

Gamers or victims: how can you ‘play the game’ on benefits if you don’t know the rules?

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Portrayals of welfare users being lazy and work-shy, manipulating the system to receive support, are common. Drawing on [research](#), [Jenny McNeill](#) explains the extent to which cynical manipulation is present in the conduct of welfare support recipients.



Media and government are fixated on the pervasiveness of so-called ‘scroungers’: people cheating the benefits system for welfare they are not entitled to, or those who do not properly take steps to end their dependency on benefits. In 2012, the then-Employment Minister Chris Grayling [defended](#) the use of benefit sanctions on the basis that they provide ‘a real deterrent for some people who are either not trying or who are gaming the system’.

Policy makers have also denied structural reasons in favour of emphasising people’s *behaviours* in explanations for the causes of poverty, unemployment, and social marginalisation. They have thus endorsed a need to ‘nudge’ targeted individuals to reduce welfare dependency. This heightened sense of panic over welfare abuse has in recent decades been called ‘scroungerphobia,’ but fears over the poor subverting the foundations of state or charitable support have much older roots (Rousseau, 1762).

In response to these long-standing caricatures of scroungers and skivers, our [research](#) shows the real hardships faced by many claiming welfare benefits. That includes people who are stigmatised, sanctioned and struggling to get by, turning to foodbanks, to other sources of support, and to ‘survival crime’. Many of the 480 welfare service users we have interviewed repeatedly over the last three years described similar devastating experiences of the process of claiming (and being denied) benefits – as depicted in Ken Loach’s film *I, Daniel Blake*.

In our [recently published paper](#), we looked at the motivations and conduct of benefit claimants. We interviewed a range of stakeholders across the UK – in addition to our 480 welfare service users, there were 150 practitioners in focus groups and 52 policy stakeholders. We wanted to understand their diverse views on the extent to which they believed people were ‘gaming’ the system or were victims of it.

The qualitative data show how these ideas of ‘manipulation’ and ‘vulnerability’ are constructed, interpreted, and used by people in varied and complex ways. We argue that manipulation of welfare systems requires all of four key elements: **capacity, knowledge, agency, and moral propensity**. In other words, you need to be capable, rational, understand how the system works, and have a desire to manipulate the system.

Whilst some participants resisted the characterisation of manipulation, it was still reflected in people’s narratives. Welfare recipients often backed the government line on dependency culture and justified the use of welfare conditionality. At the same time, they were distancing themselves from the stigma of gaming the system which they attributed to others:

I can understand government, why they do it because there’s a lot of lazy people around. If someone’s chucking money at you just for signing your name, then people are going to do that all the time. (Woman in Family Intervention Project).

Many practitioners also believed some policy response was necessary to tackle people gaming the system, even though numbers were exaggerated. As one representative from a charity argued:

The proportion of people taking the system for a ride is small, but nonetheless you have to have

controls... [but] public opinion is wrong about the extent to which people are actively trying to avoid their reciprocal obligations.

Maximising benefit entitlement was seen by some as entirely rational and legitimate. According to a charity officer:

If they're going to be efficient about it there's an argument that it's not going to be entirely faithful to their experience because they will naturally – and who wouldn't? – represent their situation as being worse than it is just to give them a bit of a cushion, because it takes so long for stuff to be sorted out.

This comment highlights three major assumptions of 'manipulation': firstly, that the benefit system lends itself to this kind of manipulation by incentivising people to make certain claims; secondly, that there is a general consensus that some level of manipulation is normal under the circumstances; and thirdly, that individuals are forced to act in this way when faced with a system which does not offer adequate support.

Some stakeholders argued that many welfare recipients lacked knowledge about the system, had a limited capacity to act rationally within it, and severely constrained individual ability to make choices: *'With the group we are working with they're not making a rational choice because they don't actually know what the rules of the game are before they start it,'* a service provider explained.

So the question is, how can you 'play the game' if you don't know the rules? While stakeholders suggested there might be *some* manipulation based on people's propensity, more commonly they blamed the welfare system – its lack of flexibility and human touch – for *increasing* the vulnerability of many welfare claimants.

Very rarely did welfare recipients we interviewed disclose that they had knowingly manipulated the system. More often, recipients didn't understand how the system worked, the conditions of their benefits, or why sanctions were applied. People often had multiple complex needs which made it difficult for them to understand or keep to their responsibilities and strict requirements of benefit conditions:

Look, I'm confused as hell. Help me out. No-one did; all they seemed to want to do is get someone out of the door and sanction them. (Homeless man)

There was little evidence sanctions actually changed people's behaviour in ways the system was designed to. For vulnerable groups, sanctions worsened health, relationships, and financial stability. One charity officer argued:

When you work with people who are so vulnerable psychologically, emotionally, materially – spiritually even – and try to drive them to behaviour change with sanctioning and forcefulness, their lives are so brutal anyway that they don't use that as a lever for change. It just feeds into despair and disengagement.

We wanted to know people's perceptions on whether benefit recipients are abusing or being abused by the welfare benefit system. According to the stakeholders we spoke to, both things are happening to some extent. But it seems the vulnerable are more likely to bear the brunt of sanctioning. Nonetheless, the rhetoric around 'cynical manipulation' of welfare is undoubtedly powerful and pervasive. Will films like *I, Daniel Blake* help reshape public, media, and government debates around welfare?

Note: the above is based on the author's [recent article](#) in the Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, co-authored with Professor Del Roy Fletcher and Elaine Batty from Sheffield Hallam University, and Professor John Flint from the University of Sheffield. Their research is part of the project *Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change*.

About the Author

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