P55 - The making of target publics for welfare policies. A multilevel approach.

Targeting mothers? A two-phase study of the implementation of activation policies in Australia

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Introduction

As in most Western jurisdictions, Australian social welfare discourse has shifted in recent decades from treating single mothers as legitimate recipients of income support to framing them as "welfare dependents" in need of "activation". The aim of this paper is to understand how street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) in Australian employment services engage with this new target-population and the extent to which their interactions redefine this target group. Australia is a particularly interesting case in this regard because since 2005 non-government providers contracted by the Federal government have delivered activation programs for single parents. In that year, a significant number of single parents were moved from the public welfare agency into the contractualised *Job Network* that had originally been set up in 1998 to serve the unemployed. We ask: how has this network of government-funded, employment-focused, contractual providers adapted to serving single parents?

Much has been made in the international literature of Australia's pioneering work in outsourcing the provision of government-funded employment assistance for the unemployed. The system was intended to introduce competition for services, integrate service delivery expertise from private and not-for-profit organizations, and ultimately improve employment outcomes for clients. The move to a contracted service system was heavily inspired by new public management principles of devolving decision making to the frontline, while at the same time holding service agencies accountable for "outcomes" (Eardley 2003; cf. Clarke and Newman 1997). By opening space for frontline discretion - so the thinking went - agencies would engage in better targeting of activation programs to individual needs.

At the same time, this arms-length delivery model creates the potential for wide variation in how targeting is implemented. Furthermore, as reviews of Australia's contractualised employment

services system have noted, several factors mitigate against the tailoring of services to specific client groups and to individuals. The discretion of contracted agencies is not absolute but bounded by statutory minimum activity requirements agencies must impose on clients, along with rules stipulating that agencies must report client non-compliance to state welfare authorities. Furthermore, the Job Network and its replacement Job Services Australia system have created an extremely demanding business environment in which *the majority of providers have been unable to survive beyond a single contract period*. There is evidence providers cope with these severe financial imperatives by engaging in rationing practices familiar to the street level literature, including creaming and parking (Lipsky 1980), thereby limiting the potential for targeting and individualization of service provision. Thus we suggest empirical investigation of practices on the ground is essential for determining how single parents are targeted.

To this end our paper reports on the findings of a two-phase interview study of how contracted service providers work with parents who have a primary caring responsibility. The first phase occurred shortly after the introduction of new welfare to work policies targeted at parents (in 2007) and the second phase occurred a little over six years later (from late 2013 to early 2015). Over this period the government has made major changes to the system as a result of concerns that providers were 'parking' difficult to place clients and 'creaming' by focusing on the easiest to place clients. Policy makers responded to these concerns by changing the conditions of new contracts so as to use the fee system ostensibly to optimize the incentives that providers have to assist those who are most disadvantaged. Thus the aim of the second phase was to understand how the targeting of parents at the street level had changed over time as the system developed greater experience in working with parents, and contract conditions changed to increasingly target the fees paid to providers for outcomes rather than simply fees for service.

Our approach to studying these frontline interactions explicitly takes into account the broader policy discourses driving policies towards the unemployed. Agencies are not merely rational economic actors seeking to survive and profit under demanding conditions, but are also vectors through which narratives of post-welfarist governance are fashioned into street level practices and client experiences (Dubois 2012). During our first interview phase government discourse focused on activating parents in order to address what was viewed as a significant problem with *intergenerational welfare dependency*. In the first phase we found that employment providers did not fully embrace this activation discourse and many sought to soften the rather harsh government rhetoric through more explicitly recognizing parenting caring obligations. Providers saw their roles as gently and gradually transforming the mindsets of clients towards a more active labour market orientation.

However, in the most recent interviews, the focus has shifted to an immediate imperative to get clients into work. Providers make little reference to normative policy discourses (neither embracing or rejecting them) but focus on getting parents into work within the resource envelope of the contract. They do not see service encounters as transformative but rather purely pragmatic. They also pay increasing attention to the risk assessment instruments used by the government to classify individuals into different assistance categories, since these determine what resources they can allocate. Targeting of single parents in Australia's contractualised employment service system has thus shifted from a normative and transformative regime into a pragmatic approach addressing short-term activation objectives and organizational survival imperatives.

The paper begins with an outline of our theoretical approach to the concept of targeting in the context of Australian single parents. We then outline the structure and evolution of Australia's activation policies towards single parents, and describe the contractualised employment services system. The paper then presents findings from the two interview phases.

Conceptualizing targeting in social policy

Targeting – singling out persons or groups of persons for distinctive treatment - has a long history in the liberal democratic state (Henman 2004). Scheinder and Ingram (1993: 337) define "target groups" as "the direct or indirect recipients of policy initiatives; they are located at the end of the implementation process and are found throughout a chain of policy effects". In the context of social policy, targeting has many specific meanings. It has been used to refer to the restriction of income and service entitlements to specific groups so as to ensure the finite financial resources of the welfare state are used most efficiently to alleviate poverty; targeting in this sense is supposed to have progressive, redistributive connotations (Goodin and Le Grand 1989). Targeting can also mean the "tailoring" or customization of services for the specific needs of subgroups and even individuals (Howard 2012). Following the emergence of post-welfarist discourses of welfare dependency and the need for "activation", targeting takes on new more coercive connotations. Welfare systems increasingly impose requirements to search for work, and to engage in work and various work preparation activities on specific subpopulations deemed "at risk" of long term "dependency" or "underserving" of support because they are work-capable (Henman 2004).

Our research draws on several works on target publics of public policy. From these we derive three key observations: firstly, target publics are not fixed or pre-existing but are usually actively constructed; secondly, the nature and impact of targeting is strongly shaped by the moral politics surrounding the groups in question and the objectives and methods of targeting; and finally,

targeting is being extended and transformed by new technologies and discourses that emphasise and allow individualised, risk-based governance of subjects. We summarise these ideas below.

Targets of public and social policies must be constructed before they can be targeted. This point has been made most compellingly by scholars working in critical and post-structuralist traditions (Brady 2011; Henman 2004; 2007). For them targeting is a processes of “subjectification” whereby a series of discourses, rationalities and technologies coalesce to render certain individuals appropriate targets of specific state interventions. A key technology is classification – the development of matrices of categories and definitions and the fitment of persons into those categories (Haggerty 2001; Henman 2004, 2007). A process of subjectification then occurs whereby people are “made up” into category members (Hacking 1999). Brady (2011) provides an example relevant to this paper in the form of a genealogy of the making up of Australian single parents as a coherent category worthy of state support and appropriate subjects of policy intervention, and the extensive bureaucratic labour involved in constructing the evidence required to make them appear as a self evident group (in the process replacing older target publics that partly overlapped with the new formation, such as widows). This literature tends to present the construction of target publics in a relatively top-down fashion, as the product of the schemes and imaginings of senior or middle level policy and program designers. Less attention has been paid to how front line staff are actively involved in subjectification, including how they transmute “official” policy discourses and rationalities (Brady 2014).

A second influential literature on targeting addresses the tactical politics of decisions to target particular groups, drawing on how targeting is shaped by the moral status of target populations and the content the targeting processes (instruments, entitlements and coercions) (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Schneider and Ingram present a systematic analysis of the factors that drive policy makers to target particular groups and their choices of instruments. For them the nature of targeting has several causes: the first is the moral-political status or “value-based cultural image” of the target population. In the case of welfare these are often dominated by negative images such as "undeserving," "stupid," "dishonest," and "selfish." In addition, the political power of the group - its capacity to directly or indirectly mobilize influence in the legislative process – will affect targeting. Schneider and Ingram (1993) reflect that “the electoral implication of a policy proposal depends partly on the power of the target population itself (construed as votes, wealth, and propensity of the group to mobilize for action) but also on the extent to which others will approve or disapprove of the policy's being directed toward a particular target.” They concede that the way the policy is implemented will depend on the degree to which street level actors on the ground agree with this group being targeted by the policy, and the extent to which they sympathize with the group. As they point out, children and mothers have weak political power but

positive social constructions, leading to complex and variable targeting processes for such ambiguously positioned subjects (p. 336).

Thirdly, targeting has been transformed and extended in recent decades via the introduction of new technologies, which increasingly facilitate individualised, risk-based governance (Henman 2004; 2007). These technologies include computerised assessment systems with complex algorithms that are designed to weigh a large number of potential risk factors and produce an aggregate profile of disadvantage, to guide decisions about the allocations of assistance resources. Such systems ostensibly allow for the consideration of intersectionality of disadvantages, meaning the possibility that individuals are bearers of complex and unpredictable combinations of barriers. As a result, individuals within categories are less likely to receive homogenous service packages or activation requirements. At the same, such algorithmic systems depend on statistical averaging of risks, such that individuals are targeted as bearers of variously socially defined risks, not as unique persons, what Henman (2007) calls "structured individuality". These technologies also depend on a range of professional and quasi-professional staff to undertake assessments of disadvantages.

To summarise this section, targeting has long been a core of state practice and social policy in particular but it is also evolving and intensifying in the context of post-welfarism. Existing research suggests targeting involves the active construction of target publics, the tactical design of interventions to maximise political advantage, and the deployment of new technologies that allow more finely-grained targeting of individuals as bearers of socially-structured risk profiles. We turn now to explore the evolution and implementation of broad policy frameworks targeting single parents in Australia.

Targeting parents in Australian social policy

Parents have been the targets of various activation programs since the 1980s, beginning with the OECD-inspired Jobs, Education and Training (JET) program of 1989, which created specialist advisors and new childcare supports to help single parents re-enter training and work *on a voluntary basis*. In the late 1990s this discourse shifted from supporting parents' choices to a new emphasis on the problem of welfare dependency. While dependency was stressed as a problem for all beneficiaries of welfare, it took on a special significance and urgency in the context of parents because of the alleged dangers of an "intergenerational dependency mentality", where workless families would provide poor role models for their impressionable children. Associated with this was a new discourse of parents' psychological vulnerability and maladaptation – they lacked confidence and self-esteem, and had unrealistic expectations of the kinds of work they could and could not do. The 2003 *Personal Advisor Program* introduced a series of proto-

professional advisors into the public welfare agency to assist mothers with basic "life planning" processes. Mothers with school-aged children were compulsorily required to meet with their Personal Advisor and develop a plan for their eventual return to work.

In 2005 the policy targeting of single parents intensified significantly. The new *Welfare to Work* program subjected parents with school age children to new compulsory interactions with the contractualised *Job Network* system (renamed Job Services Australia in 2009), which as we have explained was historically overwhelmingly focused on assisting people in receipt of unemployment payments who did not have primary carer responsibilities. These changes involved dismantling the system of specialist programs[1] for parents that had been delivered in-house by Centrelink (the income support agency). Furthermore, new more stringent activity requirements in the form of part-time work requirements were applied to parents already on income support with a school age child, while parents who claimed income support after 2006 and had a school age child were moved to the lower rate Newstart payment. Eight years later the "grandfathering" clause was removed and the work requirements were extended to those who claimed payment prior to 2006 (an additional 65,000 single parents).

Despite the radical nature of this shift, to date little research has focused on how these employment providers have adapted to this new client group. Aside from the findings from the first phase of this study (Brady, 2011) insights into how this system targets and engages with parents may be drawn from Grahame and Marston's (2012 p. 73) recent study of single mothers' experiences of welfare to work and McArthur et al's (2013) study of how single mothers in receipt of income support experience the welfare service delivery system.

Focusing on interactions with the welfare bureaucracy (including Centrelink and Jobs Serviced Australia) Grahame and Marston found that mothers "experienced a lack of recognition of their identities as mothers, paid workers, and competent decision makers" (2012 p. 73). Although some mothers gave positive accounts of friendly and supportive Centrelink and job services staff the majority of single parents' narratives recounted negative experiences (Grahame, Marston 2012 p. 73). Both studies found that many parents felt their individual circumstances were not taken into account by the welfare system due to the 'work-first' and 'one size fits all' or 'blanket' approach (Grahame, Marston 2012 p. 80, McArthur, Thomson et al. 2013 pp. 163-5). This lack of service responsiveness resulted in parents feeling unable to return to paid work but being pushed to do so (Grahame, Marston 2012 p. 73) while others who wanted to return to paid work found systems unwilling to provide them with the assistance they needed to make this move (McArthur,

[1] Jobs, Education and Training advisers and Personal Advisers.

Thomson et al. 2013). For example, parents whose children had significant health issues expressed their concern about being 'pushed' back into the workforce (Grahame, Marston 2012 p. 80) whilst parents who were eager to return the workforce reported being unable to access the skills training courses they needed to make this a reality (McArthur, Thomson et al. 2013 p. 164).

While these studies provide some general insights into parents' frustrations with the employment services system, they reveal little about how specifically the system seeks to target mothers and the degree to which this deviates from the governance of the employed within this system. Existing research on how the employment services system targets the unemployed has argued that the "ongoing relationship between the job-seeker and their employment service agency" is framed by a "calculative rationality of risk" with 'a separate moral rationality of "mutual obligation"' (Henman 2004 p. 181). This research highlights the ways in which the targets of public policies are social constructed through a range of discourses and technologies. Our aim in this paper is to determine the importance for single parents of these various constructions and framings on the front line over time in a contractualised employment system.

Australia's contractualised employment system

Much has been made in the international literature of Australia's pioneering work in outsourcing the provision of government-funded employment assistance. In this section we provide an overview of the system and explain how it reflected and affected governments' approaches to targeting welfare recipients. We suggest that over time the system has been reformed consistently to build in a greater focus on securing employment outcomes, with a heightened emphasis on risk-based targeting technologies.

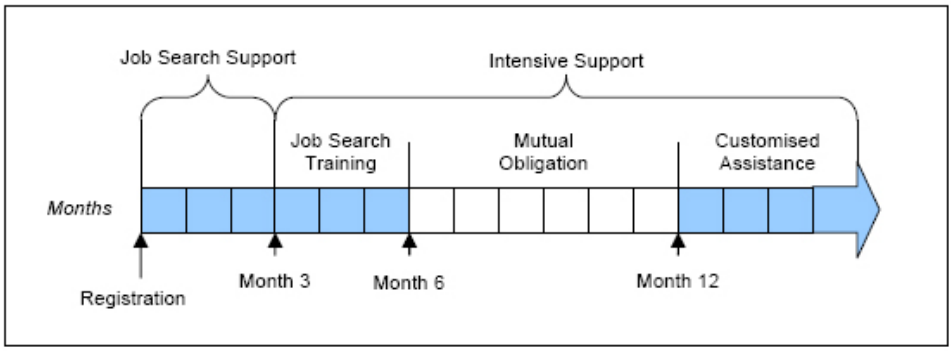
The Job Network was introduced in 1998 as part of a suit of reforms aimed at introducing greater efficiency and effectiveness into the employment services system. These reforms intensified activation policies for particular target groups, especially the young and long term unemployed. The old separation between the benefits office (Department of Social Security - DSS) and labour exchange (Commonwealth Employment Service - CES) was removed and the two agencies were merged into the agency *Centrelink*. The government then outsourced the delivery of employment assistance and job matching to the quasi-marketized Job Network. To determine the level of service each welfare recipient would receive, the government adopted a combination of risk and duration based targeting. The risk-based approach was implemented via the introduction of a computerized, algorithm based Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI):

> An important way of boosting the efficiency and effectiveness of employment assistance is to target it to those job seekers most likely to have their chances of gaining employment

> increased. If these job seekers can be reliably identified then resources can be targeted to where they are most likely to produce results. The JSCI [Job Seeker Classification Instrument] is a tool for identifying job seekers who are most likely to remain unemployed or are at risk of becoming long-term unemployed (DEWR, 2002: 27–8).

Under the original system and the first contract round (called ESC1), individuals were assessed using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument when they claimed an unemployed related income support payment from the welfare agency Centrelink. The results of this assessment together with their duration of employment determined which of the three "levels" of assistance (see Figure 1) they would receive from a Job Network agency of their own choosing. The first level of assistance (*Job Search Support*) was designed for newly unemployed income support recipients with few barriers and involved the agency finding job vacancies for the client. The second level of assistance, the *Job Search Training program*, kicked in after 3 months of unemployment, or where the client was assessed as have moderate barriers to finding work. Agencies would provide more assistance in terms of crafting resumes, practicing interview techniques and so forth. The third level of programming was *Intensive Assistance Customised Support*, for the "hard to help" including automatically those on income support for more than one year, as well longer term unemployed persons, or people with substance or mental illness issues that were not severe enough for them to be in the disability payment system, and, following 2006, a number of single parents assessed to have serious barriers (for example victims of domestic violence).

Figure 1 The Job Network service pathway model (source ANAO)



The system was from the beginning based on performance rewards for providers securing work outcomes for clients. This aspect was strengthened over the four contracts that were offered during the life of the Job Network, to encourage greater targeting of the most disadvantaged. One criticism of the initial system was that the reward structures did not give agencies sufficient incentive to target their efforts towards securing employment for hard to help clients, with a result that many were "parked". In ESC1 providers received a relatively substantial "commencement"

payment when a job seeker first joined their service, and then performance payments when their clients secured and maintained employment for the designated period. From the second contract period (ESC2) commencement payments were dropped, so agencies had to rely entirely on outcome payments that varied depending on the level of disadvantage identified on the clients' JSCI test.

The job network created a demanding performance environment in which the vast majority of agencies did not survive. Over the period 1998-2009 there was a dramatic consolidation of providers with the majority losing their contracts. Thus there were 306 providers in ESC1 and 205 in ESC2, falling further to 109 in ESC3 "Stage 1" and 103 in ESC3 "Stage 2" (the latter was effectively the fourth Job Network contract period). Importantly, there has been limited new entry into the system: 60% of ESC2 contracts went to existing ESC1 providers, while 95% of ESC3 (Stage 1 and 2) contracts went to ESC2 providers.

ESC3 Stage 2 coincided with the introduction of the Welfare to Work measures targeted at parents in receipt of income support. The introduction of parents into the JN coincided with a complex funding shift for employment service agencies. On the one hand, significant new funds ($227 million) were provided for the expected 84,000 parent places required in the job network. $266 million was provided for additional childcare places to support parents required to work. The government provided a smaller allocation ($47million) for an *Employment Preparation Program*, which according to budget documents would :

> provide a range of flexible and individually tailored pre-employment services. The services will be tailored to address the specific needs of parents, mature aged people and carers receiving Carers Payment (Budget 2005).

At the same time, the government cut substantial funding (around half a billion AUD) from the JN on the grounds that labour market conditions were improving. This mismatch between more clients and less general funding generated substantial criticism from Job Network providers and advocacy groups (Thomas 2007).

These criticisms were taken up by the Rudd Labor government elected in 2007. They replaced the Job Network with the Job Services Australia system, geared to further strengthen the targeting of long term unemployed/most disadvantaged and widening the range of employment assistance sub-programs available through the contractualised system. The JSA strengthened risk-based, individualized triaging of job seekers. Whereas the Job Network was based on the assumption that job seekers' needs could be consistently correlated with their length on payment,

such that anyone on benefits for more that 3 months went up to the middle service level and on 12 months automatically went into the most intensive service level, the JSA model uses the initial JSCI assessment to place a client for a full twelve months.[2] After twelve months the client is reassessed to see if they need to move into another level of service intensity. In place of the Job Network's three levels there are now four "streams" with stream four representing the hardest to help. The new model is outlined in figure two. The JSA required agency staff to develop Employment Pathway Plans – tailored quasi-contracts outlining the job seekers'/parents' goals and agreed activities - with their clients at the beginning of the service period, regardless of the level of disadvantage (stream).

Figure 2 The JSA service pathway model

	First 13 weeks	Second 13	Third 13	Fourth 13	Fifth 13	Sixth 13
Stream 1 (Work ready)	Initial interview/EPP		Skills assessment	Reassessment	New stream /compulsory activity	
Stream 2 (Work ready)	Initial interview/EPP			Reassessment	New stream /compulsory activity	
Stream 3 (Disadvantaged)	Initial interview/EPP			Reassessment	New stream /compulsory activity	
Stream 4 (Disadvantaged)	Initial interview/EPP			Reassessment		

Fees were paid at the beginning of every 13 week spell that the individual remained a client with the service but there were caps on the total amount of service fees that the government would pay (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 (source: Australian Senate 2012)

[2] Reflecting the higher disadvantage of Stream 4 clients, they can remain in S4 for 18 months.

(1) Stream and time in Payment Period	(2) Service Fees	(3) Service Fees—Remote ESAs only
Stream 1		
First 13 weeks	$63	$107
Second 13 weeks	$94	$160
Third 13 weeks	$328	$558
Fourth 13 weeks	$96	$163
Maximum for Stream 1	$581	$988
Stream 2		
First 13 weeks	$271	$461
Second 13 weeks	$208	$354
Third 13 weeks	$202	$343
Fourth 13 weeks	$204	$347
Maximum for Stream 2	$885	$1505
Stream 3		
First 13 weeks	$332	$564
Second 13 weeks	$264	$449
Third 13 weeks	$257	$437
Fourth 13 weeks	$267	$454
Maximum for Stream 3	$1120	$1904
Stream 4		
First 13 weeks	$587	$998
Second 13 weeks	$512	$870
Third 13 weeks	$409	$695
Fourth 13 weeks	$411	$699
Fifth 13 weeks	$402	$683
Sixth 13 weeks	$415	$706
Maximum for Stream 4	$2736	$4651
Work Experience Phase (excluding Compulsory Activity Phase)		
First 13 weeks[2]	$456	$775
Second 13 weeks	$66	$112
Third 13 weeks	$133	$226
Fourth 13 weeks	$67	$114
Compulsory Activity Phase[3]		
First 13 weeks	$133	$226
Second 13 weeks	$66	$112
Third 13 weeks	$133	$226
Fourth 13 weeks	$67	$114

The JSA reforms continued the pattern of service disruption and industry consolidation. As a result of the introduction of the JSA, approximately 320,000 job seekers (half the total case load) had to move geographically or change service provider (Finn 2011). The total number of new organizations was 189 (141 main agencies and 48 subcontractors), which appears higher than the JN ESC3 total, but includes services provided by non JN agencies in ESC3. The relevant total under the JN system for comparison was 280; thus JSA reflected a further consolidation. The disruption and cost to providers of moving from JN to JSA was also significant, as Finn (2011:17) notes:

> Overall, there was considerable disruption, even for successful providers, and about half of JN sites had to be de- and re-commissioned. One larger provider, who retained about the

same overall business share, estimated that its transaction costs in the transition to JSA amounted to over $7 million.

A senate committee into the JSA process raised significant criticisms, focusing on why so many apparently highly successful JN performers had not been given new contracts. It concluded that insufficient weight had been given to prior performance, and that too much of the tender assessment procedure relied upon agencies having "good grant writing skills". As a result, while some commercially successful providers found their contracts inexplicably un-renewed, many of the new agencies in the JSA contract were struggling to stay commercially viable (Finn 2011).

This review of existing documentation on the Job Network and Job Services Australia Systems highlights the deliberately targeted nature of the system, as well as the shift towards greater emphasis on risk-based targeting and diminished emphasis on length of dependency as a driver of the targeting of clients. We saw that the transfer of single parents into the system did not come with a clear increase in resources for new programs, and also that providers have been under consistently intense financial pressure. Contract renewal has been a difficult and at times seemingly arbitrary process. Furthermore, the lack of policy prescription and the outcome-based rewards structure for providers introduces a degree of uncertainty about what agencies actually do with and for their single parent clients. It is to this empirical issue that we now turn.

The Study

In order to study how Australia's contractualised employment services providers target single parents, we carried out two tranches of qualitative interviews with staff of agencies in Perth, Western Australia. Perth was chosen as a site for several reasons. It is rarely studied in research on welfare reforms, which tends to focus on the large east-coast cities. Furthermore, the Perth labour market is overwhelmingly dominated by the mining industry. These jobs are frequently in "fly-in, fly-out" operations with long shifts, and therefore completely unsuited for parents of young or even school-aged children. Perth has a relatively small service sector, where parents tend to seek employment. As a result, the city represents an important test of the capacity of employment assistance programs and agencies to adapt to the specific labour market needs of mothers.

The first tranche of interviews was carried out in 2007 just after the introduction of the requirement for parents to attend Job Network agencies. We interviewed 15 job network staff across 11 agencies. Agencies were contacted directly using the lists of contracted providers on the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations website. Analysis of this material revealed that the practices and discourses amongst service providers deviated significantly from

official policy discourse (Brady, 2011). However, because these interviews were carried out shortly after the introduction of the program, we were concerned that the findings about services for single parents might not reflect the full implementation of the new requirements, since it might take time for agencies to develop programs tailored to parents' needs. Furthermore, in 2009 the system changed to the new Job Services Australia model. As a result, we returned to study Perth agencies in 2013. Our goal was to study the same agencies, comparing the 2007 "baseline" with the later interviews to determine what had changed and why. However, with the exception of two agencies, all of those in our original sample had left the Job network due to their contracts not being renewed – a reflection of the turnover in the industry discussed above. The need to recruit new agencies lengthened the time period for the second tranche which took a bit over 12 months.

Interviews addressed questions surrounding the agencies' case loads, what their programs aim to achieve for parents, staff's views on the importance of service encounters, the ideal roles of staff and clients, the value of working for parents and their children, and the challenges single parents face in trying to find work. All interviews were transcribed professionally. They were imported into N'Vivo for thematic analysis.

Our analytic approach is informed by Foucault's reflections on governance and subjectivity together with post-Foucauldian governmentality approaches. Broadly this involved a concern with how rationalities underpin the agencies' actions, how governmental technologies shape street level actors' actions, and the forms of subjectification that occurred as part of agencies' efforts to shape single parents' conduct. In what follows we present a summary overview of themes that emerged in the two tranches of interviews, focusing in particular on differences between agencies and tranches.

Targeting and Governance of Single Mothers in Australia's Contractualised Employment System

Comparison of the tranches of interviews reveals continuities but also striking differences in how service providers sought to target and govern single mothers. The clearest continuities are in staff's consistent invocation of discourses of individualized service delivery, suggesting agencies do not see parents as a coherent target group. On the other hand, two key shifts have occurred: agencies in the past saw service encounters as mechanisms for gradually building rapport and supporting single parents to change their mentalities; now they largely eschew this transformative aspect and try to quickly align work requirements with parents' attitudes. Secondly, front line staff have shifted from engaging (often critically) with the normative values of activation and now treat it as a given and an organizational survival imperative. In the next sections we explore these themes in greater detail.

Subjectification in Jobs Agency Encounters: Serving individuals not mothers

Because Australia's contractualised employment services were organized around the new-public management principles of performance pay and process flexibility, there was very limited policy effort to specify how parents were to be treated in the system. This has made empirical research crucial because the policies are effectively being made at the street level (cf. Lipsky 1980). We therefore began our interviews by asking what programs the agencies had put in place for their single parent clients. In the 2007 interviews all but two agencies had not developed specific programs. A common refrain was "we treat everyone as individuals". Agencies that embraced this individualized service ethos took the view that parents' situations were sufficiently diverse as to render any common programming inappropriate. Parents were thus subjected to the same service processes as the regular unemployed, with the assumption these systems would pick up any special needs. Two agencies offered special days where single parents would be invited in together as a group to discuss their experiences, difficulties and fears about returning to the workforce. One agency "put out bouquets of flowers as well as boxes of Kleenex" [tissues] to "give a feminine touch". This agency also invited successful women entrepreneurs to act as role models and speak with the clients. However they agency did not have a renewed contract in the subsequent tranche of interviews.

Despite this individualized focus, when asked in the first tranche about specific difficulties parents face, many agencies where acutely conscious of the problems of finding work for mothers during school hours. In other words, although providers embraced the rhetoric of individualized service, in practice many acknowledged structural patterns in mothers' unemployment and attempted to deal with this by only referring mothers to suitable jobs and working hard to find childcare placements. Furthermore, these agencies often emphasized the important role of *mothering identities* in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of clients. Agencies were conscious that women saw themselves as "mothers first" and often felt "they couldn't do anything other than raise a child". Some of these agencies suggested they intended to develop specific programs for mothers in the future and had not done so only because the program was too young. Others suggested they would develop programs specifically for parents if the caseloads got big enough to justify the investment.

In the recent tranche of interviews the language of individualized service is now completely dominant with no agencies offering any programs specifically for mothers. This suggests that the intention to develop specialized programs for parents has not materialised over time, either because those agencies that intended lost their contracts, or the case loads did not materialize,

or the agencies felt the individualized model met clients' needs sufficiently. In terms of differences, a comparison of the interviews from the two periods reveals a change in attitudes towards mothers and work. The idea that mothers face barriers to working outside of hours has been replaced with a discourse that mothers *want* to work during these hours. Thus what was formerly regarded as structural has been recast as a matter of preferences. This does not mean such preferences are ignored. Interviewees affirmed the importance of trying to meet this preference wherever possible, because "there's just no point in forcing a parent to do a nine to five if they don't want to. They're not going to stick to it". The focus has thus shifted from seeing single parents as individuals who nevertheless belong to a category with shared structural needs and identities, to a grouping of individual clients who happen to express similar preferences and tend not to stay in a job if it encroaches on home time.

Repurposing the service encounter: from targeted transformation to pragmatic service adaptation

We asked interviewees in both rounds what was important about meetings between clients and staff. The responses differed between the two interview tranches. In the first round, the service encounter was most often presented as a crucial component of a process of client transformation. Staff saw clients as displaying a variety of maladaptive attitudes, especially around what they were capable and incapable of doing. They lacked confidence and self esteem. In this context the service relationship was driven by the gradual process of securing change, as this 2007 Interview argued:

> I think we are working with people to effect change and that we can't force people to change, so I think that the consultant is really integral to the success of the client. And we do form a real connection with the client. // I1: So it is connection? // Yeah and I think it is not only the individual consultants and myself. We have a job search room and I always make a point of introducing myself to clients and trying to get to know what they are doing, what they want to do, how we are helping them.

Another 2007 interviewee made the transformative aspect of their work clear:

> We are not running a business. We are doing, we have opportunity to transform people's lives and these people can see that. That we choose to do this work. We have a history of 160 years of history of doing community work.

So in the first round of interviews, the service relationship was conceived by many agencies as part of a project of changing attitudes, which in turn required both a gradual and persistent effort.

The 2013-15 interviews show a changed agency attitude towards the value and function of encounters. In the new phase, building immediate rapport is stressed as a critical task in order to quickly understand "where the parent is coming from". Transformation takes a back seat to the need to rapidly adapt services to the individuals' priorities so as to get an employment outcome. The following 2015 quote illustrates this clearly:

> Well [the relationship is] very important. If there is no relationship or rapport between the two, then the clients aren't going to open up about anything that's impacting on them going for a [job] interview. You experience that so often. You just wish that the clients would open up . . . So even I experience it myself when I - because I do a little bit of that work too in sending off resumes to the employers on behalf of our clients. You send the resume with all good faith and the client has said yes, I can go to the - I'm happy to be referred for this job. The employer rings them for an interview and then they say yep, then they don't turn up.

Rapport then functions as a way to get clients to mention practical issues preventing them from getting work. The role of the agency is not to transform their attitudes but help them address these practical issues:

> Then you're like why haven't they turned up [to a job interview we arranged for them]? It's because I didn't have petrol this week, because my son had to go to the doctor and this and that. Again that's - whose fault is it? It's probably no one's, but if you had to you'd say it's probably ours because we should have provided that support network prior to them going, being told about the interview. Like hey, do you need fuel? We will give you fuel, or do you need - have you taken into account child care for that day for the interview or something like this, you know...

Thus we suggest the role of service encounters in the targeting of single parents has shifted. When parents first joined the contractualised system, encounters were used as a technology of incremental transformation in which problematic psychologies were worked upon. This discourse has been largely abandoned by staff, who now see encounters as the centerpiece of a pragmatic strategy of adapting requirements to individuals and assisting them to obtain and keep jobs.

To do this they must often waive procedural requirements and de-emphasize important policy themes, especially at the beginning of the agencies' dealings with the client. They deliberately chose in the first meeting not to emphasize the work requirement so as not to "freak out" the client. Furthermore, when clients failed to show up to meetings and interviews, staff would often

hold back from putting a note on their record (which could result in a payment reduction sanction) because this could damage their rapport with the client.

From morality to risk in the targeting process

We saw in the conceptual discussion that targeting in contemporary social policy takes many forms, including 1. Normative or moral discourses that rely on moral problematisation of sub-populations for their political and policy effect, exemplified by the policy approach that suggests single parents are prone to damaging periods of dependency; and 2. Actuarial or risk-based technologies that facilitate differentiated treatment on the basis of individualized risk profiles. We also saw in the discussion of the evolution of the contractualised systems that the policy design has shifted from a temporal model where duration of dependency shapes the nature of the intervention, to one that relies exclusively on the Job Seeker Classification instrument to target resources and requirements.

Our interviews show this policy shift is matched with a corresponding shift in discourse on the ground. In the 2007 interviews only one staff member mentioned the JSCI. All but one interview in 2013-15 mentioned the JSCI, and most mentioned it more than once. Furthermore, interviewees in the first tranche interpreted the goals of the activation policies in strongly normative terms. This 2007 interviewee illustrates the normative orientation, although she disagrees with the policy stance:

> Like I'm pro-work, you know like overall, but um yeah I think that . . . we've really started picking on a defenceless group of people again. Not to say that, that's not going to have benefits for the individual or for the community. But I just wish that there'd be more preparation not just what my job is supposed to achieve. Like you can't do it, you know. Reality is, and it's like, one year expecting people to get to work, you know, pretty much overnight or over six months, it's just um//Flawed.//um Yeah.

Every 2007 interview mentions the notion of "obligation" which was a key component of the conservative governments' discourse around the moral desirability for welfare recipients to "give something back". The term is only mentioned once in the 2013-15 interviews. This discursive shift is the street level expression of a change in how targeting takes place – away from a morally-loaded discourse of long term dependency towards one that stresses systematic assessment of risks.

Conclusion

This paper sought to understand how Australian contractualised agencies target single parents in the context of shifts in the discourses and technologies surrounding the government of welfare recipients. Australia's devolved, performance-driven administrative arrangement, coupled with a policy-level intensification of rhetoric and requirements targeting parents, made empirical exploration of front line conditions necessary. We found the implementation of these discourses and programs at the front line furthered aspects of government targeting agendas but also transmuted them in important ways. The front line experiences are complex, but there are clear patterns, especially in how the systems have evolved over time. By taking a two-phase perspective, we were able to highlight continuities and expose changes. The major continuity is the emphasis on serving individuals, meaning no systematic efforts are made to devise programs for the target parent group. Despite this emphasis on treating each parent as unique, there are also clear patterns in how they are targeted. Agencies have modified how they use service encounters, reducing the transformative aspect and moving towards a pragmatic "path of least resistance" mentality, heightening the focus on immediate outcomes. Furthermore, the normative appeals (and counter-appeals) have largely disappeared from front line narratives, replaced by efforts to manage the resources and gaps created by the established actuarial risk assessment tool.

What can we conclude from these observations about the broader theoretical concepts of targeting discussed above? Targeting via discursive subjectification and normative/political rhetoric appear to have subsided in favour of the quotidian processes of actuarial risk assessment and job placement. This shift has been encouraged by the strong financial pressures and severe survival challenges of the Australian context. However, it is a mistake to think that subjectification and political stigmatization no longer matter. A more plausible analysis is that targeting of mothers in Australia has proceeded through a series of stages. It was necessary to make up single parents as both appropriate recipients of welfare and subjects of activation. It was necessary also to invoke political/normative arguments tactically to overcome resistance to the new forms of targeting of parents. These targeting methods succeeded, entrenching the subjectification and subordination of the target group. The system is now able to proceed in a relatively routine manner to implement intensified activation requirements. Thus we conclude that targeting is not static but displays a strong temporal dimension, and shifts in targeting may not represent the rejection of particular modes, so much as their successful institutionalization.

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