

Beth Watts and Suzanne Fitzpatrick (2018)

Welfare Conditionality

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This very welcome book 'Welfare Conditionality' by Beth Watts and Suzanne Fitzpatrick is published as part of Routledge's Key Ideas series and stands up well to the test of being a lively and original treatment of the subject matter. The authors participated in a five-year research programme into Welfare Conditionality; Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change¹ within which they undertook a major international evidence, policy and normative review of welfare conditionality. The book benefits from this research; the authors are clearly on top of their game and have an encyclopaedic and interdisciplinary knowledge of the subject. This well written book is, at first glance, deceptively simple. It also seems short, organised into just five core chapters. However, the authors pack a lot into a tightly written text of 156 pages. There is an extensive bibliography and very effective index. After a short introduction, the five main chapters set the context for conditionality and go on to examine the techniques, the subjects, the impacts and the ethics of conditionality. The conclusion goes further than most conclusions offering benefit in the form of 'a framework' to assess welfare conditionality.

Readers of this journal will be most interested in the author's wide-ranging discussion of housing policy and practice as a key site for conditionality (p.67). This includes exploration of various themes including criminalisation of vagrancy, banning food distribution and use of anti-social behaviour orders. It also reviews recent UK trends towards more conditional, probationary and renewable social housing tenancies and the tendency towards segregated 'very social' housing practices in France, Austria and Sweden. The authors also reflect optimistically on UK housing associations' resistance to implementing behavioural conditions and the growing support for the principles underpinning the Housing First approach. In their consideration of behavioural conditionality in the context of street-homelessness, the authors do not sit on the fence. Having surveyed a range of views concerning conditionality in homelessness, including the 'right to be homeless' and anti-intervention perspectives, the authors clearly conclude that conditionality and

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some level of enforcement is morally justifiable if and when used to compassionately shepherd homeless people into rehabilitative social services (p.76). Albeit the authors are also clear that local level discretion to enforce conditions can also be used for discriminatory and oppressive ends and are especially mindful about the limits to vulnerable claimant's knowledge and understanding (p.95).

While the book is clearly inter-disciplinary, the authors' own backgrounds in law and philosophy shine through in both their willingness and ability to debate and take positions in key arguments about welfare conditionality. In Chapter Three, the authors are even-handed in their assessment of rational-based behavioural economics and models of human agency and concur on the need for more middle range behavioural theories that are socially embedded and contextually rational (p.111). Likewise, in Chapter Seven's discussion about the ethics of conditionality the authors reject any one normative perspective including rights based perspectives, which the authors argue, are too unqualified in their critique of conditionality. They argue instead for a pluralist social justice framework that allows a triangulation of different normative perspectives within which conditionality can be ethically appraised.

Social housing tenants and homeless people's experiences of conditionality are well served by this book, as are the experiences of unemployed people and those who are sick and disabled. Conditionality as applied to low income families with children is also discussed, largely focusing on conditional cash transfers in developing countries, and income management, immunisation and school-enrolment in developed countries. While space is tight, other subjects or themes might merit more attention than given. The conditional treatment of lone parents, while mentioned a number of times, is not a specific focus of discussion, perhaps thereby missing the option of introducing gender as a more explicit variable of overall analysis and bringing the enforcement of sexual behaviour into the discussion. Migrants' differing experiences of conditionality might merit more consideration. The authors are interested in how conditionality is used in Nordic welfare models to safeguard robust welfare safety nets in increasingly competitive global markets; they could extend that discussion to explore how conditionality is used to reinforce social, cultural and economic norms in a context of increased migration. Chapter Seven's 'framework' to assess the efficacy and welfare conditionality includes seven tests or questions to test the ethics and efficacy of conditionality. These include questions about, in order; legitimacy of the ends being pursued; alignment with ultimate societal goals; plausibility of the theory of change; effectiveness in question of the approach; degree of benefit over non-conditional alternative approaches; the level of proportionality; and lastly, the degree of cost effectiveness. Given the high possibilities of discriminatory application of conditionality, a test for equal treatment might also be useful in such a framework.

Some of the strengths of the book lie in the disciplinary background of the authors; coming from a political sociology perspective, I would have enjoyed more treatment of the politics of conditionality and a more thorough investigation of how conditional regimes are often linked to broader political discourse, and often stigmatise and disempower claimants. This seems particularly important when one distinguishes, as the authors do, between the threat and the imposition of sanctions. Sanctions shifts power in all sorts of ways. The book raises hard political questions why conditionality is the choice or technique of social control for the poor. It also raises important questions about unintended consequences. There are scar effects of conditionality, which may not only crowd out intrinsic positive motivations but may also create hostility towards service providers. There are also impacts for non-government agencies as institutions are forced to shift their culture and relationship with service users. An outcome of UK research, the book inevitably over-focuses on UK and to some degree Anglo Saxon evidence. However, let none of these small gripes undermine this well written and well-researched book. Other books are due to be published from this welfare conditionality project. One can only look forward to them and hope they reach the same high standards as this first publication.

Dr Mary P. Murphy,
Department of Sociology,
Maynooth University, Ireland