis returns to some of the themes and issues raised by the previous chapter, concerning advisors' investments in the street-level field and the activation *illusio*. In so doing, it draws attention to some limits placed on advisors' ability to demonstrate the forms of understanding which claimants valued.

Chapter Eight – Benign cruelty, bad magic, and ‘barriers’: exploring the conditions of punitive practice and social sadism

Belief-talk

I genuinely believe...that anyone can achieve anything they want to. So if someone has, if someone is really committed to something they want to do, then they can do it... provided that they've got the self drive themselves, they're half-way there. (Harry, advisor, 2008-2010; other roles 2010-2015)

One curious feature of my own disillusionment with the field of activation was an uncertainty about the extent to which the investment and belief exhibited by other participants in the field (colleagues at the time, but also managers, directors, and people I have subsequently met) was either authentic, or else a form of bad-faith, or cynicism (cf: Crawford & Flint, 2015). For the most part I found it easy to accept that others remained invested in the field, and saw it quite differently to me.

However, there were some aspects of this investment which, from my point of view, were quite difficult to understand. Something I found particularly odd and incongruous while still an advisor was the extent to which the outcome-focused, stats-driven organisation for which I worked was also, at the same time, suffused with a secular language of faith and belief. Whilst the object of our everyday activity as advisors was very clearly defined and given an unambiguous numerical value (in the form of a target), the means by which we were to attain it were often much less clear. It is true that managers often spoke about ‘the high performing advisor’ and their ‘behaviours,’ which we were encouraged to emulate, but rather than any specific form of expertise that we might learn, what the high performing advisor exhibited was an ability to do the very same things we were already doing (seeing clients, cold-calling, sending out ‘high quality’ applications), but with greater speed and intensity. Emulating these behaviours didn’t always produce corresponding changes in ‘performance’. In these instances, managers also emphasised the supposedly inspirational and charismatic qualities

'high-performing' advisers. These were people, we were told, who 'believed' and were able to 'inspire belief' – they believed in their clients, and were able to inspire clients to 'believe in themselves'. During one performance review meeting - it will be remembered that my own performance was consistently low – after a discussion of my caseload, I was asked by a senior manager whether I truly believed in the programme. Whilst what she called my 'integrity' was not in any doubt, she nonetheless had reason to doubt the extent of my belief. Was I, she asked, *with them or against them?* At the time I struggled to understand what was being asked of me. What, I wondered, did it mean to be 'with them', and in what, precisely, was I being asked to believe?

At the time I found this sort of talk, about belief and charisma, with its passionate investment in what I considered to be the facile and spurious nostrums of self-help (see: Ehrenreich, 2010) not only embarrassing but also, when contrasted with our dull corporate surroundings and my own more mundane estimations of some of the 'high-performing' advisers I knew personally, faintly comic. I was often reminded of the grandiose delusions animating the character of David Brent²⁸ in *The Office*, and to a certain extent this and other kinds of popular satire on the contemporary workplace meant I was already primed for a more or less dispirited resignation to such hyperbolic but unavoidable features of modern office life and managerial culture. What I did not expect, however, was the devout and earnest seriousness with which such notions of 'belief' and 'inspiration' were handled, their centrality to descriptions of our work, and to the expectations set out for us as employees. More than simply a contingent and symptomatic delusion, individual or collective, dreamt up, as it might be in *The Office*, to cover up insecurities and alleviate the 'boredom, banality and the pettiness of office life' (Brabazon, 2005), 'belief' and 'inspiration' talk as I encountered it seemed central to the activation enterprise, and as such, a matter of policy-in-action. It featured not only in everyday, informal interactions with my managers (when they were

²⁸ David Brent is a character played by Ricky Gervais in the BBC sitcom *The Office*

offering on the spot 'coaching' and advice), but also in the more formal conversations I had in supervision and performance appraisal meetings.

Among other things, this chapter develops out of these questions I had as a street-level advisor, and argues that what I was being asked to believe was, in a way, the power of belief itself. Believing in one's clients, and eliciting belief from them, was seen within activation services as a crucial step in helping someone 'move into work'. As such, our success, and the remedy to problems of unemployment and ill-health, was inferred to hinge upon a form of faith. In exploring this theme, this chapter asks: how do advisors process their clients? And, what does 'activation' mean to advisors? This chapter therefore returns to some of the concerns explored in Chapter Six, to what constitutes the street-level activation *illusio* (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; see also Chapter Four), exploring some of its constituent features in greater depth. In particular, it picks up the analysis of street-level prohibitions as a form of symbolic violence (see: Chapter Six), but attempts to understand more about these prohibitions from the 'inside' – the way that, for some participants, they seemed to make sense. In doing so it also addresses some of the specific content, in the context of activation services, of what Lipsky (2010, p. 71, 119) calls the myth of altruism and the ideology of benign intervention. What is the ideology of benign intervention, as it is found within activation services? For Lipsky this ideology and myth is important for the ego and self-regard of street-level bureaucrats, and Chapter Six already pointed to some of the ways in which advisors make use of discretionary power in order to maintain the sense that they are acting in benign ways (that is, to maintain their investment). However, Lipsky (2010, pp. 151–153) also draws attention to the way that street-level workers can maintain this myth, not only through practice, but also by altering their *conceptions* of this practice, and of the clients they see. Such modified conceptions – of their role, and of clients – he describes as 'cognitive shields, reducing what responsibility and accountability may exist in the role expectations of street-level bureaucrats' (2010, p. 153). In this chapter it is not so much the practices of street-level advisors which help to sustain myth and

investment, but rather the conceptions they have about their clients and practices. Here, the chapter picks up some of the themes developed by literature exploring what happens when there is a disconnect between a practice and its stated aims, or between what people say (or wish) they were doing, and what actually they do (see: Chapter Four). In this sense, the chapter is about the ‘rational fictions’ and ‘imaginary systems’ (Crawford & Flint, 2015) of activation, which it understands using the concepts of ‘social magic’ (Bourdieu, 1991) and ‘magical voluntarism’ (Fisher, 2014; Smail, 1995). However, whereas Chapter Six largely focused on the struggles of advisors to ‘retain a concept of their own adequacy in the job’, including a concept of their own ethicality, in this chapter I draw attention to some of the ways that activation (and its street-level myth, ideology, and *illusio*) produces the conditions for certain types of harm, punishment, and social sadism.

Agency absent structure: two instances of magical thinking

The critical psychologist David Smail defines magical voluntarism as the view that ‘with the expert help of your therapist or counsellor, *you* can change the world *you* are in the last analysis responsible for, so that it no longer causes you distress’ (Smail, 2005, p. 7). Smail views this as an ideological proposition derived from the social relations of liberal capitalism, wherein relations of exploitation, disadvantage, and oppression are subject to ideological effacement through the valorisation of the private individual and their agential capabilities. More recently, the theorist and cultural critic Mark Fisher has argued that magical voluntarism ‘constitutes something like the spontaneous ideology of our times’ (Fisher, 2011) and is a central feature of what he calls ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009). This latter term describes a diffuse sense – at once political, experiential, and aesthetic – within neoliberal society that ‘there is no alternative’, and that the broader social and economic conditions in which we live our lives cannot be made the subject of change; rather, we must learn to change and adapt our selves, becoming ever more competitive and entrepreneurial subjects in order to survive. Among other things, this chapter argues that activation programmes utilise and propagate such a

magical voluntarist and capitalist realist perspective. In practice this means excluding from purview some of the contextual and structural factors which contribute to situations which are experienced, by individuals, as problems. Magical voluntarism is particularly apparent at street-level in the way that advisors (are encouraged to) view their clients and caseloads. Before exploring these dynamics, however, I want to first indicate some of the ways that these forms of thinking are not confined to street-level activation, but circulate more widely within the activation field, arguing that certain kinds of magical thinking are constituent of the way that more elite activation actors think about – and by extension, shape – street-level practice and its conditions. To this end I present two instances of 'magical voluntarism' observed in the discourse of senior managers and directors involved in the broader activation field.

The importance of belief

As an attempt to cultivate gate-keeping contacts within street-level organisations, but also in order to understand more about how street-level activation was discussed and represented by more elite policy actors, during fieldwork I attended two public events at which were present various people involved in one way or another in the delivery of street-level activation services. On one of these occasions, in May 2016, after I had completed my interviews and as I was beginning data analysis, some remarks made by the speaker reminded me of my past observations on the role of belief in street-level activation services. This was a public lecture, part of a series, organised and chaired by a senior academic with research and commercial interests in employability and employability services. The invited speaker was the regional director of a prime Work Programme provider. I went to the lecture with a colleague who was particularly curious about the promise of seeing 'extensive data captured by [the provider] on more than half a million clients who have been supported on employability

programmes over the last 15 years across the UK.’²⁹ As it turned out, this promise went unfulfilled, and the lecture mainly drew on some widely available figures about the number of referrals received and ‘placements’ made by the provider. The lecture’s main focus rather seemed to be what had been advertised as ‘operational insight’, by which was meant something like the ‘ethos’ of activation, and in this way the lecture became a platform for the speaker to make an unashamedly promotional case for the work done by providers of welfare-to-work services.

By way of introduction and illustration of the speaker’s main point of focus – his ‘operational insight’ – we were shown a short, four-minute testimonial video (produced by the provider) focusing on one client, who spoke movingly about her descent into depression after losing her job as a result of a workplace injury. She described how, at the point of her referral to the Work Programme she was feeling very low, ‘useless, and like nobody wanted me, nobody cared’, and as if ‘really and truthfully, the Jobcentre had had enough of me’. She spoke in warm terms, however, of the staff at the Work Programme, who she came to view as ‘an extension of my family, because they lifted me so much.’ She explained that ‘if it was a job interview [for a job] I had never even thought of, they taught me to believe in myself. The reason why I could do it is because I knew that my advisor had faith in me. She didn’t see me as someone who couldn’t do anything; she saw the potential what I had.’

After showing this video, during the remainder of the talk, the invited speaker emphasised the importance of street-level staff having faith and believing in their clients. During my own time as an advisor this was a mantra often repeated by my line managers and other senior staff, and it was interesting to hear it voiced by someone more distant from street-level delivery: successful activation required both a belief in one’s clients, but also the ability to inspire this same belief in them.

²⁹As the ‘eventbrite’ description for the event put it.

As an advisor I was told that for people to get jobs it was necessary to really and truly *believe* - not that someone *could* get a job, but that they *would*. One of the most powerful tools you have as an advisor, my manager told me, is the relationship you have with your client, and in particular their desire to please you. It was my job to set high expectations, demonstrate an unwavering belief, and to inspire my client to want to fulfil and justify that belief. As an advisor I had wondered about the extent to which this focus on belief had been merely a local phenomenon, or whether it was constitutive of a more general activation ethos. Some seven years after leaving the role hearing it emphasised again during this lecture by a senior director, and indeed elevated to the level of guiding principle, suggested that it was not simply an idiosyncrasy of my own local management, but of more significance.

Competition without context

The second such event was not a lecture, but an industry conference at which were present all the main regional Work Programme providers, but also representatives from the DWP, Jobcentre Plus, subcontracting agencies, and also other interested parties such as third sector organisations, academics, and charities. Again, this was an occasion where I was able to hear more senior policy actors discuss their thoughts and perceptions about street-level activation services. As such, I attended several panel events, one of which was focused on 'future developments and challenges'. The panel of managers and directors, drawn mainly from Work Programme providers, were discussing their predictions about possible future contractual developments, and there was a sense that sustainability and in-work progression were going to become increasingly important in future contracts. In particular, those present suggested that in future, payments might be tied to longer-term sustainability outcomes than was presently the case (six months). There was a shared sense that current issues in the labour market posed particular problems for providers: an increasingly polarised labour market in which job growth was occurring at the top and the bottom meant that there were more 'bad

jobs' – low paid and insecure – into which most activation-clients would be placed, and fewer 'intermediary' positions into which they might progress (and for which they would have to compete from a position of disadvantage). This situation was agreed to pose a problem for providers, in the sense that the labour market conditions made it both more difficult for clients to sustain and progress in work, and therefore for providers to claim sustainment outcomes.

The solution to this problem, from the point of view of the managers and directors present, was to increase the scope of in-work support. This is the continuing support that providers are meant to provide to clients once they have entered work. It was suggested that providers ought to lobby, in the discussions surrounding future contract development, for the period of in-work support to be extended, and possibly made conditional through Universal Credit and the extension of conditionality to those claiming in-work benefits (see: Dwyer & Wright, 2014). In this way providers might 'support' clients to continue making applications for other, better jobs once they had entered work. In effect, the problem of labour market polarisation was left unaddressed; the solution was to accept these wider labour market conditions and focus on 'activating' clients to be more competitive within them. The horizon of discussion was drawn very close, making no reference to industrial policy or other measures which might address the wider structural context. For these managers and directors, the only imaginable solution to this problem was to increase the duration and scope of activation – for activation services to reach more people, and for longer periods of time.

The feature of this discussion which I found striking was its similarly 'magical' attribution of agency to the actor in question: in this case, the activating organisation. Either with respect to the client, their advisor, or the provider, the consideration of a wider constraining context of structural factors which might limit and frustrate individual agency was unaddressed. In both cases there was an implicit logic that it is the desire, belief, and activity of job-seeking agents or

organisations which somehow *creates* the job. Given the opportunity to support clients for longer, it was assumed that these clients would then be more likely to 'progress' in work – even though the context for this discussion had been the increasing absence of such 'intermediary' positions. Attending these events, having also worked at street-level, it began to seem that the world as it is imagined by those heavily invested in activation policies and services is one in which there are only agents – a world without structures, without macro-economic factors or forces, in which anything is possible for the agent if only they believe and are prepared to act on that belief. This focus on the quasi-magical agency of individuals might be seen as one consequence of a wider policy-emphasis on activation as a 'supply-side measure', largely divorced from demand-side considerations (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Webster, 2005). The next section turns to look at what happens when a concept explicitly formulated to address the interaction between individuals and a wider constraining context becomes applied at street-level.

“Barriers to Work”

One way to approach this meeting of magical voluntarism, neoliberal ideology, and street-level practice is through the idiom of 'barriers to work.' Like 'creaming and parking', the language of 'barriers to work' enjoys a double life, in academic discourse and in street-level organisations. It is both a conceptual and operational idiom. Considered only in terms of its academic usage, the concept of 'barriers to work' might seem an unlikely vehicle for the forms of magical thinking outlined in the previous section. In academic discourse the concept of 'barriers to work' is closely aligned with that of 'employability' (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2002, 2005). There is considerable debate surrounding this term, its conceptual definition, and its meaning as it figures in the discourse and practices of policy makers. For some, a supply side focus on 'employability' stands in opposition to a demand-side focus on 'employment' (Lister, 2001). As such, it has been argued that a focus on employability draws attention away from the labour market, and focuses blame on

the perceived failings of the unemployed (Peck & Theodore, 2000; Serrano Pascual, 2001). However, as others argue, in some contexts the concept is used to register precisely the kinds of relationships and interactions between individual agency and wider structural and contextual factors that magical voluntarist thinking erases and ignores, and the concept of 'employability' is one that acknowledges 'the importance of both supply-side and demand-side factors affecting the labour market outcomes experienced by individuals' (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 198). Here, 'employability', or its lack, is understood as a complex problem, 'the outcome of a complex of different factors, located in the labour market, in schools, in the recruitment procedures of businesses and in the economic policies implemented by the government' (Kleinman & West, 1998, p. 174) as well as factors more properly pertaining to the individual. The most up-to-date definitions of the concept:

have emphasised the need to understand the interaction of individual and external factors affecting the individual's ability to operate effectively within the labour market. The focus of such analyses is on 'interactive' employability in its truest sense – the dynamic interaction of individual attributes, personal circumstances, labour market conditions, and other 'context' factors (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 207)

Using this framework, the 'barriers³⁰' an individual faces in finding employment are understood to operate at a range of scales, involving the agency of multiple actors, both individual and collective (such as government, employers, educational institutions, etc). There is, therefore, within this definition of 'employability', and in the notion of 'barriers to work', an insistence on the importance of 'demand-side' interventions (but also on the importance of other,

³⁰ McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) provide an extensive breakdown of such barriers, sorting them into the categories 'individual factors', 'personal circumstances', and 'external factors'. These range across things like work experience and skills, personal attributes, access to transport, emotional/caring commitments, employer discrimination, local and regional labour market demand, through to macroeconomic stability. The point here is the insistence on a range of factors operating at different scales, which exist in relationship to one another and that interact: even individual factors such as particular skill-sets can vary in their effects on employability when other factors, such as the local demand for such skills, is taken into account.

non-economic, collective forms of intervention, such as combating discrimination), and the structural factors involved in unemployment. Those making use of the terms in an academic context have 'stressed the need to avoid an approach that involves "blaming the victim"' by focusing solely on 'supply-side' interventions (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 206), although it is argued that this is largely the side on which policy makers have indeed focused (Lister, 2001; Peck & Theodore, 2000; Serrano Pascual, 2001), with activation services such as those studied here providing one example. As such it can be argued that the concept of 'employability,' as it has been applied by policy-makers, has been 'hollowed out' (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 205). The next section, then, will explore the way that 'barriers to work' are conceptualised in street-level activation services, through some of my own observations and data from interviews with street-level staff. In this section it is argued that what fills the hollow space left vacant by neglect of 'demand-side' measures is magical voluntarism and victim blaming of a sort that the concepts of 'employability' and 'barriers to work' are, in their academic usage, meant to avoid. In practice, however, as I will argue below, this highly individualised victim-blaming is often framed and justified using precisely these concepts.

"Barriers" and the anti-sociological imagination: turning public issues into private troubles

"Barriers to work!" It's all coming back to me now. That was a real buzzword wasn't it? Barriers to work. (Simone, advisor, 2008-2010)

Interviewing advisors about the nature, purpose, and everyday activities of their role, nothing arose so consistently – in terms of specific phrasing – as the term 'barriers to work'. For Simone, recalling the term was the spark that lit her memory, prompting a burst of detailed recollection. The term was used consistently across interviews with advisors from different offices and providers. Its use among my former colleagues, and other interviewees who had worked for the same provider organisation, wasn't surprising to me, as the notion had been

central to the little training we had been given, and was used repeatedly in team meetings and supervision. We were often told that the essence of our role, as advisors, was to ‘address’ or to ‘challenge barriers’ – an important difference, which this section will explore.

In some respects, the version of ‘barriers to work’ that was presented to us was not all that different from the one outlined above. We were made to understand that each individual would face highly specific and possibly multiple ‘barriers to work’ particular to their own situation. These might range from problems with their health, with their housing, transport, caring responsibilities, and a host of other complex ‘contextual’ factors. The difference perhaps lay in the degree of emphasis given to individual factors, factors to do with motivation, perception, and attitude.

In training, the advisor role was constructed as a sort of barrier-clinician. Here is Simone, describing her role in this way:

So you'd try and get that out of them, what their, what's stopping them from getting, from starting work. Whether that's anxiety, whether that's concern about benefits, will they be better off, worried about housing or all of this, loads of things like that. And their depression. And so you would talk to them, identify that, and then whatever it was, whether that's referrals, even referrals to the gym, referrals to outside agencies, Access to Work – that was another one. So yeah. Try and identify it, and then work on it. (Simone, advisor, 2008-2010)

Our job was to first identify the barriers someone faced, and then to help remove that barrier so that someone could return to work. Although the distinction was never clearly drawn for us, we were presented with two different ways in which we could do this: for those barriers it was beyond our scope to address (housing, health, debt, substance use problems etc), we could refer on (or ‘signpost’) to other services who might ‘address’ the barrier³¹. In other instances, where the barrier

³¹ I often felt that most useful work I did – sometimes the only valuable work that I could do – in this role was to perform a sort of rough and ready triage, and act as a signpost to other services, whether or not this would help someone ‘move into work’ in the short or long term. This sort of work, which you could attempt to justify in the workplace in terms of the discourse on barriers,

was seen as predominantly 'individual' (having to do in some way with attitude or motivation) we were to address the barrier by 'challenging' it – by trying to alter the claimant's perception in some way. I draw this distinction here because it helps to understand some features of advisors' talk below, despite it not always being a distinction drawn within services (or by advisors) themselves. In fact, one of the main arguments made by this chapter is that often activation services blur this distinction, and encourage advisors to construct any and all barriers as individual barriers – that is, to transform a whole range of contextual, situational factors into individual matters of motivation and attitude, and thus make any situation amenable to magical voluntaristic action. In this way, activation services encourage an anti-sociological imagination (Mills, 2000), turning public issues into private troubles.

The transformation of complex situations into individual problems of attitude can be seen in a number of quotes taken from my interviews with advisors. In advisor-talk there was often a slippage where the identification or articulation of 'barriers' by the client (in more everyday terms, talking about problems they were facing) comes to be seen as the barrier itself – and something to be challenged. Often this slippage was made possible with reference to (a sometimes implied) concept of 'employability.' For example, here is Robert,

So people who weren't confident with themselves or who brought up barriers to work would act in an unconfident kind of way, and therefore wouldn't engage in processes, and I knew they'd be bad in the interview. So I guess you'd challenge that unconfident behaviour.
(Robert, advisor, 2008-2010)

For Robert, a client who comes across as lacking confidence presents a problem, because just as he has identified this lack of confidence, so might an employer at interview. Robert doubts that someone who appears to lack confidence in an

was often not something that would help you meet target. Sometimes it was seen as a distraction. More target-focused advisors did less of it. Another participant, Robert, describes viewing his role in much the same way – saying the most useful work he did was to 'signpost'.

appointment with him will be able to present themselves well to an employer³² – and so, the lack of confidence is itself identified as a ‘barrier’ which limits the claimants’ employability. In this quotation Robert also brings together, or associates (on some level, equates) the client who lacks confidence with the client who ‘brings up barriers,’ which is to say, who articulates to him a series of problems they face which make it difficult to get a job. A lack of confidence, seen as a ‘barrier’ in itself (and not as symptomatic of other problems), is equated with ‘bringing up barriers’, also then seen as a barrier in itself. Here it is the symptom of other problems, or even the *act of raising problems* that is seen as the problem – any specific underlying difficulties are not mentioned. These equivalences, which Robert leaves implicit, were stated much more clearly by Deborah, when I asked her if there were any types of client she found difficult to work with,

I think a lot of people that were on ESA, as much as they were on it, I think they wanted to work. But then there can be some that try not to. They'll say things like, I've got arthritis, I've got a bad back. And they try to distract the appointment talking about their issue, as opposed to what *can* they do. So I would always be like, okay, so you've told me about that, that's great. Let's look at what you *can* do then. There's always that focus on what they can't do. That's the main barrier.
(Deborah, advisor, 2012-2015)

Here Deborah explicitly identifies the presentation of problems by clients as being itself the ‘main barrier.’ In particular it is clients’ articulation of their health problems – and she is talking about ESA claimants, whose claim is based on their having a health problem – that is viewed as an attempt to ‘distract’ the

³² This kind of assumption was explicitly encouraged. We were told that our perceptions (prejudices) were likely to be shared by employers (in many cases this was likely correct, but with regressive consequences). The equation was often drawn between attending an appointment with us, and attending work – a link explicitly made by some advisors in their interview, but also by some claimants, such as Maria in the previous chapter (see: p.168). It was suggested that clients who were late to see us would likely be late for work too – so we needed to challenge this lateness and set expectations just as an employer would. In setting these expectations with clients, we would be in a much better position to assess their employability. Obviously there are differences between attending a welfare-to-work appointment and going to work, but we were supposed to actively minimise these differences by telling our clients that they were to treat an appointment with us *as if* it was work, and even to dress accordingly. This was seen as an essential part of ‘preparing’ someone to return to work.

appointment. I asked her to tell me more about what she meant by 'focusing on what they can't do':

Well, because if you're focusing all the time on what someone can't do, you're almost reaffirming that lack of belief that they can get a job. So for me, I'm not a counsellor, I'm not there to say, oh, I know everything about such and such, but because we've got quite a lot of training on different conditions, you could ask certain questions and get them to deter away from that so that they can focus actually on helping them and employability. Because I think you can get really stuck in that role being, oh, tell me a little bit more about it, then? Oh, that must be really hard. You know, and then you're kind of almost exasperating [sic] it. You're letting that keep live on because you're constantly like, oh dear, you can't do that. That's okay. We'll just see you in a month's time. That's not going to help someone, I don't think. (Deborah, advisor, 2012-2015)

Listening too much to clients, or showing understanding (presented here in terms of focusing too much on their problems) is seen here as a risk, something that an advisor might get stuck in. Focusing too much on problems is also dangerous, because it can undermine the belief that Deborah considers important to them getting a job. Deborah here echoes something I heard a lot when I was an advisor, that it was important to turn conversations away from a discussion of problems (on what someone can't do) toward a conversation about what they could do (sometimes reference was made to 'solution focused therapy'³³). This procedure is often presented (as it is here and as it was during my time as an advisor) in pragmatic terms as the most helpful thing to do. The possibility that it might also harmfully diminish the difficulties someone is facing, or in some way have the effect of silencing them, was not something that was ever openly voiced or considered. It was tacitly understood that to voice such a thing would (by the magical logic of activation) also be unhelpful, because it would refocus the

³³ This is a form of brief therapy which draws a distinction between being 'solution-focused' as opposed to 'problem-focused' (O'Connell, 2005). References were made to the techniques of solution-focused therapy during my advisor training, but this was not a formal training in the technique. Rather, certain principles were highlighted: not focusing on, or 'talking into' the problem; focusing on the future rather than the past; encouraging clients to think of exceptions to problems; reframing problems in terms of their solution.

conversation on the 'problem' and on what you 'can't do' – and, as indicated in the previous chapter, this went for advisors as much as for clients.

This 'pragmatic' focus on individual (magical) agency comes at the expense of being able to talk openly about difficulties and problems. I have suggested that this individualising thrust of activation can be understood as congruent with certain aspects of neoliberal ideology, and as an example of 'magical voluntarism'. However, whilst I think wider socio-cultural and 'ideological' currents undoubtedly feed into, and make such forms of thought palatable and plausible, I think it is important to emphasise that there are other, perhaps more concrete street-level factors that go into producing these ways of constructing the claimant's situation. There is a sense in which the individualisation of context-laden problems is indeed the most pragmatic form of action that an advisor can take – because it is the *only* form of action they can take. Deborah says that she is not a counsellor, and as such is unqualified to address some of the issues her clients present to her. Advisors were often aware of the broader contexts of their clients' problems, but (beyond 'signposting') came to individualise these contexts precisely because they were powerless to address them as anything other than individual problems of attitude and perception – a point made very clearly by Robert:

It's kind of quite tricky...because I wasn't in a position where I could remove any of those barriers really because [I wasn't a] qualified substance misuse counsellor, I wasn't a psychologist or a psychiatrist, or a doctor or a nurse, so. My role was to help people change their perspective on those barriers, to see were those barriers the all encompassing I've-been-signed-off-all-work that they felt they were, or they'd been led to believe they were [by medical professionals]. My job was to help them understand, well perhaps, you know, if I've got a physical health complaint could I be doing a job that doesn't require a lot of physical activity? Could I have a phased return to work where I'm doing part time hours? Stuff like that, so. It was kind of changing people's perspectives and trying to let their talents and capabilities define them rather than their health complaints. (Robert, advisor, 2008-2010)

In this sense, the role of the street-level advisor is to transform a variety of different problems, with a range of complex determinants and contextual factors, into individual problems of perception. In doing so, it is also to 'challenge' the understanding that others have of these problems – be they clients themselves, but also other professionals such as doctors, counsellors, support workers, housing officers – if these construct the problem in such a way as to place limits on what someone might do to either find or 'prepare' for work. Viewed from this perspective, activation services are about the privatisation of problems and the practice of an anti-sociological imagination which disconnects individuals from their wider context: they are about the production of decontextualised subjects. The irony here is that one of the main conceptual instruments through which this is articulated and achieved at street-level – the concept of barriers – was explicitly formulated in order to *make* such connections.

Bad magic: social sadism and sanctions

One of the street-level consequences of 'magical activation', with its decontextualising focus on belief, is the production of 'bad subjects', and this might be understood as a form of 'bad magic'. In discussing what he calls 'rites of institution', Bourdieu (1991, pp. 117–126) draws attention to a form of social magic in which various social relations and effects of social structure come to be seen as the embodied properties of individuals. For example, in the awarding of a degree from a particular elite institution, the accumulated dispositions of a habitus as it has made its trajectory through social space, and the various structural conditions and advantages which have made this journey possible, are crystallised in a title which the individual is entitled to deploy as a form of capital – which is to say, as a form of power. One feature of this form of social magic, which is efficacious to the extent that it is recognised and believed, is that various 'contextual' factors are, in the act of embodiment, through the rite of institution, erased or made invisible.

What I would like to suggest in this section is that for some people, activation services perform a similar 'rite of institution' albeit in an inverted form: what gets instituted, or comes to be regarded as the embodied property of individuals, are not the signs of accumulated advantage but rather of disadvantage³⁴. The same process is at work here: the effects of a particular trajectory through social space are seen to inhere, not in this trajectory, or its structural conditions, but in the individual themselves. However, in its inverted form what is gained through this process is not rank or prestige, or a form of capital which can be exchanged or deployed as symbolic power. Rather, through this process individuals, consecrated as 'bad' claimants, gain the sign or mark (the stigma) of in consequence, of disposability, which entitles them to become a kind of scapegoat, and the legitimate target of social sadism (Miéville, 2015), acting as a repository or container for the disavowed frustrations of those around them – most obviously, of advisors. A sensitive topic, advisors were reluctant to discuss the issue of sanctions with me during interviews, and when discussed it was often in vague terms. However, I would suggest that this process has an important role to play in the way that sanctions are produced, and this interpretation fits with the existing research which shows that sanctions disproportionately affect already disadvantaged groups (Homeless Link, 2013; Reeve, 2017).

In the previous section it was seen how advisors are encouraged to both believe in their clients, and encourage clients to believe in themselves. This is part and parcel of an emphasis on the quasi-magical agency of individuals to alter their own situation regardless of its particularities. It was argued that there is something radically de-contextualising about this way of processing claimants. Furthermore, this can be linked to what Friedli and Stearn (2015) refer to as 'coercive positivity':

³⁴ Similarly, activation services, in 'creaming', make capital from accumulated social processes in which they have paid very little part. To the extent that activation services, and activation workers, try to claim credit for the positive outcomes achieved by creaming, they also perform a rite of institution, consecrating already advantaged clients as activated, deserving, good claimants. What I describe here might be understood, alongside 'parking' and 'protection', as another alternative to creaming.

to the extent that 'outcomes' are regarded as the result of belief, then there is a corresponding injunction for both advisors and claimants to be positive, to emphasise in each and every case what is possible, what can be done as opposed to what can't (and the reasons why). This positivity might also be understood as a 'hidden condition' (Manji, 2016) of activation, to the extent that it was taken as indicative of the proper kind of 'active' engagement. There is a paradox of sorts here, in that what advisors were looking for was a demonstration of good-will, willingness, and enthusiasm to 'voluntarily' engage with something into which claimants had effectively been coerced. As will be seen below, to the extent that advisors were invested in the 'myth of altruism' and the 'ideology of benign intervention' (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 71, 119) – that is, in the idea that their actions, like their conscious intentions, were always benign and beneficial – then expressions of opposition from claimants who felt coerced and subject to malign intervention posed a threat to their self-conception and self-image. The response of advisors to this situation was, as described by Lipsky (2010, p. 153), to alter their conceptions of claimants, locating the source of such perceptions not in their own actions, or those of the 'service', but in the dispositions and attitudes of clients themselves. The negative labelling and categorisation of 'difficult' clients is well documented in the street-level literature on employment services (Brodkin, 2013c; Watkins-Hayes, 2009; S. Wright, 2003). Here, I draw attention to the way that such labelling, in the context of a 'behavioural conditionality' focused largely on 'attitude' and positive self-presentation, puts clients at risk of punitive practice in the form of sanctions.

It is understandable that advisors had a preference for working with individuals who showed willingness and good will toward the programme, or who appeared motivated and positive. In a straightforward sense, this made life easier for advisors: it is easy to work with someone who, at the very minimum, is not suspicious or resistant to the programme. Being willing and positive were often ways that advisors assessed whether clients were 'job ready' or not. Mixed in with

this was the sense that clients *ought* to be in some way compliant. Susan told me that ideally she preferred to work with:

someone with a positive attitude. Who takes on board what you are saying, and tries to make the changes...So you need somebody who will listen to constructive feedback, who will take on board the guidance that you're giving them, you know, who understands that you are there to help them. (Susan, advisor, 2010-2015)

Here a positive attitude is also associated with compliance, with the proper 'active' engagement with the programme, but also with 'understanding that [advisors] are there to help them'. The issue of a willingness to accept help also came up in my interview with Isabelle:

Well I think you're always going to want to have a client that's willing to engage with you, and to be on board with you, and to accept the support that you're there to provide for them. But I think it's very hard when you've got somebody who displays an attitude that is so against a system, and they see it as a system, and they see it as a churn, and they don't see it as somebody helping. And for me, I always found it quite ironic, that there was a willingness to, and a right of entitlement, almost, to gain off the system, but unwilling to engage in actually what comes with it. And I suppose that's my personal view on that. (Isabelle, advisor, 2008-2012)

In these quotations it can be seen how an understandable preference for working with individuals who showed good will toward the programme, and who appeared motivated or positive also had another kind of moral significance for some advisors. For Isabelle being willing to engage, but also to some extent trusting the programme (not seeing it as 'a system'), were considered to be a form of responsibility attendant to claimants' rights. From Susan, also, there was a sense that claimants *ought* to understand that she was really there to help them. What I wish to draw attention to here is the way that certain pragmatic considerations of 'job readiness' as having to do with motivation or willingness, can also become elided with moral notions of duty, and notions of how claimants ought to view their participation in the programme, and by extension, their advisor. Claimants

who did not show the proper attitude in this way were liable to be labelled as 'difficult', 'negative', or 'bad'. Here I quote Susan, discussing the sorts of client she perceived to be difficult. I do so at greater length, because here Susan draws together several themes from this chapter, showing how certain ideological notions and practices hang together and make sense for those invested in the street-level activation *illusio*:

What I don't like is a person that comes in, 'There's nae jobs here and bloody foreigners, they're taking them.' [Sighs]. An attitude like that, you're going nowhere. Quite often their attitude is the biggest barrier to their getting a job. And quite often it can be difficult to change that attitude. The other is maybe Employment and Support Allowance customers that maybe come in, and you've got to be careful here because some of them, they really are genuine, and you think, 'My god why are you on the Work Programme?' But others you can understand why they've been assessed as being on the Work Related Activity Group. But again, it's the big attitude, the big negative attitude. 'What am I here for? I won't be able to get a job.' It's a flipping carry on. 'I've got this... And I shouldn't be able to work.' And, you know, you try and kind of put it across to them with fear of getting your fingers bitten, you know, that there's loads of people working with different things. There's loads of people working with bad backs and depression and all that. It's how you get that across to them. But what we try and do is focus on the positive, so although they've come to you with this negativity, it's about looking at what can you pull out of that, how can you make it positive, how can you keep hitting them with positivity, and remember these people have maybe been entrenched in this attitude for a number of years, and their GPs and all the medical professionals are all agreeing with them. And now they've suddenly hit Work Programme, and it's 'You're capable of restricted work, within your capabilities.' How do you change that attitude? So, that can be a bad customer coming in, it's just all this negativity that you've got to deal with. And then [on] the other side its positive customers that are keen to get your help and guidance into work. (Susan, advisor, 2010-2015)

Here Susan draws together the different themes of this chapter, which together go toward producing her definition of a 'bad client'. For Susan the biggest barrier to getting a job is someone's attitude, and attitude can refer to someone's propensity to be difficult or raise problems of various sorts, from health problems to a lack of

jobs. Susan later referred to this 'type' of client as 'Mr Negative', a character who reappeared throughout the remainder of our interview. For Susan, Mr Negative was supported in his attitudes by other professionals, such as GPs³⁵, and was also someone she feared, or who she felt was hostile and might 'bite her fingers'. If Mr Negative is seen as someone who is potentially violent, then there is also a sense of retribution or revenge in the way that Susan describes her response: the way she deals with this kind of client is to 'keep hitting them with positivity' or to try and 'pull' positivity out of them. Here the advisor recognises her aggressive impulses and actions, but describes them in benign terms. In one sense, this is an admission that the focus on 'positivity' and on 'what can be done' is also a form of aggression, a weapon. However, from Susan's point of view this is a legitimate, benign form of aggression. Susan doesn't mention the fact that clients are mandated to attend, or that in the case of ESA claimants there is no obligation to actively seek work, an interesting omission because in her interview she seemed to feel genuinely confused and sometimes hurt that some clients didn't view her as having helpful or benign intent. For Emily, however, disillusioned with the field, and with no investment in the ideology of benign intervention, the 'weapon' of activation is explicitly tied to conditionality and the coercion inherent to conditional activation:

It [conditional activation] was essentially a weapon of, if you do what we want and get a job, we will give you back your autonomy. This is the price. Up until that point you belong to us. You have to come here. You have to do what we say, and once you've ticked all the boxes and got a job, you can then become an independent person and do as you wish. But up to that point, you belong to us. (Emily, advisor, 2008-2009)

For Emily, conditionality is a weapon, a form of aggression, because it is founded on coercion. This perception lay at the heart of Emily's disillusionment with the role. The consequences for advisors of this kind of perception, and this kind of

³⁵ The views of other professionals are challenging precisely to the extent that they often work to connect and provide context for a range of problems and difficulties extraneous to an individual's belief or attitudes – be that health, housing, debt etc.

disillusionment, were explored in Chapter Six, and usually precipitated an exit from the field. However, just as it is incumbent on advisors to 'believe' in the benign nature of their role, for those advisors so invested, this duty to be willing, positive, and *to believe* extends to claimants too. Mr Negative, however, is someone that refuses to 'believe' in the programme; they are also someone who refuses to accept that they – and their position as a claimant – are disconnected from other contextual factors. Moreover, they are someone who refuses to act as if they are there voluntarily, or to pretend that their participation is anything other than coerced. These clients were often highly frustrating or exasperating for advisors to work with. Not only did they present a challenge to the ideology of benign intervention, but they forced advisors to confront the issue of failure:

There were times when there was a level of frustration that you can kind of sense, in the office, and it was frustration around, you're not doing what I want you to do...It was very much a case of here's a process, the same one for everyone, five jobs a day, call these people, write these letters, do these interview techniques and you will get a job. But it doesn't work for everyone. (Emily, advisor, 2008-2009)

Several advisors spoke of the way that claimants made them feel frustrated, and this frustration was often the result of struggles to meet targets, and clients not doing what the advisor wanted them to do, or not reacting in the ways they expected (e.g., to interview offers, job offers etc). For Emily this frustration sometimes permeated the office where we worked. Reflecting back on her experiences, she understands this frustration as arising from a lack of awareness or a refusal on the part of advisors to understand what their clients' experiences were like – or as she later put it, 'to actually truly understand where they were coming, what struggles they were going through'. As this chapter has argued, the refusal to understand, or to actively disregard certain aspects of a claimant's situation and struggles was constitutive of the magical ideology of activation: advisors, and by extension claimants, were not supposed to dwell on their difficulties, or more broadly the context of 'where they were coming from'. It is this active refusal to understand which makes it possible to typify clients as one more example of 'Mr

Negative'. I would argue that this kind of client-labelling exemplifies a form of 'bad magic' in which the collection of problems which claimants have brought to the activation encounter becomes collapsed into an 'attitude' or even something less mutable about who the client really *is* (perceived to be). The transformation of the consequences, expression, or presentation of problems into *the main problem itself* means that those clients with the most intractable problems – not always visible to advisors – are also liable to be the most frustrating; as such they are particularly vulnerable to becoming the target of advisors' frustrations and aggressive impulses, including but not limited to sanctions. That advisors engaged in punitive forms of behaviour was acknowledged, though no participants addressed it directly. Rather they alluded to the practices of others, from which they were keen to distance themselves. Here, however, I would suggest that the experiences of claimants are instructive: the previous chapter introduced Bridget, who worried about what her next advisor would be like, and how they would interpret her situation. Punitive practice, for claimants, is experienced as something arbitrary and difficult to control – something that results from interpersonal encounters, the prejudices of their advisors, and how advisors happen to interpret a situation. I would suggest that punitive practices at street-level can also be the expressions of frustration, exacerbated by targets, and encouraged by an ideological refusal (elevated to the level of principle) to understand why things aren't going the way an advisor imagines or believes they could – if only their clients would believe too.

Magical voluntarism

Activation, it has been argued, is based on the ideological fantasy of magical voluntarism. At street-level this can be understood as an 'imaginary system' (Crawford and Flint 2015) that invests the individual with quasi-magical powers of agency – the ability to alter their situation and personal circumstances through sheer force of will and 'positive thinking'. In this way, this chapter has explored, from the point of view of advisors, the system of coercive positivity identified by

Friedli and Stearns (2015). Owing to their basis in the fantasy of magical voluntarism, the ideological practices of activation systematically erase and ignore the various structural and supra-individual factors that condition and determine individual circumstance and experience. At street-level, however, this fantasy must confront the lived reality of these circumstances, which are often composed of concrete problems and obstacles that are intractable to individual will power and positive thinking, but also to street-level agency intervention.

For the street-level bureaucrat (and for the claimant, but in a different way) this presents a problem; when confronted by reality this fantasy must either be abandoned, or certain aspects of reality must be rejected, denied, or disavowed. In the psychoanalytic idiom such a form of disavowed relationship to reality is characterised as 'perverse,' and is usually accompanied by a fetishised substitute for reality. Žižek (2008) characterises such a relationship to reality as ideological, and the subject of ideology as one who acts 'as if' the fantasy were, indeed, the reality. Several authors have pointed to the ways that the neoliberal valorisation of the self, and neoliberal practices of performance management and auditing, encourage such a perverse and ideological relation to reality (in this case the reality of claimants' circumstances that prevent them from finding or keeping paid work). The valorisation of the individual encourages the denial or denigration of relatedness and dependency (Layton, 2010, 2014; Peacock et al 2014). Practices of performance management and auditing come to act as a fetish, a substitute for reality – that is, the measurement comes to substitute for the thing itself (Hoggett, 2010; Long, 2008). This chapter has explored some of these dynamics as they operate in the specific context of street-level activation services, showing how the denial of dependency, the decontextualisation of the claimant, and the pressure to achieve fetishised performance measures, create the conditions in which certain clients are transformed into the legitimate objects of punitive practice and social sadism.

Conclusion

This chapter began with my own perplexity at the prevalence of 'belief-talk' in activation services, which it then went on to explore in greater depth. It asked the questions: how do advisors process clients?; what does 'activation' mean for advisors?; and, what form does the myth of altruism take in street-level activation services? This chapter argued that activation is based on an ideological fantasy – of 'magical voluntarism' – and that this fantasy shaped the ways that advisors interpreted and conceptualised their clients. Specifically, this ideological fantasy encouraged advisors to decontextualize their clients, and instead focus on matters of attitude, belief, and motivation. Advisors often make a distinction between positive and negative clients, or those who seem willing and motivated. There is an irony here, in that advisors preferred to work with clients who acted as if they have sought the service out voluntarily. Willingness, enthusiasm, and to a certain extent, compliance were important ways of differentiating clients. There is some indication that this distinction is even more important than considerations of employability or proximity to the labour market; some advisors say that positivity and employability amount to the same thing. However, it is not clear from the research whether this holds in practice. Advisors do sometimes recognise that people face very different 'barriers to work' and are differently positioned with respect to labour market. To see what difference positivity or employability make in practice would require observation. However, advisors often felt unable to address these barriers, and focused instead on attitude. In this way activation often entails a focus on attitude; activation appears to be about changing peoples' attitudes so that they are more positive about, or 'believe in', work. Positivity and negativity could, however, affect advisors perceptions about whether someone is engaging, and therefore meeting their conditions. In some cases it seems that having a positive attitude and being well-disposed to the activation programme is a 'hidden condition'. Investment in, and compromise with the activation field entails investing in an 'imaginary system' characterised by 'magical activation' explicitly linking belief, attitude, and employability. The focus on belief and

attitude creates the conditions for 'bad magic' and the identification of 'bad clients', the legitimate target of punitive practice and social sadism.

Chapter Nine – Conclusion: conditionality and activation in street-level welfare-to-work services

Street-level montage

This thesis has explored the policies of conditionality and activation as they are materialised at street-level in the lives and experiences of both advisors and benefit recipients. Before embarking on its empirical street-level journey, the thesis traced the recent development of both conditionality and activation in British social policy, drawing attention to their ideological rationale and reliance on the persistent but widely contested tropes of ‘dependency’ and ‘demoralisation’ (Mead, 1997; Murray et al, 1999; Prideaux, 2010; see Chapter Two). Here, it was argued that there was a need to understand how these policies are experienced through and alongside such moralising narratives and stigmatising representations. Introducing the street-level perspective of the thesis (Chapter Three), attention was drawn to the twin-track of policy reform shaping street-level spaces of activation: beside the ‘formal’ policies of conditionality and activation, there have also been important changes to the governance of the welfare state, meaning that activation is often implemented by private and voluntary sector contractors operating in a quasi-marketised environment. Following the argument that it is necessary to attend to street-level organisations as places where both policy *and* politics are mediated (Brodkin, 2013a), here the thesis focused its attention on the significance of this marketised context for the experience of activation, and on the role of street-level management practices in particular.

The managerial and policy context of activation is one in which both advisors and claimants are treated, by operational and formal policies respectively, as versions of the ‘rational’ utility-maximising actor, or, as potentially deviant subjects who must be disciplined into following the desired course – in either case, they are seen as responsive to systems of incentives and disincentives in relatively straightforward ways. Whilst this is a view also taken in some of the street-level

literature (Brodkin, 2011, 2013b; Soss et al., 2013), the thesis also drew attention to work highlighting the importance of ‘culture’, ‘identity’, or ‘values’ in guiding the practice of street-level actors (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). This thesis adopted the view that, whilst both claimants and advisors might come to the street-level situation with a variety of identities, orientations, and relational investments, they are nonetheless also in practice subjected to models which presuppose a particular kind of subjectivity, or which otherwise try to fashion one (Soss et al., 2013; Wright, 2016b). This is to say, both advisors and claimants become, through policy, at street-level, imbricated among complex relations of power. Responding to this analytical problem, the thesis proposed a theoretical approach capable of investigating the way such models as are applied to claimants and advisors are experienced, accommodated, and perhaps also contested or resisted (Chapter Four). In constructing a conceptual framework for this approach, the thesis offered an original psychosocial synthesis of Bourdieusian (Bourdieu, 1977, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) sociological theory and psychoanalytic concepts.

Before training its gaze at street-level, the thesis outlined the ethnographic sensibility it would adopt vis-à-vis the apprehension and analysis of street-level data (Chapter Five). This was a sensibility which sought, not to isolate discrete street-level phenomenon, but rather to perceive its chosen focal points in terms of their entanglements with each other, but also with other objects in the field. In so doing, the thesis assembled a variety of different perspectives on street-level activation such that ‘activation’ might be apprehended according to some its different constituent street-level relations and experiences. This was not, nor could it be, exhaustive; rather, the intention was to generate a multi-layered and contextual account sensitive to ambiguity, contradiction, and tension between its various elements. Among the different perspectives brought together by the thesis were those of former advisors, current advisors, claimants of ESA and JSA, as well as my own experiences as a street-level advisor. In so doing, the thesis makes an

original empirical contribution particularly with respect to its incorporation of both advisor *and* claimant experiences, of former advisors in particular, and in the auto-ethnographic treatment of my own experiences as a 'complete member' of the field. With respect to gathering data from former advisors, here the thesis makes an original contribution by enquiring into the limits and boundaries of this particular street-level field.

Activation patterns

In the following sections I would like to draw together some of the different argumentative threads which make their way through this thesis. These are thematic, but they also broadly reflect the preceding chapter structure. These themes are 'street-level symptoms', 'obscure dynamics', and 'street-level fantasy'. In the first section I draw together the conclusions pertaining to the analysis of street-level advisors and their investments in the field, highlighting its significance for the way that street-level research understands matters of street-level practice. In the second section I draw together the arguments pertaining to the 'obscure dynamics' of street-level relations, pointing to the thesis' contribution in terms of analysing some existing phenomenon in terms of their relational dynamics. Finally, the third section pulls together both the analysis of street-level symptoms and their obscure dynamics into the main argumentative stream of the thesis, which is the understanding of activation policy as a kind of fantasy and a magical thinking.

Street-level symptoms

One of the central claims of this thesis is that street-level actors ought not to be understood as either pre-formed 'rational' agents, responding to a calculus of choice (Brodkin, 2013c), or in terms of an integrated identity, of which their practice is the expression (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003). Rather, this thesis argues that street-level actors themselves need to be understood as locations of conflict, tension, contradiction and division, and that attention to them as such

illuminates both the subjective experiences of street-level workers, but also the wider fabric of social relations (which are also relations of power) in which they are entangled. The thesis enquired as to the ways that advisors become drawn to the activation field, the conflicts they faced within it, the ways they coped and negotiated with these conflicts, but also the ways they left the field and, consequently, to the field's boundaries and limits.

Overwhelmingly, advisors were drawn to and became invested in activation work through notions of help and helping others. These notions were, to different degrees, often imbued with paternalist inflections resonant with the ideological frameworks guiding formal activation and conditionality policy. Sometimes, however, advisors described coming to the role with quite vague notions and an ill-defined sense of what 'help' might mean, and here they were oriented by the nature of the work as they found it. Their definitions of help were shaped by their experiences of the field, through their perceptions of what their clients needed, but also in terms of how their employer defined these needs. These coincided, for different advisors, to different degrees.

Despite the differences among advisors – as to how they perceived their role, and how they defined 'help' – the main tensions they experienced were often very similar (although accorded different kinds of meaning and significance). These were the tensions between their idea of the role and of 'helping' clients; the need to meet monthly performance targets; and the work-first emphasis of conditional activation. These, in a way, describe different aims and objectives within the field – some of which were brought by advisors themselves, others which were more or less imposed on them (e.g. targets). Of these different aims, targets were, for all advisors, dominant. This was true both for those advisors who accepted and submitted to the target regime, seeing it as legitimate, and for those who resisted or rejected it. This dominance can be seen in the way that, of the different street-level aims and objectives, only acceptance or acquiescence to the target regime could secure continued participation in the field. In a sense, then, advisors

experienced domination through targets; for some this operated in terms of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1991), where this regime shaped the way they conceptualised their role and practice; for others this regime was perceived to be illegitimate – although again, such a perception usually signalled an exit from the field in one way or another. The illegitimacy of targets was often the result of a perception that they were not only in tension with other important aims – such as helping clients – but in contradiction with them. The short-term emphasis on job outcomes, when combined with the regime of work-first conditionality, produced some of the most fraught dilemmas for those advisors who dissented from either aspect of the field; some perceived activation, in this form, to be a kind of weapon, blunt and unwieldy, and the cause of harm rather than help. This was especially the case with clients that advisors perceived to be either too unwell, or to have problems too complex, for the service to adequately address.

These dilemmas and conflicts were dealt with in various ways. In particular, advisors could make use of the incentive systems operative within the field to pursue other ends – ends which enabled them to bring their actual activation practice into closer alignment with their conceptions, hopes for, or beliefs about the role (Lipsky, 2010). For example, the widely commented on practice of creaming and parking (Carter & Whitworth, 2015; Finn, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Rees et al., 2014), whilst on the one hand helping advisors to manage their caseload in order to meet performance targets, could also serve a second function in that it allowed them to ‘protect’ or ‘shelter’ those clients for whom they deemed the ‘service’ to be unsuitable. Here, I have argued against a kind of managerial or monocausal view of such practices (as solely determined by calculative concerns, for example), in favour of viewing them symptomatically – which is to say, as the expression of various conflicts within the field, and as something, potentially, overdetermined. The analysis of such street-level symptoms requires attention to the meaning(s) they hold for those who participate in them. To view creaming and parking in terms of the allocation of resources is to adopt a (concealed) normative position vis-à-vis the value and meaning of those ‘resources’, as if the particular

form they take is not also situated, constrained and determined. Put simply, advisors did not always think their service was 'good' for everyone; sometimes this reflected their perception of what was realistic given the wider policy, labour market, and organisational contexts. Through this example, this research makes the wider point that in analysing street-level practices it is important to attend to the meanings these have for those involved in them.

This is one example of the way that advisors coped with street-level conflict. However, the thesis also argues that the dilemmas and conflicts contained within the street-level field are also sometimes internalised by participants; here, coping, or the resolution of conflict, requires that advisors make more or less conscious adjustments to their dispositions and habitus. This is a form of coping which requires that street-level actors bring their subjective perceptions more into line with the sorts of practices that are *required of them by the field* (Bourdieu, 2000). In exploring this experience, the thesis made recourse to the psychoanalytic concepts of splitting, disavowal, and projection (Freud, 1991a; Hoggett, 2006; Klein, 1946), deployed in order to understand the psychosocial dynamics of street-level coping. Attention to such conflicts thus reveals more than the subjective experiences of advisors; it also reveals important relations of power operative within the field. Here, the thesis argues that managerial power is pre-eminent, and precludes advisors acting on perceptions of need which fall beyond the narrow scope set by conditional work-first activation. The effects of this power are clearly visible in the experiences of advisors who speak of becoming, or having to become, a different sort of person. The form of activation implicitly dictated through the operational focus on targets and outcomes is not simply work-first activation, but is also an authoritarian and paternalist form of activation. Advisors spoke of the pressure to become 'harder' or 'tougher' with their clients. No countervailing pressure to be 'softer' or 'more understanding' was described; indeed, such positions were sometimes disparaged and denigrated by those on whom the role had a more secure hold.

Obscure dynamics

If with respect to street-level practices this thesis argues that these be understood symptomatically, in terms of the meaning(s) they hold, then another important claim made by this thesis is that these meanings are not always conscious (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). This is particularly important with respect to the arguments made in relation to claimants' experiences of activation. The relations and forms of experience that policies of conditionality and activation produce are complex, and not reducible to the adjustment of incentives. There are clear material threats presented by conditionality, but these are often denied or disavowed, and so the operations of discipline, control, and power exercised through conditionality and sanctions are not always clearly expressed 'surface' or discursive phenomenon. In some instances conditionality and activation were accepted by claimants as legitimate, in others as illegitimate; this might be during the same interview. Here, the thesis argues that the experiences of conditionality and activation that claimants might present during a research encounter are likely to be highly determined by a range of contextual, situational factors (Rapley, 2001). Where the mandatory nature of activation means it is impossible to withdraw consent in practice without attracting punishment, likewise, it is also difficult to withdraw consent at a discursive level without attracting the penalty of stigma. Here the alignment of conditionality and activation with denigrating narratives about welfare dependency (Jensen, 2014; Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013) redoubles the material power that the threat of sanctions introduces. However, even in cases where there is conscious consent and compliance, it is possible to discern that conditional activation might still exact a psychological cost on claimants.

The thesis this research develops is that conditional work-first activation can take the form of a protection racket. That is, the regime of activation produces both the threat and the means of defence simultaneously; to the extent that there is compliance with the programme, this results from the need to protect oneself from

danger. As a dynamic relational form, this is a situation liable to produce various forms of conscious and unconscious dissembling. The thesis introduces and outlines the constituent features of this protection racket: the widespread suspicion and surveillance to which claimants are subject from the outset; the threat of material sanction but also of psychosocial penalty; the need to evidence their activity and, hence, eligibility or 'deservingness'; and differential access to help and support with respect to providing such evidence of active deservingness. The thesis argues that where claimants consent to conditionality and activation, the threat posed by sanctions is often denied or disavowed; to the extent that they 'engage' with the programme then this threat is *not really meant for them*.

Activation allows claimants to disavow the threat that has been made to them, seeing it as *really* meant for other 'bad' claimants (cf: Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). The threats of conditionality can thus be contained, often by 'good' advisors (Hoggett, 2005; Lyth, 1988). Advisors are perceived to be good to the extent that they are understanding and helpful; however, notably this help often has to do with producing the forms of evidence that are required to forestall the material and psychological penalties of sanctions and stigma. Claimants who otherwise valued their advisors were nonetheless inclined to view them as ineffectual with respect to the explicit and official goals of activation: namely, helping someone return to work.

In making these arguments the thesis draws on other established research on the agency of welfare subjects (Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004; Wright, 2016b), and on people's coping mechanisms when subjected to denigration and stigmatisation as a result of class position and/or material circumstances: namely, practices of 'Othering', (Lister, 2004; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013) understood here in terms of splitting, disavowal, and projection. Where this thesis makes an original contribution is in situating such practices as part of the policy programme of conditionality and activation itself. These policies both work alongside but also enlist and enrol common ideological representations and narratives about

dependency; the programmes both act on and act through these representations. It is in this sense that the research develops the thesis that 'activation' is also the activation of stigma.

Activation fantasy and street-level magic

The different argumentative threads pursued throughout this thesis, from the symptomatic nature of street-level practice, to the sometimes obscure dynamics of activation, are grounded in a more central argument: what gets implemented, materialised, or enacted at street-level is not simply a policy, but also the fantasy on which this policy is based. It is in trying to enact and make this fantasy fit with various aspects of street-level reality that street-level symptoms and their sometimes obscure dynamics are produced. To the extent that adherence to this fantasy is required by the field, as a form of belief, then street-level activation programmes also become populated with their own peculiar forms of magical thinking. The point of such magical thinking is to reconcile various street-level contradictions and maintain the activation *illusio*.

Street-level activation is, in many respects, a highly restricted form of intervention. As other scholars have argued (Bonoli, 2010; Clasen & Clegg, 2007), the form activation has taken in the UK is predominantly incentive reinforcement (through conditionality). Where, in other iterations, activation might include access to training, education, and other development opportunities, the work-first approach taken in the UK aims at more or less immediate labour market entry. Much of advisors' activity revolves around increasing the intensity of job search, volume of applications, widening job goals (to include less-preferred types of work), and coaching people for interviews. Advisors do also perform a 'signposting' function, but the value of this role is clearly dependent on the wider ecology of services in which they are situated (as well as the inclination of advisors to undertake this sort of work when it does not yield formal recognition in terms of their targets). What activation aims to produce, then, is more competition and more competitive

job applicants (Peck, 2001) – not in the sense of better trained, qualified, or otherwise more preferentially positioned, but more competitive in an existential sense – where applicants, with whatever skills and competencies they already have (and whatever difficulties and disadvantages too) pursue whatever vacancies already exist with more energy, effort, and intensity.

This situation does not, of itself, indicate the operations of fantasy. Here, the issue is not simply that activation is a form of ‘supply side’ intervention which targets only individuals (Lister, 1998; Serrano Pascual, 2001; Webster, 2006), or aims at the stimulation and intensification of competition (Peck, 2001; Wiggan, 2015)³⁶; rather, the fantasy resides in the refusal to recognise the intervention as such and, therefore, the refusal to recognise its necessarily restricted and incomplete nature. This is a form of denial, and results in inflated and delusional claims made for the power of individual agency, belief, and will-power to effect changes to situations and circumstances which are, from a ‘common sense’ point of view as much as a social science one, also highly constrained and conditioned by a variety of factors that lie beyond the scope of individual agential capabilities. What is denied are the contexts of competition; the fact that people are differentially placed to compete; and, that the ‘outcomes’ of this sort of competition depend on much else besides the factors of ‘belief’ or ‘motivation’ to which they are nonetheless attributed.

The activation fantasy is thus the notion that belief itself creates the job, and that interventions aimed at increasing ‘motivation’ and ‘belief’ are in themselves sufficient to address complex situations in which a variety of multi-level factors combine to produce any single individual predicament. It is also the notion that ‘a job’ is the solution to nearly every problem. The form this fantasy takes, at street-

³⁶ For Wiggan (2015), what are sometimes regarded as the unintended consequences of such programmes and their design – e.g. creaming and parking – can be viewed, in critical political-economic terms, as their purpose and function. Creaming and parking, for example, perform an important function in facilitating labour market segregation, and as such these programmes assist the functioning of an increasingly flexible labour market. Such links between street-level practice and its political-economic effects – that is, linking these levels of analysis – falls outside the scope of this thesis, but is one way in which this work might be developed.

level, is a kind of ‘magical voluntarism’ (Fisher, 2011; Smail, 2005) in which the context(s) of labour-market competition is/are effectively denied. This can be seen quite clearly in the way that the concept of ‘barriers to work’ is subverted in street-level activation services, becoming the means for transforming any number of difficulties into *individual subjective problems of attitude or belief*. This is different from the pragmatic consideration of how a problem looks, and how it might be addressed, from an individual’s point of view. Viewing a problem from the perspective of a single individual also means admitting the existence of constraining factors, or things it is difficult to control. It might also mean admitting that there is no solution, and that a job might not be the best outcome to pursue. The activation fantasy of magical voluntarism insists that such considerations are excluded from the activation purview – and this applies to advisors, as much as to claimants. The insistence on the importance of various constraining factors – be they health problems, economic conditions, or the make-up of a caseload – threatens the magic spell which activation programmes attempt to propagate; such forms of thinking, reasoning, or explanation are thus pathologised as excuses, and seen as part of the problem itself – here, naming the problem is seen as dwelling on the problem, and as a barrier to finding work.

Elsewhere, this thesis has also referred to this fantasy as a kind of ‘anti-sociological imagination’ which actively seeks to sever individual biography from questions of history or social structure. As explored in Chapter Two, this kind of anti-sociological imagination is found among some of the most influential proponents of anti-welfare discourse, and is arguably the undead *élan vital* animating the zombie concepts (Macdonald et al., 2014) of demoralisation and dependency to which the development of work-first conditional activation is indebted. This kind of imagination, or this kind of fantasy, does a real violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Graeber, 2012) to people when imposed on them at street-level; it blames them for their difficulties, insisting these be seen as the products of their subjective attitude, but it also creates the conditions for a social sadism in which the imposition of both material and psychological sanctions come to be seen as necessary – even

helpful – motivational tools rather than brutal deprivations and cruel punishments.

Conclusion: the activation *illusio* and anti-sociological behaviour

This thesis has argued that street-level activation services, grounded in a coercive conditionality, contrive to produce a kind of racket. For claimants, this is defined by the need to constantly evidence their ‘active’ deservingness, but without the guarantee that this will be recognised. From street-level advisors, the activation racket requires a form of belief and investment which prohibits the full recognition and articulation of the inevitable difficulties they and their clients face. As such, the thesis has drawn attention to the way that street-level activation services foster different forms of denial, ignorance, and magical thinking.

Nevertheless, the thesis also offers a glimpse into some of the ways in which advisors can, and have, struggled against the imperatives of conditional activation, or sought to redefine the activation *illusio* from within. In particular, the calculative necessity of ‘parking’ some claimants can be used as a means of shielding them from the full coercive force of activation. However, in so far as those who struggled in this way were often also advisors who became disillusioned and left the field, then the picture this thesis presents is of a highly constrained and controlled street-level space. Some of those inclined to struggle in this way also described their eventual acquiescence to the more authoritarian and paternalistic requirements of their role, achieved through the discipline of targets, and their own experiences of insecurity. As Brokdin (2011a) argues, the (quasi) marketised governance and managerial dominance of such street-level spaces means that street-level advisors are perhaps less free to exercise discretion or determine the meaning of their role than might have previously been the case.

It is for this reason that Brodtkin (2013c, 2013d) argues that street-level spaces are important locations for the mediation of both policy and politics. Whilst at the level of political rhetoric the development of conditional activation has advanced under the banner of various pairings – rights and responsibilities, obligations and opportunities, sanctions and support – the street-level organisation of such programmes has tended to produce a specific set of emphases. Surveying the broader international activation landscape, she argues that ‘governance and managerial reforms appear to be quietly shifting street-level practices away from social support and investment and toward greater social regulation’ (Brodtkin, 2013b, p. 280). This thesis supports such an interpretation in the British context. In so doing, it also shows how an ostensibly ‘balanced’ rhetoric of rights and responsibilities, sanctions and support, would obscure the ways that these *work together* to produce particular effects. In conditional activation what passes for ‘support’ does not stand distinct from a regulatory or disciplinary logic, but is put to regulatory and disciplinary use. Conditional activation involves the (further) subsumption of whatever ‘social support’ functions may exist under a broader regulatory and disciplinary regime. As such the political rhetoric of rights and responsibilities, obligations and opportunities, sanctions and support, by holding these terms apart, obscures the way that a practical emphasis on the former does, in practice, undermine people’s sense of a claim to the latter. In people’s everyday experiences of conditional activation, so-called ‘support’ cannot be separated from the ever-present threat of sanction. Moreover, in many of the instances from this research, ‘support’ is defined by clients in terms of the assisted avoidance of sanctions – that is, by a particular need created by conditional activation itself – rather than a more expansive sense of their needs, rights, hopes and entitlements. In this way, the marketised governance and managerial dominance of street-level activation helps to achieve a more punitive, paternalist, and authoritarian version of these policies than might otherwise be politically palatable (Brodtkin, 2013b, p. 280).

In keeping with the thesis' conceptualisation of the street-level space of activation in terms of field and habitus, its limits and limitations can be identified in similar terms. I was unable, during the course of fieldwork, to gain access to or recruit participants from Jobcentre Plus, and although claimants were able to offer their perspectives and experiences of this particular space within the broader activation field, further research might seek to explore the experiences of its staff. In particular, data gathered from these public-sector workers would offer the opportunity to apply and further develop the thesis' conceptual framework and associated theme of street-level investments and disinvestments (in terms of *illusio* and disillusionment), with the possibility of comparing these across public and contracted-out services. Also missing from this research are the accounts of those who, having passed through activation services, have subsequently stopped claiming benefits and entered work. Similarly, whilst the thesis drew on participant accounts of their journeys into and out of the field, this might be more systematically developed in future research design. There is something inherently 'longitudinal' about some kinds of benefit claim, and in so far as behavioural conditionality can be defined as the 'ongoing' regulation of benefit receipt (Clasen & Clegg, 2007), then research that follows these trajectories might offer different perspectives and insights to those gathered here. However, emerging evidence from recent research adopting such an approach (looking at claimants' experiences) presents a complementary picture to the one developed here, particularly with respect to the production of uncertainty and insecurity (see: Patrick, 2017).

Here it should also be mentioned that some of these omissions were less the product of design than of the not insignificant difficulties encountered when negotiating access with relevant agencies and organisations. The period in which this research was conducted was one in which the effects of both austerity and a harsher welfare regime were increasingly coming into public view. During this period, the more overtly coercive and punitive features of mandatory activation

meant that these programmes, and the organisations which deliver them, became the subject of greater media scrutiny and some popular forms of opposition. Some participants who had worked at higher and managerial levels within provider organisations suggested that political (and commercial) sensitivities might have had something to do with my difficulties negotiating and gaining access. On the one hand, such difficulties with gatekeepers are perhaps to be expected, and might be seen as important but tangential to this research itself. On the other hand, such difficulties might also be interpreted as important information about the street-level field, and indications of where certain forms of power reside. Similar research has, in the past, had much less difficulty negotiating access to Jobcentre Plus in particular (Wright, 2003b), where the relevant gate keeping powers lay with local managers at street-level. My own attempts to negotiate access to several street-level locations rather indicated that this form of power – to either grant or deny access – now resides at higher managerial levels.

This further illustrates an important theme of the thesis, one which points away from street-level spaces upwards, towards those more powerful participants in the activation field who are able to shape the contractual and managerial form that street-level activation work takes. Marketised governance and its associated managerial regime dominated the working lives of the street-level activation workers studied here, and in this sense it would seem plausible that this particular street-level space is more constrained and subject to greater oversight than those of the past (Brodin, 2012). On this point, the thesis speaks not only to the street-level literature, but also to the broader literature on neoliberalism, and its ideological and practical effects (see Chapter Two). Widely identified as fostering highly individualised and competitive forms of subjectivity (Layton, 2010, 2014; Read, 2009), the ideological form taken by neoliberalism in street-level activation services is one which denies the salience of social and economic structures, their effects, and the constraints they place on individual agency. This I have described in terms of ‘magical voluntarism’, an important feature of the activation *illusio*. This *illusio* involves a specific anti-sociological imaginary, as well as notions of the

street-level helping situation which rest on social fantasies about a dependent and demoralised underclass. Here it should be noted that not all advisors felt able to accommodate themselves to this form of activation; it was in their struggles with different aspects of the street-level *illusio* that some advisors became disillusioned with the role. Others found themselves having to alter their conceptions and preconceptions, bringing them more into line with those required by the field. In this sense, then, the activation *illusio* and the ideology of magical voluntarism are not the spontaneous product of street-level advisors' subjectivity, but are to some extent selected for by the organisational and managerial form of activation, and also, to varying degrees, imposed on advisors by the field. For these reasons, then, it is worth asking where else this *illusio* might originate, and whose investments, fantasies, and imaginaries it more comfortably reflects. As Wright (2012) argues, the academic and social policy literature has by now paid a great deal of attention to the agency of benefit recipients, 'and, to a lesser extent, front-line workers, but has largely overlooked the motivation and behaviour of more powerful social actors, such as policy-makers and employers' (Wright, 2012, p. 310). In contributing to the literature on front-line workers, and in pointing to the ways that they are themselves dominated and subject to forms of disciplinary power, this thesis further strengthens the case for directing future attention to the behaviours – but also the investments, fantasies, and imaginaries – of these more powerful others.

There is another reason why it might be important to understand the behaviour of more powerful policy actors along these lines. If it is customary in applied fields to highlight the significance of a piece of research for both policy and practice, then this thesis confronts a particular difficulty. In Chapter Two the thesis drew attention to the way that policy-making in this area has, despite well-founded theoretical and empirical critique, continued to rely on myths and moral panics about the underclass, cultures of dependency, the demoralised and the deactivated claimant. In this area, the disjuncture between academic argument and policy

development seems stark. There is, of course, also political disagreement amongst the academic community, and there is by no means a consensus regarding the activation agenda. However, it is also true that the strength of academic analysis, opposition, and critique has not, during the period in which the policy measures studied here have developed, had equivalent expression at an executive political level. As such, at various points during the research, not least when tracing the intertwined developments of activation, marketisation, and their associated academic commentary, it has sometimes seemed that making yet one more appeal to evidence – particularly the evidence of experience – risks becoming something of a ritual gesture, and a quixotic one at that. What use is either argument or evidence, after all, if they are to be ignored by those to whom they are ostensibly addressed? If there is denial, disavowal, and ignorance at street-level, then it is perhaps worth asking to what extent this is the implementation of denials, disavowals, and forms of ignorance which arise elsewhere. If, as this thesis has argued, the activation *illusio* is also a kind of fantasy, then whose fantasy is this, and what social conditions, investments, and material practices make it possible?

More than this or that discrete reform to conditionality, or to the organisation of street-level activation services, this thesis rather suggests the need for a radical reimagining, not only of what this policy area currently accomplishes, but what it might aim to accomplish in the future, and the sort of assumptions, evidence, or demands on which this ought to be based. Whilst the picture presented here, especially in earlier contextual chapters, is of a field operating with a constrained, atrophied, and narrowly ideological imaginary, there are also, at the margins and peripheries, signs of renewal and reinvigoration, most notably with respect to emerging discussions around the feasibility and desirability of a universal (or unconditional) basic income – a policy which, with respect to conditionality, represents the most radical departure imaginable – and this widening of horizons is to be welcomed (for recent advocacy, discussion, and critique see: Blix, 2017; Fisher & Gilbert, 2014; Sage & Diamond, 2017; Srnicek & Williams, 2015). In paying close attention to everyday practices, local meanings, and lived

experiences, this thesis has at various points drawn attention to the way that certain key policy assumptions and terms are either more ambiguous and ambivalent than they might first appear (creaming and parking), or are, in other cases, little more than rhetorical vacuities or obfuscations, devoid of consistent or meaningful content ('support'). Here the thesis demonstrates the *critical* value of cleaving closely to the form and texture of life at street-level, and of qualitative, interpretive, and street-level approaches for the wider field of social policy research. However, in seeking a different course (and given the political uncertainties of the present moment, and the opportunities these might present) then perhaps such methods might also serve a different *generative* or *imaginative* purpose. If 'activation' is a kind of fantasy imposed on both street-level employees and claimants, then it is also true that this imposition is not always successful, is sometimes rejected or resisted, and that such 'services' are not always experienced as welcome forms of help or assistance. In these cases, a *generative* form of street-level research might take inspiration from participatory approaches to policy research (Beresford, 2016) and ask the question (of those who work in them, or are subject to them and must use them) of how these policies and services might be imagined differently.

Appendix A: claimant sample

Name	Current conditional benefit (other recent benefit)	Current activation programme (other recent programme)
Jill	JSA	Work Programme (JCP)
Maria	JSA	Work Programme (JCP)
Michelle	JSA	Work Programme (JCP)
Paul	JSA (IS)	Work Programme (JCP)
Elizabeth	JSA (IS)	Work Programme (JCP)
Sam	JSA	Work Programme (JCP)
Gregg	JSA	Work Programme (JCP)
Frank	JSA	Work Programme (JCP)
Sybil	ESA	Work Programme (JCP)
Bridget	JSA (ESA)	Community Work Placement (JCP, Work Programme)
Stephanie	JSA (ESA)	Community Work Placement (Work Programme)
David	JSA (ESA)	JCP
Adam	ESA Support Group	JCP
Sarah	ESA Support Group (?) (JSA)	JCP
Melissa	ESA WRAG	JCP (Work Programme)
Lisa	JSA	JCP

Figure 1 - Claimant Sample

Appendix B: interview prompts (advisors)

About their work and job role (general)

a. advisors

To start perhaps you could tell me a little bit about your background, how you got involved in welfare-to-work? What different roles did you do? How did you come to leave that role?

Could you help me to understand the nature of the work you did – what did your job entail, what did an average day look like?

What kinds of clients were you working with? What kinds of barriers did they have?

What did you do about the barriers?

Did you do any kinds of group work? What did this involve?

Did the work involve any particular dilemmas or challenges? What were they?

How did you feel about the job? Is there anything you found particularly enjoyable about your work? Is there anything you found unpleasant or difficult? How did other people feel about their jobs?

b. for managers

When did you become a manager? On what contracts? Can you talk about how being a manager differed from being an advisor?

What was the nature of the work of being a manager? What did your job entail, what did an average day look like?

Who did you manage? What was your relationship with them? What was your role, with respect to advisors?

Did you have any contact with clients? How?

Did being a manager entail any particular dilemmas and challenges? What were they?

How did you feel about this role? Was there anything you found particularly enjoyable or difficult?

About the way that they are managed/supervised/appraised:

a. advisors

Did being an employment advisor suit you? In what ways?

How were you assessed and appraised?

What kind of relationship was there between managers and advisors? What kind of contact did you have with management? Did they offer any advice/support? In what way?

How was your performance measured? How was your performance managed?

What targets did you have? Apart from targets, what other things were important to doing the job? How were these assessed?

Were the targets realistic/achievable? Why/why not?

Did you always meet target? How did you make sure you met target? Why did you not meet your target? What happened if you didn't meet your target?
 How did you feel about the targets? (in general, when you met them, when you didn't...)
 How did other people feel about targets?

b. manager

Did being a manager suit you? In what ways? How was it different?
 How were you assessed and apprised as a manager?
 What kind of relationship did you have with a. advisers and b. senior managers?
 What kinds of advice and support did you offer? What did you receive?
 Did you have targets? How did targets affect you? Were they realistic, achievable?
 How did you feel about being a manager? How did you feel towards advisers?
 Towards senior managers? What happened when people didn't meet targets?

About their work with clients:

How did you feel about one-to-one work with clients?
 How were the clients with you? (can you elaborate on the differences, give examples)
 What kinds of help/support did you offer? (Was it mainly practical – if so what? Or was it emotions, psychological, something else? How?)
 Did you ever sanction someone? In what circumstances? How did you feel about it?
 What is it like to sanction someone? What do you think about sanctions in the benefit system?
 Did clients show/talk to you about how they are feeling? What kinds of emotions do clients bring to their appointments with you? (positive, negative, etc.)
 How did you present yourself to clients? Did you try present yourself in a particular way? How?
 Were all clients required to come and see you? What were the requirements of the programme? How did clients feel about the (mandatory) requirements? What did you think/feel about the mandatory requirements?
 How did clients feel about the appointments?
 What made for a job ready client?

Administration

Did you have to do any administrative/recording tasks? What were they? Can you give some examples? What were their purposes?

Beliefs

What were the main reasons why people were claiming benefits?
 In general, what are the main reasons for people being unemployed? What are the main reasons why people claim benefits?
 What do you think about the level at which benefits are set?

Was there (is there) a job for everyone?

Why are some people out of work?

What do you think about the conditions attached to claiming benefits?

What is a good way to support people who are unemployed/claiming benefits?

Are welfare-to-work programmes doing a good job? How so?

Reflections

How do/did you describe this job to other people?

How do you feel about your involvement in welfare-to-work?

There has been a lot of controversy about some aspects of welfare-to-work, especially around sanctions. How do you feel about this? What are the reasons for it, do you think?

Probing:

What did/does that mean to you?

What difference does it make?

What was/is that like?

How did/does that make you feel?

What did you mean by _____?

Can you tell me a little more about _____?

How did/does that make you feel?

Can you tell me more about your thinking on that?

I'm not sure I understood what you meant by _____. Can you say a little bit more about it?

You mentioned _____. Can you say more, what stands out in your mind about it?

Appendix C: interview prompts (claimants)

About their situation:

To start perhaps you could tell me about your background and situation. How did you come to be here today?

When did you start claiming? Do you go to the Work Programme provider, or just the Jobcentre?

Could you help me to understand more about what happens when you come here – what does this service do for you?

How does coming here make you feel about your situation / claiming JSA / finding work?

I'd like to understand more about the different kinds of feelings you have about using this service? Are you able to talk more about how you feel about [agency name]?

About using the service and relation to advisers.

Are there any things that work well for you about the service? Or are there any things that you would change?

What makes for a good adviser, do you think?

What do you think the people here/the agency want from you/want you to do?

What kind of relationship(s) / interactions do you have with your advisor(s) and staff here?

How does the staff here feel about you, do you think?

How was your appointment today? What is the reason you came here?

What happened in today's appointment? / How did you feel about that appointment?

Prompts – based on observed interactions/moments.

Conditionality

What kinds of things are made mandatory?

How are they checked?

What happens if you haven't done them?

How do you avoid having problems with your claim?

Have you had any problems with your claim?

Do you know people who have had problems with their claim?

Politics and Involvement in activism around welfare

How did you get involved in activism around welfare?

What are your thoughts about the way things are going?

What do you think should be done/done differently? Is this possible?

Why do you think things are done the way they are?

Feelings

How does the process make you feel?

How do you think it makes other people feel?

What do you think advisers feel?

The process of claiming

Could you help me understand more about the process of claiming?

How do you first claim?

What happens when you go to Job Centre Plus? Work Programme office?

What is it like inside the Jobcentre? How is it organised? Do you have to wait? For how long?

How do people treat you/talk to you?

What are the security guards for?

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