



Hidden Voices: Lived experiences in the Irish Welfare Space

OVERVIEW

Welfare states are underpinned by the idea of a right to a 'basic minimum' and are fundamental to the health and well-being of people in capitalist societies. Broadly speaking, welfare states encapsulate health services, education, housing and income maintenance. This book is concerned with income maintenance in particular.

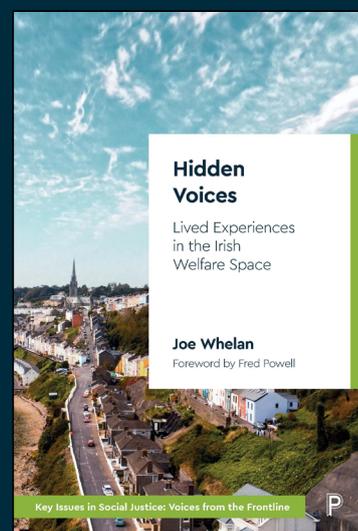
The effectiveness and costs of providing income maintenance for working age people as part of a welfare state infrastructure is often measured on the basis of expenditure and statistics. Therefore, the lived experiences of persons seeking and receiving welfare as a primary strand of income can be overlooked.

However, qualitative research has the capacity to demonstrate the critical distance between policy and everyday life and so, as part of a holistic evidence base, lived experience can reshape approaches to policy.

The research presented in this book is based on a qualitative study of the lived experiences of working-age welfare recipients in Ireland across multiple payment types. Though concerned with the Irish example, it argues that 'shared typical' experience types can tell us something about lived experiences across jurisdictions.

This book ultimately seeks to honour lived experience as a valuable, insightful and necessary form of knowledge. In this respect, the experiences of 19 people receiving various working age welfare payments in Ireland are recounted here and positioned within the broader scholarly literature of this type.

What emerges is a nuanced picture of the complexity that makes up the experience of welfare reciprocity.



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CONCLUSIONS

- **How we do welfare:** Ireland represents a unique welfare state which can be characterised as 'hybrid', but which maintains a heavy liberal emphasis. It has turned much more toward 'punitive' welfare methods in recent years, particularly in the post-crisis era.
- **Social liminality:** Recounting the experiences of those interviewed for this book, it is clear that receiving welfare as a primary strand of income in Ireland can mean being in a liminal space characterised by being at once 'outside' and 'in-between' spaces which are deemed socially acceptable. The sense of social liminality underlies experiences in the context of welfare reciprocity in Ireland and this can be profoundly negative for those experiencing it.
- **Work and the work ethic:** The interviews with the study participants show that work and how we understand work are prominent social themes in an Irish context and beyond. The continuous linking of paid formal employment to notions of what it means to be a 'valuable' member of society has a deep effect on those receiving welfare. Worklessness can become conflated with idleness and this can be deeply stigmatising. Many of those interviewed for this study struggled with worklessness on a deeply introspective level.
- **The conditions attached to welfare: where you must go and what you must do:** Welfare conditionality may be defined as the predetermined patterns of behaviour that people are expected to undertake in order to realise and subsequently maintain a claim. It characterises where you have to go and what you have to do as a welfare recipient. Conditionality is often concerned with moving people from different payment trajectories into work. This research shows that in reality, welfare conditionality can be deeply challenging, intensely time consuming and stigmatising for welfare recipients and does not make them more likely to enter formal paid employment, often having the opposite effect.
- **How welfare recipients behave:** The interviews show that welfare recipients often take multiple steps to tailor their behaviour and that this is shaped by how they experience receiving welfare and by broader social discourses. Particular behaviours include 'maintaining compliance' and engaging in impression management. Maintaining compliance is characterised by feeling one must sustain and adhere to what it means to be a 'good' citizen, along with what it means to be a 'good' welfare recipient. Recipients are prone to engage in impression management both with members of the public and with the administrators of welfare as a result of these feelings.
- **Social deservingness: who deserves to get what and what should they have to do in order to get it:** Societal narratives surrounding deservingness are ancient, ubiquitous and incredibly powerful and those interviewed for this study were deeply aware of these. As a result, this awareness shapes experiences of welfare reciprocity. This is a complex area which affects welfare recipients deeply and often leads to specific behaviours which include:
 - ◊ Othering and self-justification: Othering coupled with self-justification represent an internal and external struggle in the context of deservingness. Welfare recipients question the legitimacy of other claimants while emphasising their own deservingness.
 - ◊ Social reciprocity: The participants in this study displayed a sense that receiving welfare can be constituted as 'taking while not giving' and this causes many to question their own deservingness.
- **The social and public perception of welfare: Welfare is bad:** The experiences recounted in this book suggest that for many welfare recipients there is a sense that it is just 'normal' to feel bad about receiving welfare and that welfare itself is something inherently 'bad'. This was shown to have a detrimental effect on the self-efficacy and self-esteem of many of the participants and so suggests that welfare claimants are deeply affected by how welfare, as a social good, is framed.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lived experience as a form of knowledge is valuable and should form part of any holistic evidence base when creating and shaping policy in the area of welfare reciprocity. In order to begin to do welfare better, we need to continually speak with and listen to people who have experienced, or who are experiencing, receiving welfare. Therefore, those tasked with making and effecting/affecting social policy must embrace and honour lived experience as a valid type of knowledge.
- Life for those receiving welfare as a primary strand of income is complex, nuanced and often difficult. Therefore, common sense understandings of welfare reciprocity need to be problematised. This speaks to a process of 'reframing' welfare as a desirable and necessary social good and something from which everyone can potentially benefit. Ultimately, this needs to be taken up at the level of politics and given a basis in social policy.
- Material disadvantage and poverty clearly form part of the experiences of the people who took part in this study and this is consistent with other research in this context. To combat this, welfare rates should be set at a rate above the poverty line by indexing rates to the 'at risk of poverty' metric so that recipients can be assured of receiving income support at a socially acceptable standard.
- Current welfare conditionality practices need to be reevaluated. Approaches to welfare that are based on conditional behaviours and sanctions for non-compliance are not effective at producing good outcomes for people and actually help produce or reproduce poverty. Approaches to welfare must move away from being sanction based, punitive and work focused towards being nurturing, holistic and inclusive.
- Welfare must be reframed and reconstituted as a valuable and necessary social good that is based on citizenship and inclusivity, designed to let people in, not keep them out. This needs to be actualised at the level of politics and given effect in social policy in order to help shape positive sociological experiences.
- The COVID-19 crisis has shown the value of a strong social safety net. Yet there are potentially further crises to come. Therefore, as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, how we do welfare in the future needs to be given serious consideration and should form part of a project of social 'future-proofing'.

About the book

Underpinned by the idea of the right to a 'basic minimum', welfare states are a major feature of many societies. However, the lived experiences of persons seeking and receiving welfare payments can often be overlooked.

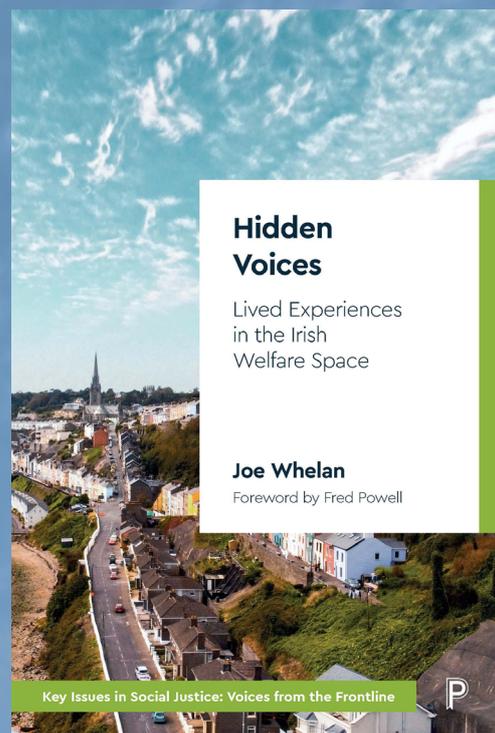
This book seeks to remedy this omission by honouring lived experience as valuable, insightful and necessary. It draws on qualitative interviews with 19 people receiving various working age welfare payments in Ireland to explore stigma, social reciprocity and the notions of the deserving and undeserving poor, and to analyse welfare conditionality in the Irish context.

Breaking new ground, this book offers original research findings which contest and inform policy both within Ireland and beyond.

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