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Australian Workers' Narratives about Emergency Relief and Employment Service Clients: Complex Issues, Simple Solutions¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on the perceptions of Australian emergency relief or employment service providers regarding clients' presenting issues, and their rationale for intervention. Reductionist and individualistic terms were used to describe complex issues suggesting self-motivation and personal responsibility were key to gaining employment or alleviating poverty. Workers appeared unaware of their positional power and drew from dominant conservative discourse about welfarism and unemployment to fortify their compliance requirements. The findings are discussed in relation to service delivery and reform.

Keywords: Unemployment; Neoliberalism; Poverty; Case Management; Job Services;
Emergency Relief

Neoliberal principles have influenced social welfare and public sector reform across many countries for the past 30 years. This has been particularly vehement in the area of unemployment (Considine, O'Sullivan, & Nguyen, 2014b). Within this frame, Australia has been heralded as *a bold reformer*, delivering the first fully privatised employment delivery model (Considine & O'Sullivan, 2014). Privatisation has resulted in the engagement of for-profit and not-for-profit providers, who employ caseworkers primarily assigned with the

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‘activation’ of the most highly disadvantaged jobseekers (OECD, 2012). While there was a flurry of research and evaluation of the *Job Network* [JN] program operating between 1998 and 2008, there has been limited re-evaluation since the introduction of *Job Services Australia* [JSA] in 2009. This paper is written during a period when the Australian Federal government continues to erode income support, with previously ‘inactive’ groups required to undertake capacity assessments and demands for emergency relief increasing. It seems timely to report on frontline workers’ experiences of JSA and emergency relief [ER] sector.

Frontline workers are influenced by, and mediate between, public discourse, government policy, agency imperatives, professional training, and their clients, so it is important to understand the cumulative effect of these interacting factors with their general perceptions of, and actions with, unemployed clients. Thirty-two frontline workers employed by JSA and ER agencies were interviewed in regional Australia during 2012. These two different services were chosen for investigation because they are primary sites of intersecting frontline contact by unemployed people. Findings offer a unique insight into the perceptions and interactions that clients might encounter, illuminating one side of an important discretionary relationship, that Marston, Larsen, and McDonald (2005) referred to as the “‘black box’... in the policy evaluation literature” (p. 142).

Australian employment policy and initiatives

Evaluation of the Job Network

Evidence about the success of the JN was mixed; employment rose during its implementation, but there was little evidence about the driver of this increase (Davidson, 2011). When employment was procured, it was often in low-wage, casualised sectors where prospects of advancement were limited and workers required partial support payments to supplement their wages (Davidson, 2011). There was some evidence that the real cost of JN programs decreased,

however, ‘red tape’ remained problematic (Davidson, 2011). While reforms were expected to deliver tailored services to the most disadvantaged populations, JN became increasingly focused on standardised procedures, contractual obligations and staying in business with innovative service delivery neglected (Considine, O’Sullivan, & Nguyen, 2014a; Fowkes, 2011).

Client experiences of the Job Network

Welfare reform has altered the way in which welfare services are delivered, and the way society perceives job seekers (Chenoweth, 2008). Ideologically, unemployed people have been increasingly stigmatised and positioned as ‘problems’ that should be ‘kept out of sight’ (Marston et al., 2005) with unemployment and the culture of welfare posed as a ‘moral failing’, ‘burden’ and ‘risk’ to society (Fowkes, 2011; McDonald, Marston, & Buckley, 2003). McDonald and Marston’s (2005) research with intensive assistance JN jobseekers showed “identifying the self as the cause of unemployment was not uncommon” (p. 392), corroborating survey data that found negative social constructions were internalised through stigma and guilt among the unemployed (Sawer, 2006).

The experience of being unemployed has been described as a “catalogue of petty humiliations, whether at the hands of Centrelink, Job Network agencies or employers” (Eardley, Abello, & Macdonald, 2001, p. 51). However, qualitative research showed many jobseekers accepted the psychological focus of JN case management, and expectations that they address personal barriers and build new skills (McDonald & Marston, 2005). Others viewed these processes as paternalistic and resisted the new identities they were expected to create (McDonald & Marston, 2005). At times, jobseekers held suspicions that services were more interested in profit and organisational survival than attending to jobseeker needs (Sawer, 2006). Some suggested caseworker inflexibility was problematic, alongside pressure to

participate in activities perceived as inappropriate, irrelevant or costly (Davidson, 2011; Sawer, 2006).

Worker perspectives on the Job Network and Job Services Australia

Research showed that JN and JSA workers were positioned precariously in a politicised compliance culture, characterised by high administrative loads, low wages, and poor training (DEEWR, 2011; Marston & McDonald, 2006). Staff reported high levels of stress, burnout and turnover while supporting clients unable to meet participation requirements due to intersecting personal and structural barriers (DEEWR, 2011; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006).

Peak welfare bodies have continued to reiterate the inadequacy of the case management model which offers infrequent contact and provides training and employment opportunities that are often poorly related to long-term career goals (ACOSS, 2012). While the case management relationship remained core, caseworkers suggested that the more restrictive regime of the JN had significantly reduced their flexibility and autonomy between 1998 and 2008 (Considine, Lewis, & O'Sullivan, 2011). Modest improvements appear to have been made in the JSA era, with the administrative burden remaining stagnant and frontline worker flexibility increasing slightly, however JSA has been less effective in moving people into work than its predecessor (Considine et al., 2014a, 2014b).

McDonald and Marston's (2005) research found that JN case managers "claimed the authority to engage with the intensive assistance recipients on two main dimensions: alliance with expertise (especially psychological expertise); and possession of personal characteristics or attributes" (p. 383), predominantly life experience. Additionally, they often used their expertise and empathic authority to reinterpret, reposition and remedy social problems in the psychological realm (Marston et al., 2005). Practice was infused with ideals about the motivated 'ethical client', recognised by dissatisfaction with their dependent status, and low employment expectations (Marston et al., 2005). Often paternalistic, pedagogic and coercive

authority were used to modify ideologies outside this realm, and to instill new behaviours of conformity and compliance (McDonald & Marston, 2005).

Another factor with the potential to undermine the case management relationship was attitudinal. Survey data with JN case managers (n=183) found 74% held negative attitudes contrary to the self-efficacy goals of employment policy (McDonald & Marston, 2008). These workers often perceived clients as an homogenous group who were primarily satisfied with unemployment, manipulated the system and required monitoring, corrective action and tighter restrictions (McDonald & Marston, 2008).

The context for this study

Under JSA (2009-present), employment services continue to be delivered by a competitive mix of more than 100 for-profit and not-for-profit providers who are selected through tendering, financed by service and outcomes payments, and audited for compliance (OECD, 2012). JSA clients are separated into four streams according to an assessment of their ‘barriers to employment’ and service fees are proportionate to the determined difficulty of placement (OECD, 2012). Compliance conditions have shifted under JSA with an emphasis on encouraging participation and “focusing the sanctioning regime on the most persistent and wilful non-compliance” (Considine et al., 2014b, p. 473). However, new groups of citizens are now required to work including parents of primary aged children, people with a disability and older workers (OECD, 2012).

Emergency relief [ER] services are provided primarily by not-for-profit organisations in Australia. Historically, not-for-profit organisations have been viewed as part of an autonomous non-government sector operating on a mission of support and advocacy for the disadvantaged (Baines, 2010; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). Under New Public Management (NPM), these organisations have become increasingly dependent on, and beholden to, government funding and private sector managerial models (Ramia & Carney, 2005). Australian

research showed that not-for-profit workers were often drawn to this work because of the emotional satisfaction they derived from the value-based activities and relationships they shared with clients (Baines, 2010). However, workers also suggested that this was being increasingly undermined by an operational reality where their work was undervalued, regulated and crisis driven (Baines, 2010).

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed to explore the individual experiences and personal reflections of workers from JSA and ER organisations. Ethics clearance was granted from the *University of [Omitted] Ethics Committee* in April 2012. Purposive theoretical sampling was used to recruit people with direct experience of ER and JSA. All JSA agencies and key ER service providers in the Hunter and Central Coast regions were contacted by email, with the exception of disability-specific JSA agencies. Emails included an invitation to participate in the research project, participant information sheets and consent forms. Three JSA agencies (1 not-for-profit and 2 for-profit) and three ER providers expressed their willingness to participate in the research. At this point, key agency personnel recruited participants from different branches and at different levels of their organisation.

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted between April and June 2012, with 22 frontline workers (5 from ER and 17 from JSA), 7 middle managers (2 from ER and 5 from JSA) and 3 senior managers (2 from ER and 1 from JSA). Interview questions focused on the experiences of workers in the contemporary policy climate and, where possible, their experiences over time. This paper reports on workers' narratives in relation to client presentations, issues and subsequent interventions.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed consistent with a *constructivist grounded theory* approach (Méabh & Fourie, 2014).

Trustworthiness was increased through double coding and conferring between the first and second authors. These authors initially read the transcripts and coded the transcripts separately, after which they compared, contrasted and agreed on emergent themes. They finalised the process by jointly searching for connections across the agreed-upon themes. These were analysed for links, similarities and differences according to worker position, service type, qualifications and experience of workers interviewed, and length of time in their position. Thus, both convergent and divergent themes were identified in the data analysis.

Findings

Three primary and often contradictory themes emerged from the data:

1. Complex presentations
2. Individualistic explanations
3. Simple solutions

This section commences with a description of the sample surveyed and then discusses the aforementioned themes. Acronyms have been used to provide a descriptor of each participant's position and agency after each quotation, as follows: Frontline worker [FL], Middle Manager [MM], Senior Manager [SM], Job Services Australia [JSA], and Emergency Relief [ER].

Worker backgrounds

For the purpose of this study, *employee* or *worker* refers to volunteer and paid positions. All workers interviewed in JSA were paid employees, while all ER frontline workers and one of the middle managers were volunteers. ER workers were more likely to be longer-term employees (averaging 9.5 years) compared to JSA workers (averaging 3.5 years). Additionally, ER workers were much more likely to have long-term experience in the human service industry (averaging 18.5 years), compared to JSA employees (averaging 6.5 years).

The majority of JSA workers and just over half of the ER workers had tertiary qualifications, but less than a third held qualifications in the human services. Most frontline ER workers suggested they wanted to ‘give back’ to society through their ER role, and most were retired or receiving some form of government assistance. JSA workers were a predominantly younger workforce, with many describing their engagement in this sector as a new start or a change of career. JSA managers often described a quick ascent from frontline appointments to their new positions.

Complex presentations

Both JSA and ER workers spoke about client presentations as *complex*. ER workers suggested client numbers had grown considerably and they saw more clients with multiple or complex issues. Clients tended to require more than food relief, often needing support with utility bills and money to cover expenses like medication, funerals and transport:

Maybe 10 years ago a client would have come, seen a volunteer, they would have given them some food, sent them on their way. Where now ... the interviewing process has probably doubled in time ... with some of the issues and the complexities (MM1, ER).

Many JSA workers stated that jobseekers with multiple issues were increasing in real terms. Homelessness, drug and alcohol, and mental health issues were core contributors cited. ER workers agreed but tended to add family violence and breakdown. Additionally, ER workers often acknowledged that crisis was exacerbated by chronic poverty, making clients vulnerable to unexpected expenses:

If any appliance breaks down, well then there's no money again because they live so close from week to week ... Once they've got behind, it's very hard to get back up (FL14, ER).

ER workers were more likely to consider complexity as a *contributor* to crisis, while JSA workers were more likely to see it in terms of increasing their own workload. JSA workers often said their work was demanding and stressful, and this was exacerbated by complex client issues:

I could average up to 18 appointments per day. That can be a diverse amount of people, ages, different disabilities, mixture of physical and mental health. I've dealt with people that are suicidal ... having to actually go to the hospital with them (FL9, JSA).

Finally, workers tended to portray complexity as the number of issues with which a client presented rather than the interlocking, intersecting and cumulative effects of disadvantage.

Individualistic explanations

Workers explained clients' unemployment and their need to access emergency relief in three ways: (i) individualistic, (ii) inevitable economic conditions, and (iii) policy and structural explanations. However, the most dominant focus was on individualistic psychological explanations, and this was particularly so for JSA and ER workers without qualifications in the human services, regardless of their frontline or management role. Primarily, clients were perceived as lacking in the education, essential skills and qualifications that would otherwise make them job-ready or prevent them from requiring emergency relief:

Most of them have got literacy and numeracy problems as well as the anger issues (FL7, JSA).

Issues with drugs and alcohol, homelessness or mental health conditions were portrayed as psychological deficits or behaviours that prevented employment or self-sufficiency; they were rarely considered as the result of unemployment or poverty:

That's probably most of their problem, that's probably why they've done all the stupid things and got into trouble with the police and everything else. It all just comes back to smoking their pot (FL7, JSA).

Sometimes individualistic or psychological deficits were ascribed to intergenerational modelling or learned behaviour. This was seen to be underpinned by notions of laziness and resistance to change.

The economic or structural explanations offered by workers tended to be secondary to their individualistic conceptualisations. These explanations were rarely critiqued in terms of social justice. Workers with human service backgrounds were more likely to offer such explanations, but these were still limited. Economic explanations, such as increased prices and tighter income support restrictions, were often perceived as inevitable and immovable. With the exception of one senior manager with human service qualifications, structural explanations and critiques of the neoliberal agenda were absent. Participants who worked in the frontline suggested that they were not particularly interested in, or aware of, broader policies and their impacts on their clients. Many struggled to offer an opinion about policies beyond those that immediately affected their work:

Policy doesn't affect me a great deal (FL11, ER).

I stick into my shell a lot, I don't tend to venture out and pay attention to what's happening outside my own little world (FL15, JSA).

Core to individualistic explanations for social problems were references to genuineness, deservedness and sometimes deception. In ER, deservedness was related to receiving support, while in JSA, deservedness was mostly related to justifications about breaching. Although workers reported that all clients were given equal support and assistance, there was a belief that a minority of clients might not actually deserve the service provided. Both ER and JSA workers

suggested clients were increasingly knowledgeable about the remit of the agency, and this was often portrayed as a sense of entitlement:

A person will ring up and know exactly what they're entitled to, food vouchers, which is, to me, that's rorting [abusing] the system ...They're using the system to benefit themselves, which, to me, that's not fair (FL11, ER).

It also appeared that when a worker was more likely to understand a client's issues or predicament, he or she was more likely to judge clients worthy or deserving of help, than when the issues were beyond his or her personal experience.

Simple solutions

Despite descriptions of client issues as complex, workers tended towards psychological or educational solutions in keeping with their individualistic explanations. Ironically, JSA workers, who were extremely limited in their broader policy analysis of client problems, were highly versed in the organisational policy driving case management. Indeed, it appeared that drawing from organisational policies fortified their commitment to formulaic, routinised *simple solutions*:

Everyone makes this out to be the most complicated job in the world. It is just simply three steps. Find out what they want, get them the training, get them the job. It's just bang, bang, bang (FL8, JSA).

Generally, the psychological benefits of employment were well accepted and rarely critiqued; employment was seen as a 'cure' for social ills. Clients were encouraged to accept, adapt to, and comply with government policies and regulations. Promoting conformity was also a feature of some case management, where clients were required to meet societal expectations in order to become more 'job ready'. Sometimes the worker advocated 'ruffling

their nest' or giving them a 'push' out of their comfort zone. Stricter compliance requirements were universally endorsed as an important tool in JSA case management, and 'straight talk' was sometimes used to enforce policy.

JSA workers rarely acknowledged simple solutions were unsuitable or unrealistic for some clients, or that they did not have the skills or training to address complex issues. Rather, time restrictions were cited as reasons not to get too involved with clients, or to refer them on to a psychologist, doctor or financial counsellor:

If you've got someone that is severely disabled, common sense tells you that ... they're going to need a lot of help ... If I've got 100 people on my caseload, I can't do that (FL8, JSA).

When JSA clients were perceived as unreceptive to the psychological or educational interventions provided, they were often described as resistant, difficult to engage, or non-compliant (particularly if they appeared aggressive or made complaints).

When policies *instructed* JSA workers to treat a client in a particular way that made them feel uncomfortable, they tended to externalise the source of the decision, and declare their position as immovable:

It can be hard. Especially when you have a good relationship with one of your clients, and then you're saying that they have to do this. You do feel a bit like, well it's not me telling you. I'm just going by the rules ... I like compliance. (FL4, JSA).

In other instances, they portrayed their actions in terms of the greater good (particularly of taxpayers) or for the good of the client. When workers spoke about professional discretion, this was often described as more difficult to achieve, and they tended to refer to 'bending rules within the rules' or legitimately pushing the boundaries of policy.

JSA workers made contradictory statements, acknowledging that some clients needed more assistance and government payments were inadequate, while others were being treated unfairly. However, these admissions were often framed in terms of deservingness (or client likeability). Such ‘exceptions’ were often revealed in ‘confidence’ or hushed tones. There was some indication that, as time went on, or empathy developed between worker and client, clients were viewed as more rational and policies as harsher and more detrimental to the client. As a consequence, decisions about breaching became more difficult:

[You start to establish] a good rapport with people ... So you do start to see it from their perspective. I think sometimes the system can be really, really hard on people that are trying to do the right thing (FL1, JSA).

It should be noted that both ER and JSA workers with human services qualifications were more likely to talk about the restrictions or injustices experienced by their clients. However, in the case of JSA workers, their training appeared to make little comparative difference to pathologising language and concepts, or adherence to organisational ideologies.

ER workers tended to view their role as providing ER only and this *simple solution* appeared to provide satisfaction. Sometimes they described frustration when clients appeared to require more than they were able to provide, or when they felt they might be assessing the client negatively. In both these instances, they tended to use avoidance tactics to keep their biases hidden and remain detached from the reality of the problems presented:

We’re not counsellors ... We’re told we’re not supposed to talk to them too much (FL3, ER).

Empathy, rapport and relationship building were mentioned by some JSA and ER workers. Relationship building was considered important to assessment of eligibility in ER, as well as determining barriers to employment and monitoring compliance in JSA. In ER, these

tools were considered useful in creating a warm atmosphere, reducing embarrassment and a kind way of giving advice. In JSA, relationship building was employed primarily to support the end goal – employment.

Finally, ER and JSA workers clearly believed clients had the power and agency to change their circumstances. This often contrasted with descriptions of the workers' powerlessness and lack of agency in the restrictive workplace, and clients who exerted power to manipulate and deceive:

[It's] very frustrating for us when we know someone's being non-compliant ... and there's nothing we can do about it (MM6, JSA).

Despite workers being invested with considerable authority by the state and organisation, they appeared unaware of the power they personally exerted in their ER and JSA roles.

Discussion

Worker narratives highlighted the infusion of neoliberal discourse and the impact of NPM within Australia's employment sector, and the tensions it creates in the client-worker interaction. Workers confirmed prior government findings (AGDEEWR, 2011) that client issues had become increasingly difficult and complex under the activation and compliance regime, but they rarely acknowledged the connections between inadequate income support and social issues such as poor housing and isolation (see Morris & Wilson, 2014). While it was clear that JSA and ER clients were engaged in well-meaning interactions, the reality was that services were simply not designed to address complex needs. Rather, service provision created

a ‘push back’ of primary responsibility onto the individual or family under the guise of the ideological promotion of ‘independence’ and ‘self-reliance’. Many workers acknowledged that unemployed, and partially employed clients, were not being well-served by the human services sector. However, top-down policy directives, and the compartmentalisation of human service roles, appeared to expunge or deflect responsibility and blame from individual services and workers.

Houston’s (2013) descriptions of ‘the personalisation of welfare’ and the growing tendency to ‘psychologise’ human problems and negate their societal basis were highly evident. Findings suggested that the predominant transformation of social issues into psychological deficits had continued since McDonald and Marston’s (2005) research in JN. Additionally, the descriptors were often tainted with moral significance, aligning with similar research where the discourse of dependency, lack of motivation and unwillingness to participate prevailed (Dunn, 2013; McDonald & Marston, 2008).

While workers acknowledged the problematic situations of their clients, it appeared that they used individualisation and ‘othering’ to differentiate or distance themselves from their problems. This is interesting considering the precarious and poorly paid conditions described by JSA workers, and the income support status of many ER workers, situations not dissimilar to those of their clients. Both Soss et al. (2011) and Schram (2012) attributed the paternalistic tendencies in the transformed welfare system in the USA partly to this workforce composition, whether intentional or not. It is therefore recommended that these findings be considered in light of suggestions from prior research that workers “who are closer to their clientele in class background are less sympathetic [and, as Soss et al. found, more paternalistic] in their evaluations of the poor” (Seale, Buck, & Parrotta, 2012, p. 517) .

It has been posited that the NPM commodification of the worker-client relationship potentially erodes social connectivity (Houston, 2013), and this was evident in this study. ER

workers were clear about their ‘crisis only’ mandate, and JSA workers were emphatically defensive of their formulaic and procedural case management responses. These findings add to prior evidence that the inflexibility of organisational requirements reported by workers and clients in the JN era has continued or increased over time (Considine et al., 2011; Considine et al., 2014a). JSA workers were committed to the notion that employment was the moral duty of their clients, and the cure for their complex social problems. Ironically, in a sector that was designed to promote consumer choice, and jobseeker negotiation and critique, this predetermined identity of the good jobseeker seemed quite out of place and signalled the inflexibility of the system. In accordance with similar investigations (McDonald & Marston, 2005; Seale et al., 2012), psychological deficits continued to be addressed through training and motivating or compelling clients to take up employment opportunities. Additionally, the pressured and rule-driven environment appeared to encourage, endorse and legitimise avoidance of client issues.

Sometimes the juxtaposition between client realities and organisational mandate created a dilemma about worker resistance or reinforcement. Overwhelmingly, reinforcement was reported and this appeared to be a self-perpetuating inclination to maintain a psychological and pathologising client focus. As Foucault (2008) predicted, failure of the system was individualised. Uncomfortable decisions were often externalised and projected towards immovable ‘policy’, aligning with research conducted with welfare-to-work managers in the USA (Seale et al., 2012). Additionally, uncomfortable decisions, particularly compliance actions in JSA, were conveyed as ‘corrective action’ to encourage the client to understand the importance of employment. An exaggerated belief about client power and agency, particularly in relation to manipulation and deception, tended to align well within the paradigm of worker overload and client resistance.

While caseloads, policies and time restrictions seemed to function as boundaries that kept workers from developing rapport with clients, this was not always the case. As Maynard-Moody, Williams, and Craig (2009) found, “the citizen’s character is entwined with the worker’s decision making” (p. 7). In this study, it appeared the more time workers spent with clients, and as relationships developed, there was a subtle shift from notions of ‘*personal* deficits’ to ‘*social* problems’. These findings are consistent with research findings that many workers are less likely to enact punitive decisions when they have established a rapport with a client (Bigby & Files, 2003). It would therefore be important to revisit these concepts with JSA clients, including the way they resist or negotiate the aforementioned positions and actions of workers. There are hints of everyday tactics in the narratives of workers, such as non-attendance and complaining about the adequacy of service provision. However, this study may point to another avenue of investigation. Might the responsibility for relationship building have shifted from the worker to the client, in a way that we could never have anticipated? Might individualised service and choice be dependent on the client’s desire and capacity to present, engage and elicit empathy from the frontline worker?

Strict adherence to mandated policy and practice appeared to negate the need for formal qualifications in the human services, with JSA workers appearing confident in their training and capacity to meet client requirements. It may be, as reported by MacDonald and Marston (2005), workers drew from their professional alliances, as well as personal experience and attributes during these encounters. Many workers had qualifications and experience in areas characterised by marketised environments, which might support their comfort with the contemporary welfare sector. However, this poses questions about the rationale for the predominant employment of workers from these fields.

There is considerable documentation of the experiences of professional groups, like social workers, at the frontline of welfare services through Lipsky’s (1980) conception of how

street-level bureaucrats use discretion. Less is known about street-level discretion in groups with limited human service qualifications, where professionals are few and far between, and a culture of professional identity is difficult to create. Lipsky's ideas remain relevant given:

welfare professionals ineliminably have latitude in implementing the rules and regulations of public welfare systems and often, of necessity, must use this discretion to establish shortcuts and simplifications so they can better cope with their responsibilities. Yet, in the process, policy gets made in the interface between worker and client, for better or worse (Schram, 2012, p. 68) .

ER and JSA workers in this study tended to work in environments where discretion was highly possible, but they appeared not to enact – or report – discretionary decisions, while publicly portraying themselves as lacking autonomy and mandated to comply with organisational imperatives. It would be important to further examine the personal and professional contributors to such narratives, in addition to the political impetus for maintaining the deprofessionalised *status quo*. Are Soss et al. (2011) correct in their cynical assessment that this deprofessionalised system and the minimal support government offers is designed to make the poor 'more manageable'? If this were the case then the work of JSA and ER workers might best be seen as an issue of governance, or in Foucauldian terms, of 'disciplining the poor'. Yet, more positively, our study reveals some measure of discretion and good intention, and perhaps the key lies in who we employ as, and how we train, human services workers. Ironically, our findings suggest workers in JSA and ER are behaving in exactly the way Lipsky (1980) observed in using their discretion *in keeping with organisational requirements*. A more professionalised workforce might use their discretion self-interestedly to establish shortcuts to better manage their responsibilities and to work towards positive client change (Schram, 2012).

Conclusion

As expected, the neoliberal discourse has had a profound effect in shaping the ‘situated interaction’ between workers and clients in Australian JSA and ER. This study suggests that government must be more responsible for the impacts of NPM, where an underresourced and deprofessionalised workforce are providing a standardised service to clients with the most complex of issues (Considine et al., 2011; Considine et al., 2014b). Workers in this study tended to ‘buy into’ neoliberal ideas uncritically, and were ill-equipped, discouraged or unwilling to understand client issues beyond individual explanations and simple solutions. Government needs to return to its undertaking to provide flexible and holistic services to jobseekers and those in poverty, commencing with the incorporation of broader definitions of ‘case management success’. This calls for truly personalised services that build upon the strengths and capacities of unemployed people to create sustainable employment. This means a recognition of, and recourse for, client issues that are exacerbated by inadequate income support. The original vision of working effectively and collaboratively with clients means worker “discretion must be protected and structured to promote these efforts and, equally important, they must be given the training, skills, and resources needed to work effectively in this mode” (Soss et al., 2011, p. 436).

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