

‘All in this together?’

**Precarity, uncertainty and abandonment: A Foucauldian
analysis of young people’s experiences of long-term
unemployment and living in Melbourne’s west during
COVID-19 lockdowns**

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ABSTRACT

Unemployed young people face considerable barriers to employment and must navigate a precarious labour market. For young people living in disadvantaged regions of western metropolitan Melbourne, these challenges are more pronounced due to unique geographical and sociocultural influences. Despite these obstacles, young people in particular are problematised for their long-term unemployment by neoliberal ideology and policies which attribute joblessness to an individual's psychological and moral deficits. In order to receive income support, they are subjected to neoliberal state practices colloquially referred to as Workfare, which are intended to discipline, punish and control welfare recipients and reorient them to think and act in accordance with labour market rationalities.

Tellingly, the disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Australian Government's unprecedented economic response to protect millions of people exposed to joblessness, allowed for the neoliberalist characterisation of unemployment as an individual failing to be contested. This response was spearheaded by the narrative that the crisis brought all Australians together and assurances from Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison that 'there is not more support for some than there is for others'.

It was within this context that this research aimed to critically analyse young people's experiences of long-term unemployment and precarity during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns. In applying a conceptual framework of Foucauldian governmentality, overlain with Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's belief in just-world (BJW) theory, the research analysed ways eight young people from Melbourne's west, who had undertaken Work for the Dole (WfD) activity, described their experiences of long-term unemployment during the city's COVID-19 lockdowns. These experiences were captured by semi-structured interviews and analysed through a Foucauldian lens using Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA).

Findings revealed that the pandemic crisis, and the Australian Government's pump-priming of the economy in response, did not shift the neoliberal narrative that blamed young people for their life circumstances caused by factors beyond their control.

During COVID-19 lockdowns, the young people in this study continued to internalise individual responsibility for their unemployment, and their subjectivities and citizenship identities went largely unchanged. Yet by exhibiting proximal acts of resistance to the discursive practices of neoliberalism and Workfare, the young people signalled a pathway to potentially challenge these oppressive systems. The research is bookended by contemplating the capacity of the climate movement – in having positioned the ecological and economic crises as inextricably linked – to propose alternatives to remedy long-term youth unemployment underpinned by an ecological social justice perspective.

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, Bryce Lewis, declare that the PhD thesis entitled, 'All in this together? Precarity, uncertainty and abandonment: A Foucauldian analysis of young people's experiences of long-term unemployment and living in Melbourne's west during COVID-19 lockdowns', is no longer than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Ethics declaration

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC) (Application ID: HRE21-182).

Bryce Lewis



Signature

February 7, 2025

Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LISTS OF FIGURES AND TABLES	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background of the problem.....	3
1.3 Statement of the problem	5
1.4 Aims of the project.....	8
1.5 Research sub-questions	9
1.6 Research contribution to knowledge and significance.....	10
1.7 Motivation for conducting the research.....	11
1.8 Explanation of key terms	12
1.9 Conclusion	15
CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND.....	16
2.1 Introduction	16
2.2 Youth unemployment.....	16
2.3 The Work for the Dole program	18
2.4 The neoliberalist case for Work for the Dole.....	20
2.5 Workfare as situated through the provision of employment services	22
2.6 COVID-19 and the Australian Government's economic response.....	23
2.7 'Deserving' and 'undeserving' citizens.....	25
2.8 Socio-economic context of COVID-19.....	27
2.9 Impacts of COVID-19 on young labour market participants	28
2.10 COVID-19, disadvantage and Melbourne's west.....	31
2.11 Conclusion	34

CHAPTER 3: YOUNG PEOPLE, LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT AND PRECARIITY, AND MELBOURNE’S WEST	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.2 Young people as a constructed identity category	35
3.3 Young people and unemployment	39
3.4 Young people, unemployment and Melbourne’s west	42
3.5 Young people of migrant background and unemployment	42
3.6 Neoliberalism and the problematisation of long-term unemployment	44
3.7 The education–employment nexus	45
3.8 Disrupted transitions to adulthood	47
3.9 Unemployed young people and risk	49
3.10 Conclusion	50
CHAPTER 4: NEOLIBERALISM, THE PROBLEMATISATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CITIZENSHIP IDENTITIES	52
4.1 Introduction	52
4.2 Laurence Mead, and welfare recipients’ rights and responsibilities	53
4.3 Workfare as mutual obligation	55
4.4 Reciprocity and mutual obligation: not one and the same	57
4.5 A human rights critique of Work for the Dole	58
4.6 Work for the Dole does not work (in remedying unemployment)	62
4.7 Unemployment discourse and ‘othering’	64
4.8 The criminalisation of welfare	66
4.9 Work for the Dole and ‘non-workers’	69
4.10 The intended purpose of Work for the Dole	71
4.11 Discursive Workfare techniques and the subjectified jobseeker	76
4.12 The contradiction of neoliberalism	78
4.13 Market forces ineffectual in responding as COVID-19 intensified inequality	79
4.14 Conclusion	82
CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	84
5.1 Introduction	84
5.2 Governmentality theory	85
5.2.1 Mediation of discourse	86
5.2.2 Power relations	87

5.2.3	Bio-power	89
5.2.4	Management of freedom	89
5.2.5	Security	90
5.2.6	The market as 'regime of truth'	91
5.2.7	Individualising discourses.....	93
5.2.8	Citizenship identities.....	94
5.2.9	Veridiction.....	94
5.2.10	Resistance suppressed	95
5.3	Theory of hegemony.....	96
5.3.1	Civil society	97
5.3.2	War of position	98
5.3.3	Historic bloc.....	99
5.3.4	The modern 'prince'.....	99
5.3.5	Language	100
5.3.6	Common versus good sense.....	100
5.3.7	False consciousness	101
5.4	Belief in just-world theory.....	102
5.4.1	Threats to BJW.....	103
5.4.2	BJW positive illusion.....	104
5.4.3	Injustice normalised.....	104
5.4.4	Personal versus general BJW	105
5.4.5	BJW as an ideology.....	106
5.4.6	Income redistribution	106
5.5	Reconciling the tensions that exist between the theorists	110
5.6	Conclusion	110
CHAPTER 6: METHODOLOGY		111
6.1	Introduction	111
6.2	Research paradigm	111
6.3	Research approach	115
6.4	Research design.....	116
6.5	Gatekeeper access to participants	118
6.6	Recruitment and sampling	119
6.7	Participants	119

6.8	Ethical considerations.....	124
6.9	Sample size	126
6.10	Data collection	128
6.11	Data analysis	132
6.12	Thematic analysis	132
6.13	The six-step process.....	134
6.13.1	Becoming familiar with the data	134
6.13.2	Generating coding categories	135
6.13.3	Generating themes.....	136
6.13.4	Reviewing themes	137
6.13.5	Defining and naming themes.....	138
6.13.6	Producing the report.....	139
6.13.7	Refining the report.....	139
6.14	Conclusion	140
CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS PART 1 – HOW WORKFARE TECHNIQUES AND DISCOURSE TRANSFORMED YOUNG PEOPLE INTO JOBSEEKERS		141
7.1	Introduction	141
7.2	Workfare as bio-power.....	144
7.3	How Workfare as bio-power punishes and dehumanises.....	150
7.4	Unemployed young people reconfigured as jobseekers.....	155
7.5	Individualising and citizenship discourses internalised.....	158
7.6	Resilience, adaptation, transformation and engagement with the narrative	162
7.7	Becoming entrepreneurial in their quest for freedom.....	166
7.8	False attribution of blame	171
7.9	Complicit in their own control.....	173
7.10	Did COVID-19 refute the narrative that responsibilised unemployment?	181
7.11	Erosion of the collective.....	184
7.12	Conclusion	187
CHAPTER 8: FINDINGS PART 2 – HOW CIVIL SOCIETY REINFORCED THE PRODUCTION OF THE TRANSFORMED JOBSEEKER.....		188
8.1	Introduction	188
8.2	Reduced dependence on the state.....	190

8.3	Young people as jobseekers failed by civil society.....	194
8.4	The pervasiveness of governmentality in all aspects of the social	199
8.5	How the education system and the family produce neoliberal jobseekers	202
8.6	The social responsibility of family according to the neoliberal state	204
8.7	Shaping citizenship through domestic discourse.....	208
8.8	Workfare discourse can be internalised differently depending on cultural identity and promote resistance to the dominant narrative	213
8.9	Disenfranchised masculinities: neoliberalism and shifting gendered expectations.....	215
8.10	Conclusion	219
CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION.....		220
9.1	Introduction	220
9.2	Key findings	221
9.2.1	Unemployed young people continued to internalise individual responsibility during COVID-19 lockdowns	221
9.2.2	The effect of the once-in-a-century pandemic, and the unprecedented monetary interventions implemented in response, had negligible effect on the subjectivities of unemployed young people.....	222
9.2.3	Young people exhibited resistance at interpersonal levels to the discursive practices of neoliberalism and Workfare	222
9.3	Relevance of findings	224
9.3.1	COVID-19, young people and precarity: transformative potential or continuity?	226
9.3.2	Catalyst for change through young people's engagement with new modes of civil engagement?	230
9.3.3	Can emerging forms of resistance and participation inspire Workfare activism among young people?.....	234
9.4	Challenges in research with young people experiencing precarity.....	237
9.4.1	Recruitment challenges.....	237
9.5	Conclusion	239
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION.....		241
REFERENCES.....		248
APPENDICES		292
Appendix A: Confirmation of ethics approval		293
Appendix B: YouthNow letter of support		294

Appendix C: Recruitment flyer.....	296
Appendix D: Information to participants involved in research	297
Appendix E: Consent form for participants involved in research.....	299
Appendix F: Information about participant questionnaire	301
Appendix G: Indicative interview schedule.....	304

LISTS OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

Figure 2.1: Map of western Melbourne LGAs (denoted in blue).....	33
Figure 5.1: The theoretical framework which underpinned the research	85
Figure 5.2: The theoretical framework, overlain and intersecting with the research problem, setting and context.	108

Tables

Table 7.1: Presentation of results – Theme 1	143
Table 8.1: Presentation of results – Theme 2	189

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ACU	Australian Catholic University
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ALMPs	active labour market programs
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
BJW	belief in just-world
CALD	culturally and linguistically diverse
CEO	chief executive officer
CESCR	Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DEWRSB	Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DJSB	Department of Jobs and Small Business
EERC	Education and Employment References Committee
FDA	Foucauldian discourse analysis
FYA	Foundation for Young Australians
GFC	global financial crisis
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
IPA	interpretive phenomenological analysis
LGA	local government area
LNP	Liberal–National Party
NFP	not-for-profit
NGO	non-government organisation

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PHEIC	Public Health Emergency of International Concern
PHIDU	Public Health Information Development Unit
RBA	Reserve Bank of Australia
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SES	socio-economic status
SS4C	School Strike 4 Climate
UBI	universal basic income
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VET	vocational education and training
VU	Victoria University
WfD	Work for the Dole
WHO	World Health Organization
YPAR	youth participatory action research

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an examination of the causes and effects of the employment barriers faced by young Australians. Further challenges existing for young people living in disadvantaged regions of western metropolitan Melbourne are then contextualised and personalised by introducing the reader to the research participants who represented the cohort foregrounded by this study. Insight is provided into the young people's experiences of long-term unemployment, precarity and work for welfare or 'Workfare' (Eichhorst & Rinne, 2018, p. 198), and of how these experiences have shaped their subjectivities as neoliberal jobseekers and citizens. Neoliberalism insists that the market determines the allocation of resources and income, and that the state should be limited to a non-intervention role primarily concerned with the preservation of private property rights and contracts (Archer, 2009). The ideology's core assumptions include economic deregulation, 'the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the framing of public welfare spending as a cost of production' (Jessop, 2002, p. 459).

The implications of neoliberal ideology and practices are acutely felt by young people through the individualisation of risk (Dean, 2002). The removal of social supports that safeguard the most vulnerable members of society against economic uncertainty and precarity (Braithwaite et al., 2002) reduces opportunities to attain full citizenship (Edwards, 2009) and limits social mobility for many young people – particularly those already marginalised by geographic and sociohistorical disadvantage. By normalising competition amongst individuals (Joseph, 2013; Oksala, 2013) the neoliberal state demands that young people be self-reliant and self-directed (Oinonen, 2018) and invest in their own trial of 'self-transformation' (Boland, 2021, p. 7) via higher education and training. The inequality produced as a consequence extends beyond educational opportunities and labour-market participation and outcomes to all spheres of community participation, including access to quality public health and affordable housing. Moreover, this emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility has been associated with a weakening of community solidarity (Brown, 2005; Charlesworth, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Vesterberg, 2015).

This section surfaces the unique lives of the young people and how their circumstances and perspectives have been shaped by their geographical and sociocultural settings and illustrates why their lives matter in the context of the research problem.

The statement of the problem situates the research against the milieu of the COVID-19 pandemic and draws attention to ways this crisis disproportionately impacted young people as both workers and jobseekers. It is from this perspective that the research intends to contribute to the generation of distinct knowledge by interrogating the legitimacy of Workfare doctrine at a unique moment in time. The proposition that the economic and ideological response to the pandemic unified all Australians (i.e. 'We are all in this together'; Morrison, 2020) is strongly contested by demonstrating how Australian Government approaches maintained the neoliberal narrative of citizens as either deserving or underserving of state support, and further widened inequality. Most notably, how financial relief measures were applied during COVID-19 lockdowns reflected a continuation of neoliberal logic which excluded certain sections of society from a safety net by making moral judgements on the causes of unemployment (Andrew et al., 2021). Findings will demonstrate that the young people who participated in this research were treated differently from those who, according to discursive Workfare practices, had full citizenship rights (Edwards, 2009). As unemployed young people, mostly from migrant backgrounds and living in a disadvantaged region of Melbourne, the burden of COVID-19 and the imploration for everyone to 'do our bit to flatten the curve' (Long, 2020, p. 1) fell more heavily on them.

This chapter then moves to the aims of the project and the overarching research question and sub-questions. It outlines how the research is intended to build on prior studies which elevated young people's lived experience of unemployment and WfD. I then address the research's relevance and potential to generate new knowledge through the changed economic, social and political conditions created by COVID-19, and the Keynesian-type monetary interventions implemented by an economically and socially conservative government. I conclude by detailing my motivations for undertaking the research, theoretical preferences and researcher positioning, and by clarifying key terms as per their application throughout the thesis.

1.2 Background of the problem

Unemployed young people face considerable barriers to employment and must navigate a precarious labour market (Denny & Churchill, 2016). Davidson (2018) found that half of Australia's 25-year-olds could not secure full-time employment, despite the fact 60 per cent held tertiary qualifications. In western metropolitan Melbourne, the situation is more acute. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, almost one in five 17- to 29-year-olds from this region were unemployed (YouthNow, 2019). The percentage of young people not engaged in study or employment was 14.2 per cent, compared with a statewide total of 11.2 per cent (Department of Education, Skills and Employment [DESE], 2020). Adding further complexity to these challenges young people encounter are the contradictory ways they are depicted by virtue of their age through intrinsically political and historical representations. These representations characterise young people 'as naturally incapable of proper political participation' and 'shape how young people come to be known, how being young is experienced and how many young people see themselves' (Bessant, 2023, p. 434).

To seek greater clarity around, and to attempt to humanise, the crisis of long-term youth unemployment in Melbourne's west, this research draws on the insights of eight young people aged in their 20s as they reflected on their experiences of long-term unemployment during Melbourne's unprecedented COVID-19 lockdowns. Having variously been unemployed after a period of 12 months on income support, these young people were mandated to complete 25 hours per week of unpaid work, for six months each year, for as long as they continued to receive government benefits (DESE, 2021). Eichhorst and Rinne (2018) established that long-term youth unemployment could not be remedied without significant structural reforms. Moreover, WfD does not substantively improve employment outcomes (Borland & Tseng, 2004; Crisp & Fletcher, 2008; Kellard et al., 2015; Martyn, 2006) and can hinder job search activity (Borland & Tseng, 2004). Nonetheless, Australian Government policy has remained wedded to neoliberal ideology and practices which ascribe unemployment to an individual's deficits and inadequacies (Wyn, 2015). Consequently, vulnerable populations, and especially the young, are problematised for misfortune caused largely by factors beyond their control.

Yet the young people in this research did not match the profile of the stereotypical, work-shy 'dole bludger' taking advantage of 'ordinary Australian taxpayers' (Archer, 2009, pp. 177, 178), as is commonly depicted by the mainstream. They had followed society's norms which prescribed how 'active' citizens (Mead, 1997, p. 21) should conduct themselves by investing in their own education, training and insecure work (Kelly, 2017). In enduring the compounding pressures of a volatile and unpredictable labour market, poverty and delayed transitions to adulthood and uncertain futures, these young people had exhibited resilience by repeatedly and positively adapting to adversity (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). Each had assumed the subjectivities of what it meant to be a neoliberal jobseeker by being self-reliant and self-directed (Oinonen, 2018), and in constructing themselves as entrepreneurial entities (Sofritti et al., 2020). For additional context, most of the young people had been carers or providers for parents, grandparents, younger siblings, and in one instance, their own children. Several were first-generation Australians of migrant parents, which compounded the difficulties they faced when also required to balance cultural considerations and expectations. Sadly, some had become estranged from family members.

They resided in local government areas (LGAs) ranked amongst the highest for disadvantage by the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018a). It was in this region of Melbourne that the impacts of globalisation, the offshoring of manufacturing, the shift to automation and the emergence of new industries requiring specialised skills had been especially pronounced in reducing employment opportunities through the pool of low-skilled, entry-level, manufacturing-sector jobs (Youth Action, 2019).

Despite the barriers they faced to escape unemployment, poverty and precarity, the young people in this study had been further disciplined by Workfare techniques designed to surveil, discipline and control (Braithwaite et al., 2002) them through the application of 'time regularity and punctuality' (Helman, 2020, p. 1), the imposition of onerous conditions and repetitive tasks (Boland, 2016; Peck, 2003) and the conflation of welfare with criminality (Wacquant et al., 2011; Wilcock, 2016). Multiple studies have highlighted the adverse psychological effects caused by WfD (Casey, 2022a; Marston & McDonald, 2008; O'Halloran et al., 2020; Philip & Mallan, 2015; Warburton & Smith, 2003; Ziguras et al., 2003). Subsequently, apart from the material

deprivations associated with their unemployment status, the young people interviewed for this research had experienced deep-seated feelings of shame, guilt, self-loathing and anger, as consequences of their joblessness and Workfare experiences. They reported having become withdrawn and socially isolated, grieving the loss of identity and self-worth, and of suffering adverse health effects, including sudden weight loss or gain, disrupted sleep and depressive episodes.

It is against this backdrop, even prior to the confluence of the social, economic, political and environmental crises created by COVID-19, that the experiences of disadvantaged young people who were long-term unemployed, and living in Melbourne's west, are located.

1.3 Statement of the problem

There is not more support for some than there is for others. That is not the Australian way. If one person falls on a hard time, if anyone falls on a hard time, it is the same hard time. We are all in this together. That is what is fair. That is what is Australian.

(Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, 30 March 2020)

The research aimed to apply FDA to critically analyse young people's experiences of long-term unemployment and precarity during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns. As a research design FDA examines how power relations are embedded in societal structures, discourses and practices. It 'seeks to describe and critique the discursive worlds people inhabit and to explore their implications for subjectivity and experience' (Willig, 2008, p. 96). These were unprecedented times for all Australians, hence the opportunity to contribute to the field of Workfare research by designing a project that could build on existing knowledge. As will be substantiated through the testimonies of the young people centred by this thesis, the pandemic experience of Australians varied immensely. In Melbourne, Australia's second-largest capital city, and the location of this study, six separate periods of stay-at-home orders resulted in a combined total of 262 days in lockdown, the most of any city in the world (MacReadie, 2022). Stay-at-home directives, social distancing measures and gripping fear and panic associated with the existential threat to both life and one's hopes and aspirations disproportionately affected young people, and particularly those in this study who

possessed less social and economic capital. Research of the mental wellbeing of the general population found that Australians aged 18 to 24 years experienced the greatest deterioration in mental health as a result of COVID-19 (Rossell et al., 2021).

When he announced the JobKeeper wage subsidy, Prime Minister Morrison asserted that we were 'all in this together' (Morrison, 2020). The evidence shows otherwise. Already marginalised by virtue of their unemployment and socio-economic disadvantage, the young people in this study were further sidelined by their exclusion from a universal safety net. These young people were the human face of a cohort who, when in employment, were more likely to be fixed-contract and casual workers concentrated in sectors heavily impacted by COVID-19, such as hospitality and retail, and therefore ineligible for JobKeeper. The fallacy of Morrison's proclamation of 'what is fair' (Morrison, 2020), while presiding over the selective application of the 'largest single fiscal measure in Australia's history' (The Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, 2022, p. 51) was contextualised by a 2020 Parliament of Australia analysis which concluded that the nation's 2.6 million casual employees performed a critical economic function by supplying a flexible workforce to the labour market (Gilfillan, 2020). Denied JobKeeper, were these Australians 'in it together'?

The refrain that 'we're all in this together' was embraced and disseminated by governments globally in an attempt to unify nations and populations during the initial stages of the COVID-19 crisis (Long, 2020). In popular culture the slogan has its origins in the 2005 song of the same title written and performed by Australian-born musician and actor Ben Lee. Government campaigns sought to frame the pandemic as a collective adversity that demanded a response of social solidarity as the basis for promoting physical and emotional support (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020). Key messaging centred on the premise that anyone could contract the virus, that the virus did not observe borders, and that each of us needed to play our part in helping to 'flatten the curve' (Long, 2020, p. 1).

There is irony in the Morrison government having co-opted the slogan given the song's long association with union industry superannuation funds (Australian Unions, 2024). Superannuation is a savings system for retirement. It involves money earned by an employee being placed into an investment fund that can be accessed when they retire.

(Australian Taxation Office, 2024). In Australia, the trade union movement began campaigning for employers to establish pension funds for their workers in the 1960s. In 1984, the Building Workers Industrial Union was the first to win award-based superannuation for its members, and in 1992 universal, guaranteed superannuation was legislated by the Keating Labor government (Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU] Institute, 2024). Hence the paradox of Morrison's appeal for national unity and cohesion through the claim 'we're all in this together'. Morrison's Liberal–National Party (LNP) Coalition opposed the introduction of compulsory superannuation and has consistently blocked legislated increases to minimum contributions made by employers (Leigh, 2020). The LNP has been successful in dismantling worker solidarity by legislating to greatly reduce the role of unions in negotiations over pay and conditions, and through the removal of longstanding workplace regulations and entitlements (Velm, 2007). During COVID-19 lockdowns the LNP acted to undermine the concept of superannuation by enabling Australians experiencing financial distress early access to their superannuation, up to a maximum of \$20,000 (Morrison & Frydenberg, 2020). This move will have adverse, long-term implications for the 1.2 million young people aged 20 to 30 years who did so (Australian Treasury, 2020a).

For what seemed a fleeting moment, the young people spotlighted in this research experienced a shared consciousness of community and belonging. They recalled feeling less stigmatised by their unemployment during pandemic lockdowns, as the resultant economic disruption made the prospect of becoming jobless and reliant on income support a distinct reality for many Australians for the first time. Though, ultimately, these marginalised young people, residing in a disadvantaged region of Melbourne, continued to internalise responsibility for their unemployment and precarious life circumstances. As neoliberal policies and discursive practices maintained the narrative of there being deserving and undeserving citizens, the extraordinary pump-priming of the economy by a fiscally conservative Australian Government did not shift the subjectivities of the young people who participated in this study. They complied with and navigated an oppressive employment services system, intended to control and reconfigure them, and to invariably set them up to fail, as a means of survival.

Yet as findings reveal, each of the young people, in their own inimitable ways, exhibited resistance, albeit in nascent and prefigurative acts (Törnberg, 2021) to Workfare practices, even if these acts occurred at a lower or proximal level. In this respect, the young people were not powerless as their thoughts and actions offered glimpses of how society could be reimagined outside of institutionalised politics (Moreira Fians, 2022).

The economic disadvantaging of vulnerable young people, while concurrently enriching entities and privileged individuals (Conifer, 2021; Hurst, 2020; Savva, 2021), was hardly an outlying consequence of the pandemic. It merely represented a continuation of a decades-long pattern of neoliberal ideology that had abandoned young people to ‘fend for themselves’ and normalised precarity and insecure work (O’Keeffe et al., 2022, p. 13). The disruption caused by COVID-19 to young people’s education and employment trajectories was not a new economic challenge but rather surfaced ‘pre-existing social issues magnified by the pandemic’ (Walsh et al., 2021b, p. 3).

As a cohort occupying the lower reaches of society’s power strata, and thus being unequally affected by the economic downturn, job losses, social isolation, restriction on movement and access to income support as a result of COVID-19 (Shadmi et al., 2020), the retelling of the lived experiences of this study’s young people will put paid to the notion that ‘we were all in it together’. Consequently, the evidence presents an opportunity for this research to reinterrogate the neoliberal argument – from the perspective of young people residing in a low socio-economic status region (SES) of Melbourne – that attributes long-term unemployment to an individual’s psychological and moral deficits (Mead, 1992).

1.4 Aims of the project

The research aims to:

- mobilise Foucault’s theory of governmentality, as well as Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Lerner’s belief in just-world (BJW) theory, by applying FDA, to critically examine young people’s experiences of long-term unemployment and

precarity amidst the economic, social and political disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

- surface the voice of low social status, highly controlled and largely silenced young people who are marginalised by neoliberal Workfare policies which perpetuate insecure employment, precarity and wealth inequality.

The study was guided by the overarching research question:

How did young people residing in Melbourne's western suburbs, who had participated in mandated Work for the Dole activity, understand their experiences of long-term unemployment during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

1.5 Research sub-questions

The research question was underpinned by the following sub-questions:

- How was neoliberal ideology, which positions joblessness as an individual responsibility, internalised by young people as they experienced unemployment during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns?
- What effect did the implementation of Keynesian-type monetary interventions by the neoliberal Australian Government, as a response to the COVID-19 crisis, have on the subjectivity of young people as jobseekers and citizens?
- In what ways did these young people resist the discursive practices of neoliberalism which ascribe long-term unemployment to psychological and moral deficiencies?

It is this pandemic element, as framed through the research question and sub-questions, that provided the temporal dimension by which the study sought to make an original contribution to the existing body of research. The study's relevance was further augmented by the focus on the experiences of long-term unemployed young people from Melbourne's western suburbs, and principally the City of Brimbank, Melbourne's second-most disadvantaged municipality (Brimbank City Council, 2019). The Burnet Institute found that disadvantaged SES areas were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 infections, due to lower health literacy and access to testing and vaccines, and highly casualised workforces (Kelly, 2021). There were almost four times as many deaths from COVID-19 infections for people in the lowest socio-

economic group compared with those in the highest (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021). Research published in the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey* further revealed that the defining characteristic of workers in industries most directly impacted by COVID-lockdowns and job losses was socio-economic disadvantage, and that half of all workers in these industries were young people aged 15 to 24 years (AIHW, 2021). A Monash University study also found that those from low SES areas who continued to work during lockdowns were more likely to use public transport, and less likely to work remotely and home quarantine, due to not having access to paid sick leave and fear of losing employment (Henriques-Gomes, 2021).

1.6 Research contribution to knowledge and significance

Along with jobseekers aged over 55 years, young people are most adversely impacted whenever employment and underemployment rise (Wright, 2020). The supremacy neoliberalism affords the supply side of the labour market leads to endemic problems of job displacement and substitution (Peck, 2003) and produces ‘scarring effects that have been linked with ‘increases in poor self-reported physical and mental health’ (Cuervo & Wyn, 2006, p. 131) and ‘reduced incomes and living standards for life’ (Jackson, 2020, p. 4). In October 2018, the proportion of employed young people working part-time hours was 54.8 per cent, compared to 13.6 per cent four decades earlier (ABS, 2018a). And while more 25-year olds than ever held post-secondary school qualifications, half were not in full-time work (Foundation for Young Australians [FYA], 2018).

This study’s objective is to build on research which elevated the voice of young people’s experiences of unemployment and WfD, especially that of Carson et al. (2003), and Warburton and Smith (2003). The study is also influenced by the more contemporary research of Sofritti et al. (2020), to extend the inquiry beyond the exploration of young people’s experiences of labour market uncertainty and precarity. A particular focus is a critical approach to ways neoliberal ideology and Workfare policies subjectify young labour market participants through ‘the discourses of the entrepreneurial self, employability and self-responsibilisation’ (Sofritti et al., 2020, p. 1054) and how these discourses become internalised. The opportunity to generate new knowledge emerged through the economic, social and political conditions created

by COVID-19 and the interventions of a conservative LNP government, whose senior partner's platform ascribes to 'an economy based on private property, free enterprise, and competitive markets' (Liberal Party of Australia, 2024, p. 9).

The adoption of Keynesian-style stimulus spending as an economic response to the pandemic represented a challenge to the authority of neoliberal discourse which frames unemployed young people as lacking work attitudes (McGann et al., 2020). Neoliberalism insists that the market determines the allocation of resources and income, and that the state should be limited to a non-intervention role primarily concerned with the preservation of private property rights and contracts (Archer, 2009; Jessop 2002;). Yet the fiscal measures implemented in response to the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 directly contravened this ideology. In just over the first 12 months of the pandemic the Australian Government committed \$291 billion in direct economic support (The Treasury, 2021a). Inferred through this unprecedented response was an admission that unemployment could demonstrably be caused by factors beyond one's control, calling into question the rationale of Workfare discourse which responsibilised risk and individualised unemployment. To investigate a knowledge gap established by this incongruity, Foucault's theoretical framework of governmentality will be used to critically examine how Workfare techniques and rationalities mediate behaviours and aim to create 'good citizens' (Warburton & Smith, 2003, p. 773) through 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2008, p. 186). The Foucauldian lens of social control, discipline and punishment will be complemented by Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's BJW theory. The research will further seek to identify whether the pandemic, by exposing the contradictions of neoliberalism, including the upward redistribution of wealth (Ryan, 2015), caused any shift in the subjectivities of unemployed young people and how they internalised individualising discourses.

1.7 Motivation for conducting the research

How the neoliberal state systemically marginalises and further disadvantages the vulnerable, and particularly disadvantages young people, has long intrigued and appalled me in equal measure. My researcher positioning has been informed from experiences of working and volunteering in the community services sector – primarily in the west and north-west of Melbourne. In recent years, I have supported young

people living in residential care, at risk of homelessness or educational disengagement, and children who have come into contact with the juvenile justice system. These encounters have further reinforced the efficacy of neoliberalism in controlling and dehumanising people.

Qualitative researchers bring values to research, which informs their perspective on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007; Wahyuni, 2012). This research is informed by a stated theoretical lens but it is also influenced by my own experiences and self-construction of knowledge (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), and my 'biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences' and 'place' in the research 'setting, context, and social phenomenon' I was seeking to understand (Schwandt, 1997, p. 224). I was enthused by the possibility of generating detailed, novel understandings of a phenomenon by platforming a cohort of socio-economically disadvantaged young people whose lived experiences of precarity frequently went untold (Scotland, 2012; Silcock, 2013). The construction of these young people's realities through their storytelling aligned with my belief in the utility of social justice research and its commitment to highlight and challenge societal inequalities and oppression (Lorenzetti, 2013). Encouragement as to my suitability for this undertaking – in the context of my community-sector experiences – was also instilled from Padgett's (1998) conviction that qualitative interview research as a platform for social justice paralleled approaches of social worker and client interactions.

1.8 Explanation of key terms

This section is included to clarify key terms as they are applied throughout this thesis.

Young people

The term 'young people' is used to describe the eight young individuals who participated in the research and the population cohort they represent. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2008) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020) each define young people as persons aged between 15 and 24, as does the Australian Government in its *Australia's Youth Policy Framework* (Australian Government, 2021a, p. 3). Yet this standardised definition, which implies a sequenced and linear transition to adulthood, can be reductive. Markers which have traditionally defined adulthood, such as

completing secondary schooling, securing employment, independent living and family formation, have been increasingly delayed due to changed social and economic conditions in late modernity. Hence the emergence of 'new adulthood' as a life phase to reframe the understanding 'that the period of youth had become a new extended period of the life course' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016, p. 122).

Representations of young people through 'layers of metaphors, symbolic interpretative frames and ethical evaluations' (Bessant, 2023, p. 424) also allow for them to be generalised through public discourse in various and often contradictory ways. By positioning them as half citizens or 'citizens-in-the-making' (Weller, 2003, p. 154), young people are characterised according to deficit-account narratives which describe them 'as "naturally" immature, cognitively, emotionally and psychologically undeveloped, and lacking political knowledge, good judgement and independence' (Bessant, 2023, p. 434). These adultist perspectives, in which the superior person of the adult relative to the young person is continually and ubiquitously reaffirmed and reinforced through cultural norms, rationalise discriminatory practices that exclude young people (Bessant, 2023) and do not recognise the capacities of young people (Corney et al., 2022, p. 4).

Life transitions take on different meanings in different contexts. In certain cultures, a capacity for family connectedness and kinship responsibilities are critical passageways to adulthood, whereas western perspectives tend to emphasise autonomy and independence as key adulthood markers (Idriss et al., 2021). This distinction is pertinent given the young people who participated in this research lived in regions of Melbourne where almost half of residents were born overseas (Brimbank City Council, 2019). In recognising that age is shaped as much by social conditions and relations as biological and psychosocial development processes, the term 'young people' in this thesis refers to Australian young people who were aged from 18 up to 30 years. The definition is also contextualised by the fact eligibility for the age-specific WfD activity undertaken by the participants in this research was from 18 to 30 years (YouthNow, 2020a).

Notwithstanding this qualification, notions of how young people are classified according to age are highly contested. As stated, young persons are frequently defined as those aged between 15 and 24 years (Australian Government, 2021a; OECD,

2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008;). A category of a 'third youth' comprising those aged over 30, for whom the attainment of adulthood markers had been delayed or not attained, has also been advanced (Chauvel, 2010, p. 75). These definitions are countered by the way young people are socially constructed through governmentality narratives and practices. For example, in the state of Victoria, adulthood is legally defined as 18 years and associated with a range of rights and responsibilities, including being permitted to vote, obtain a motor vehicle license and consume alcohol (Brancatisano, 2024). Yet the Labor Victorian government walked back a pledge to raise the minimum age of responsibility from 12 to 14 years. At the time of writing this thesis, children as young as 10 could still be arrested, charged and jailed in juvenile detention in Victoria (Smethurst, 2024). The contradictory ways young people were governed and controlled legally by age were further evidenced by the intention of the Victorian government to introduce laws which would prevent 14- and 15-year-olds from accessing social media without parental consent (Allan, 2024). This intention was supplanted by the Albanese ALP Government in November 2024, when the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill was introduced to Federal Parliament. This bill applied a minimum age of 16 years to access various social media platforms (Rowland, 2024).

jobactive

Australia's employment services system has undergone several rebrandings since the Commonwealth Employment Service was disbanded in 1998 and replaced by a quasi-market model which outsourced service delivery to private and not-for-profit (NFP) agencies. From July 2015 until June 2022 the system operated as 'jobactive', before the rebadged Workforce Australia commenced on 4 July 2022. To ensure consistency and avoid confusion, 'jobactive' is the term applied in this thesis when referring to both the employment services system and providers delivering employment services. Although the duration of the research intersected with the changeover from jobactive to Workfare Australia, all young people interviewed had experienced unemployment during the system's jobactive iteration. Moreover, the three research participants who were subjected to mutual obligation requirements after the transition did not refer to either jobactive or Workforce Australia when interviewed. Rather, all spoke of their 'provider' or 'providers'.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter introduced key aspects of the research by outlining the problem under investigation and the background of the problem, as these relate to the young people centred by the research and their unique experiences of long-term unemployment, precarity and Workfare as residents of a disadvantaged region of Melbourne. It introduced the research aims and questions and justified the significance of the research problem. The chapter then demonstrated how the research question and sub-questions, as framed through the event horizon of the COVID-19 pandemic, contributes to new knowledge about the structural failings in the way youth unemployment and welfare were addressed during the crisis. It addressed motivations for undertaking the study and critically reflected on the researcher's positioning. The following chapter provides background to the research through an overview of youth unemployment, the measures adopted by successive governments in response to this phenomenon, and neoliberal justifications for these. The research problem and the gap in knowledge identified are conceptualised by revisiting the Australian Government's economic response to the pandemic crisis, as well as the discursive nuance attached to these measures. This chapter then draws attention to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, including the way young labour market participants were especially disadvantaged.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

2.1 Introduction

This chapter contextualises the research by examining how political, economic and social conditions, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, intersected with neoliberal ideology and policy to disadvantage and penalise young Australian labour market participants. It establishes how long-term unemployed young people are particularly vulnerable to structural impediments produced by neoliberalism, which manifest in increasingly precarious employment, and prevent their full participation in society. This chapter commences with an overview of youth unemployment in Australia, which persists at more than double the rate of that of the total labour market. The causes and effects of this disproportionate burden of unemployment and underemployment is then examined, followed by an overview of the Australian Government's default response to long-term youth unemployment. This section includes a snapshot of WfD and an explanation of how it serves as an instrument of neoliberalism by shifting responsibilisation for employment from the state to the individual. The background of long-term youth unemployment is then situated within the setting of COVID-19 and the Australian Government's responses to the economic impacts of the pandemic. Significantly in terms of the research question, the way in which the Australian Government designed and implemented these policies is shown to demonstrate how neoliberal discourse, which frames citizens as either deserving or undeserving of state support, is reinforced. The latter sections of this chapter are concerned with the socio-economic context of COVID-19. There is a focus on how the adverse economic and social impacts imposed on young Australians by neoliberalism were exacerbated by COVID-19, and how these conditions coalesced to intensify for them insecure employment, precarity and other disadvantages. The chapter concludes by contextualising these conditions for young people living in Melbourne's west.

2.2 Youth unemployment

Young Australians are 'defined by the precariousness they encounter in the labour market' (Denny & Churchill, 2016, p. 6). Although Australia was spared the worst impacts of the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC), eight years on the youth

unemployment rate was 13.6 per cent (Churchill, 2020). Moreover, jobs growth post the GFC significantly favoured older workers over their younger counterparts (Churchill et al., 2014).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate for young Australians aged 15 to 24 years was 11.7 per cent, or 6.4 percentage points higher than the national unemployment rate (ABS, 2019). An additional '18.2 per cent of employed young people' were 'wanting and available to work more hours', (ABS, 2019, as cited in Cross, 2020, p. 7) meaning that 'almost a third (29.9 per cent) of young Australians' were 'underutilised in the labour market' (Cross, 2020, p. 7). Young people entering the labour market face intense competition for low-paid, insecure work. The decline and closure of local manufacturing industries since the 1990s, and the subsequent impact on supply chain businesses, has meant that many jobs previously available to young labour market participants with low skills and qualifications no longer exist (Australian Council of Social Service [ACOSS] and Jobs Australia, 2018). There has also been an increased focus on specialised skills and technological innovations, with automation predicated to make redundant at least four out of 10 jobs (Durrant-Whyte et al., 2015). Young workers are disproportionately represented in low-skilled roles, such as retail, telemarketing, hospitality, labouring and concreting. In 2017, 83 per cent of workers in these sectors experienced above average unemployment (FYA, 2018). Then there is the 'crowded-out' effect (Borland & Coelli, 2020, p. 1). Older workers not only 'have an incumbency advantage in their existing jobs compared to younger workers' (Borland & Coelli, 2020, p. 7) but are increasingly working longer hours and are better placed to capitalise on aggregate employment growth.

Challenges faced by young jobseekers were further illustrated by Anglicare Australia's *Jobs Availability Snapshot 2021*. This report determined that despite predictions of a strong economic recovery to accompany the lifting of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in Australia's south-eastern states and the Australian Capital Territory, there was an average of 27 jobseekers for each newly created entry-level position (not requiring recent work experience or qualifications beyond secondary school). Moreover, the report found that these positions were mostly being filled by those whose qualifications and experiences far exceeded the job requirements (Anglicare Australia, 2021).

For young people, long-term unemployment and insecure employment produce ‘scarring effects’ that contribute to poor physical and mental health, family disruption, social exclusion, and ‘reduced incomes and living standards for life’ (Jackson, 2020, p. 4). Insecure or ‘precarious employment’ is ‘defined as non-standard work, or work which is irregular, casual or temporary, low-paying and excludes employees from organisational input in the employing organisation’ (Hartman, 2005, p. 64). In June 2018, for the first time since employment records were taken, fewer than half of all working Australians had a permanent full-time job with leave entitlements (Carney & Stanford, 2018). In October 2018, the proportion of employed young people working part-time hours was 54.8 per cent, compared to 13.6 per cent four decades earlier (ABS, 2018b). As large parts of Australia emerged from COVID-19 lockdowns, casual employment accounted for almost 60 per cent of new waged jobs created, while much of the rebound in self-employment was driven by insecure jobs in the ‘gig’ economy, which is characterised by the ‘absence of key protections such as sick pay, annual leave and superannuation, uncertain hours and continuity of employment, and often, lower wages’ (Anglicare Australia, 2021, p. 11).

2.3 The Work for the Dole program

The predominance of active labour market programs (ALMPs) as a response to unemployment has been a significant contributor to the transformation of welfare discourse and policy implementation throughout the industrialised world. ALMPs, which in Australia take the form of either job search, work experience or formal training and education, ‘seek to increase the amount and/or effectiveness of job search undertaken by the unemployed’ (Borland, 2014, p. 2). These program streams are underlain by a philosophy that the receipt of welfare must be allied with the responsibility to make a valid effort to support oneself through the exchange of paid labour (Weaver, 2000). In Australia, ALMPs are mostly delivered by non-government, contracted employment services through a national employment services network. In maintaining ultimate responsibility for welfare governance, while outsourcing welfare service provision to both NFP and for-profit providers, the Australian Government has created a quasi-market of employment services delivery (Considine et al., 2018). For close to three decades WfD has been a preferred response to long-term unemployment by offering:

job seekers the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, contribute to their local community and help improve their skills so they can move into work.

(DESE, 2021, p. 1)

WfD as a remedy to long-term unemployment was first raised in Australian public discourse in the mid-1980s by Bob Hawke, who would become the nation's longest-serving Australian Labor Party (ALP) Prime Minister. In his June 1986 *Address to the Nation on the Economic Situation*, Hawke acknowledged society's responsibility to the unemployed but contended that this responsibility was a 'two-way process' (Hawke, 1986, p. 4). With particular reference to younger unemployment benefit claimants, Hawke proposed that the receipt of benefits be tied to the performing of community work (Hawke, 1986). His government subsequently introduced support packages which offered tailored education or training to the long-term unemployed in exchange for their welfare payment. This initiative was followed by the Keating government's 'reciprocal model of unemployment policy' (Hammer, 2003, p. 7), which delivered guaranteed subsidised job placement for all long-term unemployed claimants, along with penalties for those who refused to participate

WfD was permanently enacted in 1998 and limited to unemployed 18- to 24-year-olds who had received income support for six months or more (Biddle & Gray, 2018). Its introduction represented a key pillar of the Howard LNP government's industrial relations reforms, which aimed to deregulate the labour market and create a more flexible workforce (Hartman, 2005). The 2000 release of the *Reference Group Report on Welfare Reform* resulted in the broadening of WfD to 'include older unemployed people, single parents with school-aged children and disability support pensioners with mild disabilities' (Biddle & Gray, 2018, p. 1). This report reaffirmed 'mutual obligation' as a concept for people to 'prove their worth' to claim welfare benefits (Carney & Ramia, 2002, p. 279). It emphasised that:

All members of society – government, business, community organisations, families, and individuals – have obligations to each other.

(Reference Group on Welfare Reform [Australia]
and McClure, 2000, p. 51)

Although variance has existed in WfD requirements according to the age and circumstances of benefit recipients, the unemployed have generally been required to commence WfD after a period of 12 months of receiving income support. When this research commenced, eligible jobseekers aged 18 to 49 years were mandated to complete 25 hours per week of WfD or another approved activity for six months each year for as long as they continued to receive welfare payments. WfD activities have typically included 'landscaping, restoration of community amenities, sorting through goods donated to charities, recycling materials, and retail and customer service in charity stores' (DESE, 2021, p. 2). In adopting a 'work first' approach, WfD emphasises the quick transition of participants into any available job and off income support, 'irrespective of the quality or suitability of the job' (Cross, 2020, p. 13). A meta-analysis conducted by Borland (2014) concluded that WfD did not improve employment outcomes. A report published on the Australian Parliament website also confirmed that WfD's main function was to ensure compliance with mutual obligation reporting requirements (Thomas, 2017).

2.4 The neoliberalist case for Work for the Dole

Workfare has been utilised by Australian governments as an instrument of neoliberal ideology and underpinned key policy responses to long-term unemployment. This approach has represented a departure from the philosophies which characterised the welfare state that emerged after the Second World War. The welfare state acknowledged that the transfer of resources by the state was an overarching requirement to prevent the exploitation of the weakest members of an unequal society (Goodin et al., 1999). By contrast, neoliberalism rejects Keynesian macroeconomic theory based on government expenditures and lower taxes to stimulate demand. Neoliberal ideology, anchored in the critiques of the interventionist state by Austrian economist Friedrich A. Hayek, and the monetarist ideas of the Chicago School of Economics' Milton Friedman (Hartman, 2005) – and embraced by OECD nations – champions the 'deregulation of economic transactions', the 'privatisation of state-owned enterprises and state-provided services' and the framing of public welfare 'as a cost of production' (Jessop, 2002, pp. 454, 459). Neoliberalists view government spending on social welfare as a 'financial burden on the taxpayer' and an affront 'to the values of individualism' (Archer, 2009, pp. 177, 184). The embedding of

neoliberalism into the state economic apparatus has supplanted the principles and practices of the welfare state, with the notion of citizen rights overridden by an 'emphasis on individual responsibility and obligation' (Peck, 2003, p. 76). In insisting 'that the market should determine the allocation of resources and income while the state should minimise interference' (Archer, 2009, p. 181), neoliberalism is primarily concerned with the preservation of private property and taxpayer rights (Nozick, 1974).

Neoliberalist attitudes towards the unemployed have been heavily influenced by American social policy theoretician Lawrence Mead. This influence culminated in a decisive shift away from welfare as an entitlement of citizenship to one where the receipt of benefits was contingent on reciprocity (Carney & Ramia, 2012). This principle is founded on an assumption that the welfare state created a learned dependency, where the poor and disadvantaged were increasingly unable to compete for jobs (Eardley et al., 2000). Mead's mutual obligation framework was grounded in the contention that long-term unemployment was a consequence of an individual's 'diminished psychological and moral state' (Marston & McDonald, 2008, p. 254). According to Mead, the attitudes and behaviours of the unemployed were manifest in limited ambition and competence and a passivity to 'do little to help themselves', and reflected an 'entitlement mentality' (Mead, 1992, pp. 3, 213). Rehabilitating the unemployed by instilling desirable qualities to produce 'socially acceptable behaviour' (Fletcher & Flint, 2018, p. 774) therefore demanded the paternalistic intervention of the state. Mead's solution consisted of a combination of 'help and hassle strategies' (Braithwaite et al., 2002, p. 233). These strategies are visible in Workfare practices rendered through the provision of various forms of training and services ('help'), where non-compliance attracts a form of financial sanction ('hassle') (Marston & McDonald, 2008, p. 256).

Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, when Federal Minister for Employment Services, extolled the paternalism of mutual obligation on the basis that the unemployed needed to be organised and directed in order to work (Abbott, 2000). For Abbott, the unemployed person had 'to prove that they are deserving of the state's support' (Yeates, 2003, p. 7). He insisted that without mutual obligation, many welfare recipients might be presumed to be unemployed by choice (McGann et al., 2020). Programs such as WfD have thus been justified on the assumption that the

unemployed are destined for 'learned helplessness, passivity and dependence' (Levy, 2006, p. 38). The belief that the unemployed require demands be made of them for their own good has been endorsed by widespread community support for young jobseekers and the long-term unemployed to be compelled to undertake WfD or other specified activities (Sawer, 2005).

2.5 Workfare as situated through the provision of employment services

Australia's employment services network, known as jobactive until rebranded as Workforce Australia in July 2022, ranked second only to the defence portfolio for Commonwealth services procurement spending (Lawson, 2019). Private jobactive providers were estimated to have earned around \$10 billion in the five years to 2018 (Bennett et al., 2018), with Workfare programs costing the taxpayer upwards of an additional \$1.3 billion per year (Besser, 2015). These outgoings have continued despite Senate inquiry findings that were critical of the cost-minimisation funding model of jobactive, which incentivised service providers at the expense of jobseekers (Education and Employment References Committee [EERC], 2019, pp. ix–xi) and failed the needs of the long-term unemployed (Morris & Wilson, 2014). Employment service providers are remunerated based on the employment outcomes of jobseekers, not for implementing prescribed case management. Invariably, minimal effort is expended by providers on 'expensive' or hard-to-place clients, whereas those deemed more 'job ready' are given preferential treatment (Considine et al., 2018, p. 1194). The jobactive network has been exposed for facilitating endemic fraud, manipulation, falsified documentation and the recycling of the unemployed through temporary jobs (Besser, 2015). Providers have also been found to have funnelled jobseekers into irrelevant training courses operated by their own training organisations, at a cost of almost \$600 million over four years (Besser, 2015).

Employers have been critical of the job-matching functionality of jobactive. Many complained of receiving large volumes of applications from jobseekers 'manifestly' unsuited to the positions advertised (Nous Consulting Group, 2020, p. 19). This grievance can be directly linked to 'job plan' obligations that the unemployed apply for a minimum of 20 jobs per fortnight in order to receive income support. The condition is both impractical and counterproductive, as writing applications that require jobseekers to address unique selection criteria can be more labour-intensive than

performing a full-time job and causes inconvenience for employers tasked with reviewing and responding to unsuitable applications (Davidson, 2018). In 2020, there were at least eight applicants for every available entry-level job that did not require prior experience or qualifications beyond secondary school, and many more unemployed people were applying for positions for which they were over-qualified (Anglicare Australia, 2020). North (2020) concluded that decades of public funding of outsourced employment services had made unemployment a multi-billion industry that served to discipline a reserve pool of labour and delivered inflated profits to private firms.

2.6 COVID-19 and the Australian Government's economic response

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. While most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring specialist treatment (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024), some unvaccinated people are at greater risk of serious illness or death. These include older people, those with underlying medical conditions and primary acquired immunodeficiency, individuals receiving immune suppressive therapy, pregnant women, smokers, First Nations people, and those with some neurological conditions (Department of Health, 2020). On 31 December 2019, WHO was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown causes in Wuhan City, China, and a week later, Chinese authorities identified a novel coronavirus, soon to be named COVID-19 (WHO, 2020a). By 11 March 2020, with more than 118,000 COVID-19 cases having been reported across 114 countries, and 4,291 lives lost, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced that COVID-19 had been categorised as a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). In less than two years, the pandemic had claimed five million lives (considered an undercount because of limited testing and people dying at home in poorer countries), and COVID-19 had become the world's third leading cause of death, after heart disease and stroke (Johnson, 2021). On 20 March 2020, the Australian Government closed its borders to all non-Australian residents and enacted a series of social distancing measures (Churchill, 2020). In the ensuing 19 months, all Australian states and territories at varying stages entered periods of lockdowns. These resulted in the shutdown of non-essential services, restrictions on group gatherings, and the closure of borders to residents of other Australia states and territories experiencing

uncontrolled COVID-19 outbreaks (Victorian Government, 2021). Melbourne, the location of this thesis' research, endured six separate lockdowns for a combined 262 days under stay-at-home orders (the most of any city in the world) (MacReadie, 2022). By early November 2021, a large proportion of lockdown and social distancing restrictions had been lifted, as 80 per cent of the Australian population (aged 16-plus) had been fully vaccinated for COVID-19 (Australian Government, 2021b). However, modelling by the Doherty Institute predicted ongoing direct costs of COVID-19 management strategies were still expected to be in the vicinity of \$140 million per week (The Treasury, 2021b).

Spearheading the Australian Government's response to the significant economic impact of COVID-19 was the JobKeeper payment, which provided the equivalent of around 70 per cent of the national median wage (Frydenberg & Morrison, 2020). In its first six months JobKeeper supported 3.5 million eligible workers across 900,000 businesses who were permanent full-time and part-time workers, and also casual workers who had held their position for more than 12 months (Australian Treasury, 2020b). The first phase of the scheme operated from 30 March to 27 September 2020 and provided eligible businesses and NFPs with wage subsidies of \$1,500 (before tax) per fortnight, per employee, to cover the cost of wages. During the extension phase of JobKeeper (28 September 2020 to 28 March 2021), this 'payment was tapered and targeted to those businesses that continued to be significantly affected by the economic downturn' (The Treasury, 2021b, p. 10). Bishop and Day (2020) found that one in five employees who received JobKeeper would not have remained employed between April and July 2020 without it and credited the scheme with reducing total employment losses by at least 700,000 over this period. JobKeeper represented a groundbreaking ideological shift by a conservative Australian government by providing a safety net for wage earners. However, the scheme was not extended to millions of low paid and insecure workers. Ineligible for JobKeeper were an estimated 1.1 million casual employees who had held their positions for less than 12 months (Australian Treasury, 2020b; Taylor, 2020).

The second major stimulus measure announced by the federal government was the \$550 fortnightly Coronavirus Supplement. This payment, which was made available to new and existing recipients of the JobSeeker payment, as well as recipients of the

Parenting Payment, Youth Allowance for jobseekers, Farm Household Allowance and Special Benefit, almost doubled the JobSeeker payment for six months (Klapdor, 2020), with reduced supplement payments remaining until 31 March 2021.

2.7 ‘Deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ citizens

The Australian Government’s economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the contradictions of neoliberalism and the way in which its ideology determines citizens to be either worthy or unworthy of the state’s support. Churchill (2020) observed that JobKeeper created two distinct cohorts of benefit recipients: those who were out of work through no fault of their own, and others considered to be in some way responsible for their unemployment. JobKeeper ultimately paid billions of dollars to businesses whose turnover did not decline sufficiently enough during the pandemic to warrant state support, yet these businesses were not compelled to refund the overpayments (Murphy & Karp, 2021). Simultaneously, JobSeeker recipients were required to undertake additional job search activity and subjected to enhanced surveillance in the form of a federal government telephone hotline, which encouraged employers to report unemployed people who declined offers of work (Curtis & Bonyhady, 2021). It is these contradictions, occurring during a singular historical context when neoliberalism was ill-equipped to respond to the social and economic crisis created by the pandemic, that informed the rationale of this study. The juxtaposition of the strictly enforced conditions imposed on JobSeeker recipients, with the negligible oversight applied to the administration of JobKeeper, embodied what Brenner and Theodore (2002, p. 353) termed ‘actually existing neoliberalism’. This practice describes how the state purposely intervenes in the market to redistribute wealth upwards (Ryan, 2015). When it emerged that ‘one-fifth of JobKeeper payments made to major listed companies in the second half of 2020 went to firms which grew profits during the pandemic’ (Powell, 2021, p. 1) – including 66 of the Australian Security Exchange top 300 companies – the Australian Government was unapologetic. Asked whether these profitable businesses should return their taxpayer-funded JobKeeper subsidies, Prime Minister Scott Morrison remarked: ‘that was up to them’ (Trioli, 2021).

Morrison’s response reflected a position inconsistent with the integrity compliance and risk management protocols applied to individuals considered likely to commit welfare

fraud (Robert, 2015). Under this reverse onus-of-proof model, it was the responsibility of welfare recipients to produce evidence of their eligibility to receive benefits (Services Australia, 2021). Flaws with this approach were exposed by the \$1.2 billion Robodebt class action brought on behalf of illegally targeted welfare recipients, which the Commonwealth of Australia agreed to settle in November 2020. By calculating annual averaged income payment data obtained from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), and not the actual amount a person earned in the relevant, fortnightly reporting period, tens of thousands of welfare recipients were incorrectly accused of under-reporting their fortnightly income to Centrelink, the statutory authority that administers the payment of financial assistance from the Commonwealth Government to individuals (Gordon Legal, 2020; Henriques-Gomes, 2020a). Despite repeated warnings by the ATO that the issuing of debts based solely on income averaging was unlawful (McCauley & Harris, 2020), the Australian Government proceeded with the scheme, which was claimed to have contributed to the deaths of more than 2,000 people handed debt notices. One-fifth of these were aged under 35 years (Medhora, 2019). Ryan (2015) argued that the selectiveness exercised by governments when allocating state resources was an inherent feature of neoliberal economies and ensured the transfer of income and wealth from lower- to higher-income households. Bailouts to ailing businesses, or the guaranteeing of worker entitlements to selected businesses or industries which fail, run counter to the neoliberalist mantra that markets are more efficient, competitive and profitable without state interference (Farnsworth, 2013). The political ideology underpinning the creation and implementation of interventions such as JobKeeper was revealed by the industries and workers excluded from the \$90 billion scheme. Despite initial modelling that indicated a \$19 billion revenue shortfall over three years for the higher education sector (representing Australia's fourth largest export market), the Morrison LNP government changed eligibility provisions three times to deny public universities access to JobKeeper, which resulted in the loss of 40,000 jobs (Napier-Raman & Wilkins, 2021). The disparity was maintained following the phase-out of JobKeeper, as workers adversely affected by COVID-19 state public health orders could still apply to the federal government for a lump-sum payment (ATO, 2021). Alternatively, once the fortnightly Coronavirus Supplement ended, the payment for a single person receiving JobSeeker increased by \$3.57 per day – making this unemployment payment the second-lowest rate in the OECD (Whiteford & Bradbury, 2021).

2.8 Socio-economic context of COVID-19

In Australia, ‘almost four times as many deaths due to COVID-19 were recorded for people living in the lowest socio-economic group compared with the the highest socioeconomic group’ (AIHW, 2021, p. vi). A study by the Public Health Information Development Unit (PHIDU) at Torrens University attributed this disparity to lower vaccination uptakes in areas with higher proportions of age pensioners, recipients of the JobSeeker payment, people living in social housing (where crowding often exists), people born in countries where English is not the main language spoken, those living outside capital cities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Glover, 2021). As Professor Mark Stooze from the Burnet Institute explained, disadvantaged population groups tended to have lower health literacy and less access to COVID-19 testing and vaccines (Kelly, 2021). In Melbourne, at the height of the outbreak of the COVID-19 Delta variant, the five LGAs with the highest number of active cases per 100,000 residents were Melton, Brimbank, Greater Dandenong, Hume City and Whittlesea. Each ranked in the top five for disadvantage in metropolitan Melbourne LGAs on the SEIFA (ABS, 2018a; Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2021).

Research based on data from the HILDA Survey (Wilkins et al., 2021) revealed that the defining trait of people most vulnerable to COVID shutdowns and job losses was socio-economic disadvantage. According to the report the 3.5 million workers in either ‘directly adversely affected industries’ or ‘secondarily adversely affected industries’ (which continued to operate but experienced marked declines in turnover) had lower average wages and were more than twice as likely to not have post-secondary school qualifications than workers in other less affected industries (Wilkins, 2020, p. 2). Meanwhile, people from low SES areas who continued to work during lockdowns had an increased likelihood of contracting COVID-19. These workers had a reduced capacity to work from home, were more likely to be employed in jobs that required frequent contact with others and had more reliance on public transport (AIHW, 2021). Furthermore, the shift away ‘from the standard employment relationship of full-time, ongoing employment and a corresponding rise of insecure work arrangements, including ‘casual, fixed-term’ (van Barneveld et al., 2020, p. 146) and ‘fee-for-service’ (Chesters, 2020, p. 54) jobs further exposed low-income workers to the worst health

and economic impacts of COVID-19. Australia has the second-highest rate of casual employment in the OECD (Gilfillan, 2018). ‘Casual and part-time workers accounted for over half of all job losses’ in Australia’s first COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, and during the 2021 lockdowns, ‘casual workers were eight times more likely to lose work than permanent staff’ (Stanford, 2021, p. 1).

COVID-19 created a dilemma for the millions of Australian casual workers without sick leave entitlements, as the abrupt loss of income and fear of losing employment provided a disincentive to get tested and self-isolate in the event of illness or potential exposure to COVID-19 (ACTU, 2020). The incompatibility of a casualised workforce with adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols was confirmed during Melbourne’s ‘second wave’ COVID-19 outbreak. The cause of this outbreak was attributed to the hiring of a low-paid and inadequately trained and supervised casualised staff to provide hotel quarantine security, and private sector aged-care workers who needed to ‘work across multiple sites’ (including when ill) ‘to earn a liveable wage’ (O’Keeffe et al., 2022, p. 4). To compensate for a lack of access to paid leave entitlements, casual workers are legally required to be paid a loading, set usually between 20 and 25 per cent, in addition to their hourly wage rate (Gilfillan, 2020). However, research conducted by Griffith University concluded that a large number of Australian casual workers are actually working regular working hours, and around half do not receive the casual loading (Peetz & May, 2020). These findings were corroborated by the Australia Institute’s Centre for Future Work, which found that ‘median wages for casual workers were 26 per cent lower than for permanent employees’ (Stanford, 2021, p. 2). Some social commentators predicted that the political, economic and social shocks produced by the pandemic would prompt a reorganisation of labour practices and a renewed focus on remedying inequality (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020). Instead, insecure work became even more prevalent in Australia’s post-lockdown recoveries, where almost 60 per cent of net new jobs created were casual, and almost two-thirds were part-time positions (Australian Unions, 2021).

2.9 Impacts of COVID-19 on young labour market participants

Employment insecurity, promoted by governments and business as offering workers ‘freedom and opportunity’ (O’Keeffe et al., 2022, p. 5), exacerbated the adverse economic and social impacts of COVID-19 on young Australians. While ‘precarious

employment is problematic for many workers' (O'Keeffe et al., 2022, p. 3), young people are particularly vulnerable to insecure working arrangements. Data from the 2016 Australian census showed workers aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 years respectively had casualisation rates of 76 per cent and 41 per cent, which was substantially higher than the national average of 25 per cent (Gilfillan, 2018). As stated by Churchill (2020), not only were young workers more likely to be concentrated in service industries most affected by COVID-19 closures, a considerable number were ineligible for the JobKeeper subsidy. In consideration of JobKeeper being available only to casual workers who had held their position for more than 12 months (Australian Treasury, 2020b), it is noted that 46 per cent of casual employees in the accommodation and food services industry, over 36 per cent in retail, and 33 per cent in arts and recreation, had been with their employer for less than 12 months (ABS, 2020). Consequently, 'casual workers, sole traders and other "independent" workers' were 'responsibilised for supporting themselves economically throughout the pandemic' (O'Keeffe et al., 2022, p. 9).

The Australian Government facilitated this transfer of economic risk from the state to the individual by enabling Australians experiencing financial distress early access to their superannuation, up to a maximum of \$20,000 (Morrison & Frydenberg, 2020). In Australia, superannuation is paid by employers as a proportion of an individual's income and is protected in investment funds until retirement (O'Keeffe et al., 2022). According to former Australian ALP Prime Minister Paul Keating, the architect of the country's compulsory superannuation scheme when the nation's Treasurer, in the first four months of the LNP Coalition government's economic response to COVID-19, young and low-paid workers who drew down on their superannuation provided more economic stimulus (\$32 billion) than the Commonwealth did through JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments (\$30 billion) (Butler, 2020). The long-term consequences for those who accessed the early superannuation scheme were detailed in a government review of retirement income. This review forecast that a 30-year-old who withdrew \$20,000 of their superannuation would have \$69,300 less at retirement (Australian Treasury, 2020a).

This environment of insecure employment and an inadequate safety net is compounded by the other financial disadvantages young people encounter, 'including

an increasingly expensive user-pays higher education system', zero wages growth in the decade from 2013, 'and an extremely expensive housing market that has diminished the ability of young people to rent or buy a home' (O'Keeffe et al., 2022, pp. 3, 8). Young people have similarly been betrayed by the marketisation of vocational training. By enabling 'private providers to compete with public and community providers for public funds', the marketised system 'has contributed to a decline in training quality, the erosion of transferable skills, stagnation in training investment and failing enrolments and/or completions in many trade-based apprenticeships' (van Barneveld et al., 2020, p. 148). In the six years after taking office in 2013, the LNP government oversaw 140,000 fewer apprentices than when it was elected, cut \$3 billion from vocational education funding (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2019), and between 2014–15 and 2018–19 withheld 'nearly \$1 billion budgeted for a series of TAFE apprenticeship, skills and training initiatives' (Australian Education Union, 2019, p. 1).

Accordingly, it is not just employment ambitions that fail to be realised for many young people. Precarity contextualises the lives of young people in terms of their living standards, health, work-life balance, personal relationships and sense of security (Bone, 2019). Traditional transitions to adulthood and the capacity for future planning are continually delayed and frustrated (Chesters & Wyn, 2019). Even the relationship between high-quality educational attainment and well-paid, meaningful employment – as advanced by the Australian Government in *Australia's Youth Policy Framework* (Australian Government, 2021) – is tenuous. Longitudinal research that charted the employment trajectories of two cohorts of Australian students following their secondary school graduation found that most who were tertiary educated took up to 10 years to gain stable employment (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016). The dominance of casual and insecure work in future employment growth was codified during the pandemic by legislative amendments to the Fair Work Act. These changes strengthened the ability of employers to use casual employment in any role they chose and limited provisions allowing for the conversion of casual workers to permanent positions, thus further suppressing wages growth (Stanford, 2021).

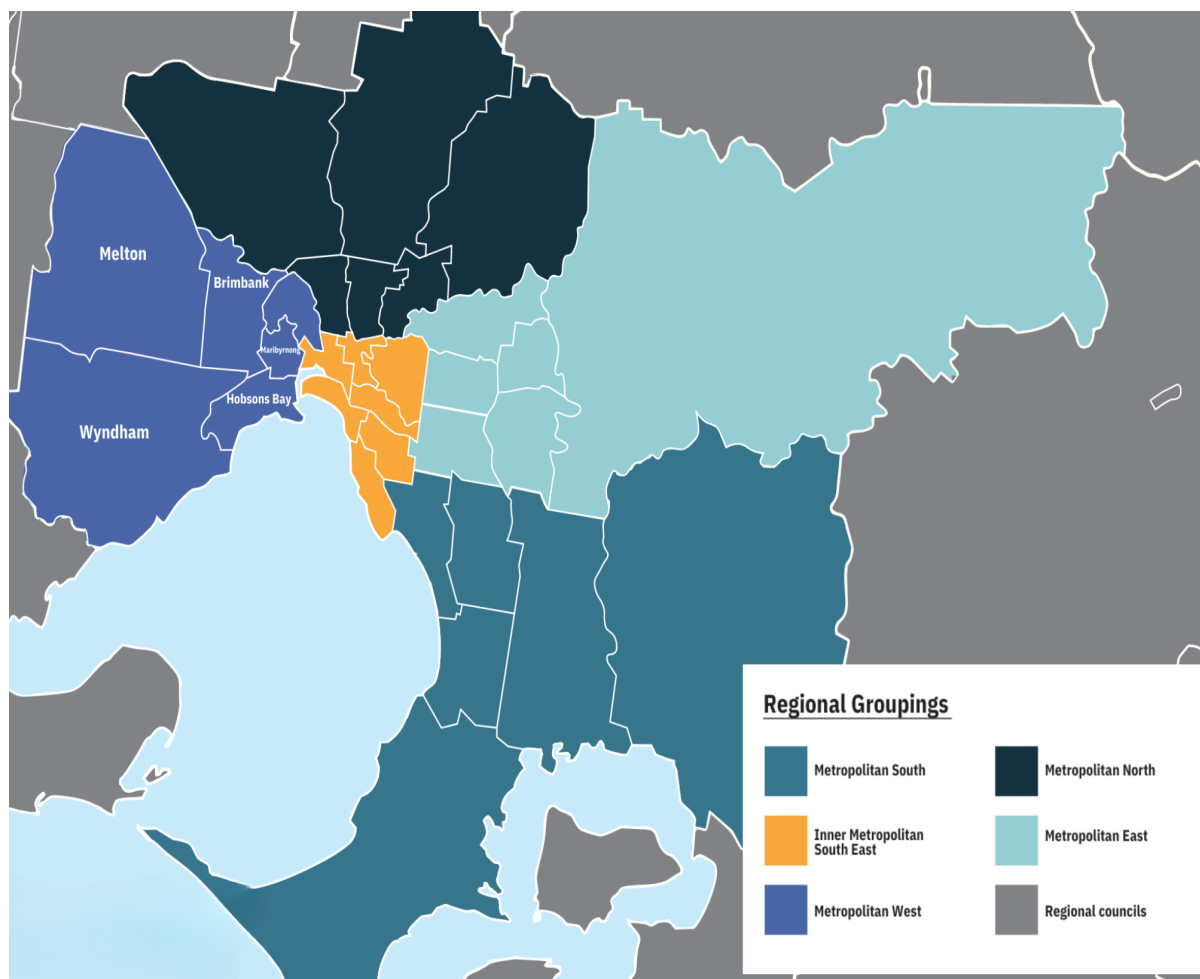
2.10 COVID-19, disadvantage and Melbourne's west

This chapter concludes by identifying COVID-19 impacts distinctive to young people from low SES groups, including those residing in Melbourne's western suburbs. At the height of Victoria's outbreak of the Delta COVID-19 variant, the western metropolitan municipalities of Melton, Wyndham and Brimbank – each ranked in the top five for disadvantage in Melbourne LGAs on the SEIFA (ABS, 2018) – recorded the second, third and sixth highest number of active COVID-19 infections respectively in the state (DHHS, 2021). Due to their disadvantage, unemployed youth in Melbourne's west are more likely to live in crowded housing, which increased their exposure to COVID-19 infection due to difficulties in isolating. Research commissioned by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute found residents living in substandard or overcrowded rental accommodation faced additional health risks in the context of COVID-19, 'largely because of the need to share bedrooms and facilities such as bathrooms and kitchens' (Buckle et al., 2020, p. 3). Low-paid workers similarly faced increased COVID-19 health risks from their marginal living arrangements due to the chronic shortage of affordable rental supply. A comparison of rental data and employee earnings data from the ABS showed that essential workers such as checkout operators, pharmacy sales assistants and kitchen hands could not afford to rent housing in a single Victorian suburb. The figures also revealed that those employed as child carers, commercial cleaners and packers might be able to secure a rental in a limited number of Melbourne suburbs, but doing so would push them into rental stress (defined as when lower-income households put more than 30 per cent of their gross income towards housing costs) (Burke, 2021). Across the national private rental market, almost three in five renters were experiencing rental stress (Witte et al., 2022).

Compelling evidence of the discriminatory nature of COVID-19 was produced by Australian Catholic University (ACU) researchers, who quantified the inequality of the pandemic through postcode comparisons. Drawing on data analysis mostly from the 2021 Delta variant outbreak, researchers concluded that the proportion of 'blue-collar' workers in LGAs was the biggest determinant of the spread and impact of COVID-19 (Catholic Health Australia, 2022, p. 4). Lead researcher Tom Barnes reported that the research established a direct cause and effect between the proportion of blue-collar

workers and case numbers, reflected by the fact that blue-collar workplaces created 'a much higher risk of occupational exposure which is directly reflected in case numbers'. This research found that 'a one percentage-point increase in the proportion of blue-collar workers per LGA led to one additional coronavirus case for every 183 people' (Catholic Health Australia, 2022, p. 2). The impact of COVID-19 was highest in municipalities such as Brimbank, where blue-collar workers accounted for 40.5 per cent of the workforce, or four times higher than the City of Stonnington, which reported the highest personal median incomes in Victoria (ABS, 2021a). The higher susceptibility of people living in Brimbank to COVID-19 exposure was compounded by the LGA's cultural diversity, with 47.8 per cent of its residents born overseas (Brimbank City Council, 2018). The ACU research also found a one percentage-point increase 'in the percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers led to one additional COVID-19 case' for every 225 people in an LGA (Catholic Health Australia, 2022, p. 4).

Figure 2.1: Map of western Melbourne LGAs (denoted in blue)



Reference courtesy of Municipal Association of Victoria.

Other factors that increased the risks of COVID-19 exposure for young people in Melbourne's west included a higher reliance on public transport (Henriques-Gomes, 2021) and, for many in a region with one of the highest proportions of young people not engaged in study or employment (DESE, 2020), the requirement to attend in-person jobactive meetings. The disparity between socio-economic groups in accessing health care, as highlighted by the PHIDU at Torrens University study (Glover, 2021), was emphasised when the health system in Melbourne's west was placed under extreme duress by the Delta and Omicron variant outbreaks. Due to significant staffing shortages caused by healthcare workers being forced into isolation, there were occasions when public hospitals in Melbourne's inner west and north-west were unable to admit patients to emergency departments, except those with life-threatening conditions (Cunningham & Estcourt, 2021). In Melbourne's outer west, a

health service that provided urgent medical care to a region of more than 180,000 people – and where the closest emergency department was 33 kilometres away – was forced to close for three weeks after COVID-19 infections decimated staffing levels (Jacks & Cunningham, 2022).

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of long-term youth unemployment in Australia, its causes and effects, and how neoliberal Australian governments respond to this problem through Workfare policies such as WfD. It revealed how COVID-19, coupled with the Australian Government's policy responses to the economic disruption caused by the pandemic, heightened inequality and disproportionately increased employment insecurity and precarity for low SES groups, particularly young people. The following chapter describes, summarises and critically analyses the body of scholarly and associated literature relevant to a focus on long-term youth unemployment and Workfare.

CHAPTER 3: YOUNG PEOPLE, LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT AND PRECARIITY, AND MELBOURNE'S WEST

3.1 Introduction

The literature review is divided into two chapters. This chapter examines and synthesises literature as relating uniquely to young people in the context of the overarching research question. The research question is further positioned by literature which identifies barriers distinctive to young people, including those of minority backgrounds, living in the western suburbs of the city of Melbourne, the capital of the Australian state of Victoria. This chapter commences by examining the ways young people are represented through dominant social and political perspectives as a means of control. Key themes to follow are insecure employment and precarity as these specifically relate to young people. The phenomenon of delayed progression from adolescence to adulthood provides a useful framework to develop a nuanced appreciation of the problem, as does the emphasis on self-investment in higher education as a means-end to labour market entry and ongoing employability, and narratives that promote young people as a risk population predisposed to problem behaviours.

3.2 Young people as a constructed identity category

Research examining the experiences of young people must consider and signpost the ways they are represented according to dominant political and sociohistorical perspectives. Young people are historically and socially constructed as a youth identity category, widely thought to comprise those aged from 15 up to 30 years. This category 'straddles the formal age divide between those who have full citizenship rights, in particular, political rights, and those who don't' (Harris, 2009, p. 302). Bourdieu (1993) maintained that youth as an age category is not an absolute but rather a social construct resulting from the struggle between the young and the old and subject to manipulation. Representations of young people, not via literal or neutral descriptions but through 'layers of metaphors, symbolic interpretative frames and ethical evaluations' (Bessant, 2023, p. 424) enable them to be generalised through public discourse in various and often contradictory ways. As 'an identity category that is

relational and developed in opposition to “adulthood”, young people are situated ‘precariously between a vulnerable and innocent childhood and a responsible and self-sufficient adulthood’ (Baker et al., 2024, p. 11) and positioned as half citizens or ‘citizens-in-the-making’ (Weller 2003, p. 154). Deficit-account narratives invariably characterise young people as ‘naturally’ immature, cognitively, emotionally and psychologically undeveloped, and lacking political knowledge, good judgement and independence’ (Bessant, 2023, p. 434).

Political institutions are created by adults. They serve adultist agendas at the exclusion of young people’s interests (Harris, 2009). By linking citizenship to adult status, policy concerned with youth citizenship emphasises young people ‘as passive recipients of civic education that will prepare them for their future adult role’ (Harris, 2009, p. 302). Bourdieu (1993) drew attention to how those who controlled symbolic, economic, political and cultural capital exercised these to maintain control over the ways young people are represented. It is within this framework that Côté’s (2014) political-economy-of-youth perspective reveals the:

root causes and consequences of the positioning over time of the youth segment in relation to those (adults) in a given society with political and economic power ... a perspective with which to imagine radical solutions to youth exploitation.

(Côté, 2014, p. 528)

Young people are clearly not a homogenous group with regard to privilege associated with social class, ethnicity, gender, and educational opportunities and attainment. Yet what the political-economy-of-youth theory does is conceptualise how discursive practices act to disguise inequalities between the adult and youth segments of society or, failing this, to justify these inequities. This occurs through the positioning of:

the youth segment in capitalist economies with respect to labour-force participation and earning power, education-to-work transitions, and the social construction of youth in ways that ideologically justify their exploitation as producers and consumers.

(Côté, 2014, p. 538)

These representations of young people are informed by ‘adultist aged-based prejudices, fears and fantasies’ to rationalise a multitude of ‘discriminatory practices’ that exclude young people (Bessant, 2003, p. 423). The phenomenon of ‘adultism’, in which the superior position of the adult relative to the young person is ‘continually and ubiquitously’ (Corney et al., 2022, p. 4) reaffirmed and reinforced through cultural norms, does not recognise the actual capacities or talents of young people. Adultism objectifies young people and subjugates their human rights (Shier, 2012). It is manifest in the way adultist classifications fail to acknowledge or dismantle systemic obstacles facing young people, while simultaneously blaming them for failing to overcome these obstacles (O’Conner et al., 2016). Even youth participatory initiatives, such as consultation with government policy development, are rarely representative or inclusive of many young people’s experiences, and mostly rely upon a deficit approach which seeks to create ‘good citizens’ (Vromen & Collin, 2010, p. 98).

As stated, dominant representations of young people are frequently contradictory, as they are established according to the historical context of when they are constructed. This is particularly germane during periods of turmoil (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011). Bessant (2023) wrote of the assorted depictions of young people ranging from ‘victims’, ‘threats to social order’ or ‘messengers of hope and futurity’ (p. 424), and of how these determine the political role they are assigned in public discourse. Pratley (2011) likewise explored the constructions of youth narratives, but in the context of those affected by armed conflict and instability. In her critical analysis of UN and World Bank youth policies, she found that young people were discursively positioned as ‘victims’, ‘troublemakers’ or ‘peacebuilders’ (Pratley, 2011, p. 19). Relatedly, in war times, rather than the stereotyping of young people as ‘immature, psychologically, unstable and in need of prolonged participation in the education system’ (Enright et al., 1987, p. 541), discourse tended to emphasise their ‘competence’ and ability to embrace ‘adulthood’ in service and sacrifice to the nation (Baker, 2024, p. 14). As an equivalence, the crisis created by COVID-19 highlighted discourse which promoted the utility of young people as fixers (Pratley, 2011) by providing a large pool of readily available labour to fill the least desirable jobs (Boland, 2016; Helman, 2020; Peck, 2003). In this instance, young workers are represented as assets or saviours by performing front-facing and gig-economy work which made them more susceptible to contracting the coronavirus than those who were able to work remotely or access

government subsidies (AIHW, 2021; Chesters, 2020; van Barneveld et al., 2020). Yet irrespective of the specific depiction, these representations ultimately serve the same purpose. That is, to ensure young people are a controlled category by dominant discursive practices in order to neutralise political threats to the supremacy of capitalism (Côté, 2014).

Neoliberal conditions have made it increasingly difficult for young people to enact their citizenship status, as pathways to traditional markers of adulthood are less accessible and not linear (Kelly, 2017). Young people are forced to remain in education and the family home for longer in order to navigate an insecure labour market. The deferment of young people's futures has been likened to them occupying a 'continuous present' which limits their capacity to commit to lifelong plans (Bone, 2019, p. 15). For Harris (2009), the arbitrariness of adultism and perception of young people as 'passive citizens-to-be' is controverted by societal expectations for them to live 'simultaneously youthful and adult lives' (p. 303).

Discursive neoliberal practices have been particularly effective in the pathologisation of young people as predisposed to risk or problem behaviours, including those associated with long-term unemployment. In doing so, such representations have depicted young people as 'delinquent' and needing to be managed through practices and everyday forms of 'social control' (Bessant, 2003, pp. 88, 90) collectively known as Workfare (Eichhorst & Rinne, 2018). It is through these processes that deficit narratives are constructed that further erode the citizenship rights of unemployed young people. Despite increasingly unresponsive educational systems and precarious labour markets, this loss of basic human rights is evidenced by how young people have restricted access to income support, as neoliberalism has devolved responsibility for economic security 'from the state onto the individual' (Macintyre, 1999, p. 103). The absence of young people's agency is manifest in how neoliberalism suppresses wages and also splinters 'the components of jobs so that individuals are increasingly unlikely to be able to sell their labour as a full-time and secure proposition' (Wyn, 2015, p. 57).

The classification of young people is contested in the literature. There is no universally agreed age category that defines young people (Bessant, 2023; Bourdieu, 1993; Chauvel, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2016). Accordingly, the ways identities of young people

are socially and legally constructed create contradictions and ambiguities that result in them being highly controlled and excluded. Consider that the minimum age at which a young person is eligible for the JobSeeker payment is 22 years. Unemployed young people aged 18 to 21 years need to apply for the Youth Allowance for Job Seekers. However, for a single claimant without children and living away from parents, this fortnightly payment is \$139 less than what is paid to an equivalent single person without children who is receiving JobSeeker (Australian Government, 2024). Arbitrary distinctions based on age likewise define Australia's industrial award system. In many sectors, employees aged under 21 years are classified as juniors and are paid a percentage of the relevant adult pay rate. For example, an 18-year-old retail worker performing the same duties as a colleague aged over 21 years is entitled to 70 per cent of the adult pay rate (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2024).

The anomalies extend to the criminal justice system. In Victoria, the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* 'defines a child as someone aged 10 to 17 at the time of the alleged offence and aged under 19 when proceedings begin' (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2022, p. 1). The *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic) 'defines a young offender as someone aged under 21 at the time of sentencing' (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2022, p. 1). Courts have the discretion in certain circumstances to sentence young offenders to custodial sentences in juvenile detention, but 18- to 20-year-olds still enter the adult prison system (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2022). Hence, young people serving custodial sentences in adult prisons are considered adults, but not when it comes to receiving an adult wage or being eligible for JobSeeker.

3.3 Young people and unemployment

For most people of working age, full participation in society is contingent upon remunerated work, not only as a source of money but for providing the fundamental social values of purpose, identity, inclusivity and dignity (Jahoda, 1982; Shildrick et al., 2012). Yet young people increasingly confront barriers to stable, ongoing employment and are particularly vulnerable to adverse economic conditions and labour market volatility (Carvalho, 2015). Shortly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate for young people aged 15 to 24 years was 11.7 per cent, or 6.4 percentage points higher than the national unemployment rate (ABS, 2019). Moreover, this cohort is disproportionately affected by high rates of underemployment,

with close to one in five employed young people wanting and available to work more hours (ABS, 2019). Youth unemployment is not a new phenomenon. However, since the GFC of the late 2000s, gaining and maintaining employment has become more challenging for new labour market entrants. Seven years on from the onset of the GFC, the average proportion of Australian young people who were long-term unemployed – defined when duration of job search is 52 weeks or longer (ABS, 2022a) – more than doubled from 8.7 per cent to 18.2 per cent (Carvalho, 2015).

The consequences of the structural transformation of Australia's labour market away from manufacturing to a services-based economy, and the associated increase in non-standard jobs, have been especially trying for young people (Churchill et al., 2014; Denny & Churchill, 2016). Despite the decline of production-type industries, employment growth has continued, driven largely by the healthcare and social assistance sectors, which employ 15 per cent of Australia's workforce (ABS, 2022b). Still, it is older workers who are mostly represented in service-sector job growth (Bowman et al., 2015), with young people largely concentrated in retail, and accommodation and food services – the two sectors with the largest proportion of part-time and insecure casual workers (Cassidy & Parsons, 2017) and therefore the sectors most susceptible to economic downturns. This was evident during Australia's COVID-19 lockdowns, when young people bore 55 per cent of job losses despite comprising just 14 per cent of the workforce (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). Young people are further disadvantaged by the increased labour market participation of Australians aged 55 to 64, which has been consistently greater than the overall participation rate (Denny & Churchill, 2016). Older workers enjoy an incumbency advantage when employers require transferable job skills that can only be acquired through work experience (Cross, 2020). This first-mover benefit in taking up growth in aggregate job growth invariably causes young people to be 'crowded out' from employment (Borland & Coelli, 2020, p. 3).

High levels of educational attainment do not necessarily shield young people from barriers to their desired employment (Kelly, 2017). While it is acknowledged that it takes time to gain relevant qualifications, the labour market is characterised by a growing cohort of 'underemployed' and 'overeducated' (Wyn, 2015, p. 50) young people. Although professional occupations employed nearly one in four workers in the

Australian economy prior to the pandemic, only 7 per cent of young workers filled these positions (Department of Jobs and Small Business [DJSB], 2019).

The implications of extended periods of unemployment are especially pronounced for young people due to what is known as ‘scarring’ (Borland, 2020, p. 174). This refers to the way an adverse labour market experience associated with a downturn in macroeconomic conditions produces a long-term negative impact on the individual. Delayed entry or prolonged exclusion from the labour market can result in ‘skill atrophy, negative effects on motivation, stigma effects from employers’, and the need ‘to accept a job that is lower quality’ and of less relevance to a person’s qualifications and skillset (Borland, 2020, p. 178). The scarring effects of long-term unemployment manifest in poor physical and mental health, marginalisation, family disruption, and ‘reduced incomes and living standards for life’ (Jackson, 2020, p. 4). Social exclusion caused by unemployment is said to be more keenly felt by young people, as it occurs during a life phase when they are not yet fully integrated into social life as independent and autonomous citizens (Lahusen & Giugni, 2016).

As earnings are the largest single component of household incomes, unemployment is a significant source of inequality and disadvantage (Whiteford, 2015). Economic inequality refers to the unequal dispersion of resources across a society and is often measured using the Gini coefficient statistical dispersion index, which represents inequality within a group of people (Wienk et al., 2022). In Australia, inequality in the distribution of wealth is increasing. Thirty years ago the income difference between the bottom and top 10 per cent of households was around \$70,000. Today the difference is closer to three times this (Dovers, 2022). Across this period the nation’s household wealth has doubled, to be six times that of gross domestic product (Dovers, 2022). Yet the proportion of first home buyers sits at a record low (Smith et al., 2022). Rising levels of economic inequality not only represent a threat to an individual’s quality of life. For population health and wellbeing, economic inequality produces negative effects on public health outcomes, including from violence (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015), breakdown of social cohesion and trust (Davidson et al., 2018), and crime, substance abuse and dependency on government income support (Vespignani & Yanotti, 2020). With regard to the COVID-19 crisis, the Australian Government’s policy responses, including the provision of the JobKeeper wage subsidy and the

Coronavirus Supplement (Australian Treasury, 2020b), did shield many low-income earners from income loss. Nonetheless, it was young people who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (Davidson et al., 2020), and it is young people who are replacing the elderly as the social category most exposed to poverty, according to the International Labour Organization (Shildrick et al., 2021).

3.4 Young people, unemployment and Melbourne's west

Young people living in the western region of metropolitan Melbourne face even greater barriers to employment than those in other regions (DESE, 2020). For example, residents in the municipal area of Brimbank (where six of the eight participants in this research resided) overall have lower levels of educational attainment and poorer health, and children are more likely to live in jobless households and single-parent families when compared to Greater Melbourne (Van Dyke & Calder, 2021). Brimbank residents are less likely to complete secondary schooling or equivalent compared to Greater Melbourne residents, and more than half of Brimbank residents aged 15 years and over hold no qualifications (City of Brimbank, 2018). Almost half of Brimbank residents were born overseas, with '64 per cent of the population speaking a language other than English at home', (Van Dyke & Calder, 2021, p. ii). The municipality ranked second in metropolitan Melbourne for disadvantage on the SEIFA (ABS, 2018). Much of Victoria's declining manufacturing industry had been situated in western metropolitan municipalities like Brimbank and historically provided residents of migrant background and lower educational attainment with entry-level employment opportunities (Jakubowicz et al., 2014). Literature establishes that 'low SES during childhood increases the risk of unemployment during adulthood' (Doku et al., 2018, p. 517) and that socio-economic disadvantage transmitted from one generation to the next not only reduces people's 'economic resources' but also results in 'their social exclusion and limited aspirations' (Cobb-Clark, 2019, p. 2).

3.5 Young people of migrant background and unemployment

Literature reveals that second-generation migrants (born in Australia but with one or both parents born overseas) of 'Lebanese, Middle Eastern, Vietnamese or North African ancestry were two- to three-times' more likely to be unemployed (Jakubowicz et al., 2014, p. 9). The research of Booth et al. (2012) revealed evidence of labour

market discrimination faced by minority young people. Their field experiment – where identical job application cover letters and resumes were submitted for the same entry-level jobs, with only the name of the applicant changed – identified significant differences in call-back rates depending on the applicant's ethnicity. Applicants with Asian and Middle Eastern names were required 'to submit at least 50 per cent more applications in order to receive the same number of call-backs as Anglo candidates' (Booth et al., 2012, p. 20). One young person relayed their experience to researchers:

After completing TAFE in 2005 I applied for many junior positions where no experience in sales was needed – even though I had worked for two years as a junior sales clerk. I didn't receive any calls so I decided to legally change my name. I applied for the same job and got a call 30 minutes later.

(cited in Booth et al., 2011, p. 1)

Discrimination is but one of the extra layers of complexity young people of migrant backgrounds contend with as they navigate an uncertain and exclusionary labour market. Familial and cultural expectations place additional pressures on minority young people (Naidoo, 2015; Renzaho et al., 2017). A case in point is the popular stereotype that associates high-achieving Asian-Australian students with parental approaches to education. This culturally essentialist explanation has been criticised for foregrounding ethnicity at the expense of broader social and policy contexts (Watkins et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the repeated portrayal of Asian exceptionalism can be damaging for Asian-Australian students who do not meet the expectations of parents, teachers, community members and themselves, and who acutely internalise their 'failure' and the bringing of shame upon their family (Ho, 2020, p. 6). Reflecting these findings is United States (US) research which identified that Asian-Americans who fell outside the 'success frame' norm were more likely to perceive themselves as outliers, and even seek distance from their ethnic communities and identities (Lee & Zhou, 2019, p. 2321). Kinship obligations also shape the subjectivities of young people of migrant background through an emphasis on the responsibility to the welfare of dependents, particularly within the context of multigenerational households (Easthope et al., 2017) and ageing discourse which promotes private family responsibility for supporting the elderly (Asquith, 2009).

For young Australian Muslim women, family circumstances are a critical factor in determining their employment prospects. Their labour market participation is influenced by the intersecting factors of religion, gender attitudes and family preferences (Khattab et al., 2020). The research of Keddie and colleagues (2019) highlighted 'the double bind of racism and patriarchy' experienced by young Australian Muslim women 'around familial/community and public ideas about what it means to be a good Muslim woman' (Keddie et al., 2019, p. 2). Negotiating a bi-cultural identity is highly complex when mainstream narratives depict Islam as incompatible with the values of gender equality (Kabir, 2008). This is especially pertinent when questioning or resisting the authority of patriarchy and religion can not only undermine familial relationships, but render young Muslim women vulnerable if familial supports are removed in a society where these women face both sexism and racism (Khan, 2002). It was from this perspective that research has identified the ways second-generation young Lebanese-Australian women deployed strategies to construct blended identities to counter racism and reclaim their independence and assertiveness (Poynting, 2009).

3.6 Neoliberalism and the problematisation of long-term unemployment

To appreciate how long-term joblessness is problematised as an individual failing, it is necessary to examine the key function of neoliberalism as the dominant political, economic and social ideology of modern Australian society. In repudiating Keynesian-type economic interventions of government expenditures and lower taxes to stimulate demand, neoliberalism's core assumptions include economic deregulation, the privatisation of state-owned assets (Archer, 2009) and the 'framing of public welfare spending as a cost of production' (Jessop, 2002, pp. 454, 459). The latter position was strongly prosecuted by the 'New Right' (Archer, 2009, p. 177) movement which viewed universal welfare as a violation of taxpayers' rights and an affront to the values of individualism, and likened claiming benefits to the act of receiving 'stolen goods' (Nozick, 1974, p. 90). Influential figures in the emergent neoliberal movement who denounced state intervention in both the economic and social sphere included Austrian economist Friedrich A. Hayek and the Chicago School of Economics' monetarist Milton Friedman (Hartman, 2005). According to Friedman, the role of government in a free society 'should be limited to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts and to foster competitive markets' (Friedman, 1962, p. 262). Hayek

insisted that liberty could not be achieved through a 'needs-based' system of welfare allocation that 'discriminated against the majority in favour of the minority' (Hayek, 1960, pp. 259–260).

These libertarian assertions promoted by the likes of Hayek and Friedman and their supporters, including Australian conservative think tank the Institute of Public Affairs (Archer, 2009), were persuasive in undermining the legitimacy of the welfare state. Neoliberalists dispute the notion that members of society unable to support themselves should be entitled to assistance from the community (Macintyre, 1999). From the early 1940s in Australia, the provision of universal welfare was integral to economic planning to reflect a cooperative society which worked towards producing a common good (Harris, 2001). The transfer of state resources to those in need was considered necessary to prevent the 'exploitation of the weakest members of an unequal society' (Goodin et al., 1999, as cited in Hartman, 2005, p. 61). It was the ascension to power in the late 1970s of the conservative Thatcher government in the United Kingdom (UK), followed by the Reagan administration in the US in the early 1980s, which marked a critical juncture in state welfare discourse. As avowed adherents of neoliberal ideology, Thatcher and Reagan instituted policies to lower taxes and reduce government spending, which essentially involved the winding back of social services (Hartman, 2005). Monetarist theory was rapidly embraced by other OECD nations, including Australia, which at the time was governed by the reformist, trade-union-based ALP (Bramble & Kuhn, 2007). As neoliberalism became embedded in the economic apparatus of the state, the concept of citizen rights and entitlement was overridden by a new emphasis on individual responsibility and obligation (Peck, 2003). For the welfare recipient, their obligation to society was positioned as being greater than that of the state's duty to them (Eardley et al., 2000). This narrative serves as a crucial imperative for neoliberal governments by displacing the costs of providing safeguards against economic risk and uncertainty onto the members of society least able to bear them (Braithwaite et al., 2002).

3.7 The education–employment nexus

The retreat by the neoliberal state as custodian to its citizens is evident in the way 'higher education is presented as a prescribed means-ends pathway to the labour market' (Keast, 2020, p. 519). Consequently, young people, as consumers of

education, are required to make rational economic choices based on acquiring skills that will lead them into employment (Keast, 2020). A key priority identified by *Australia's Youth Policy Framework* is access for young people to 'high-quality education and skills development which leads to meaningful, stable, and secure employment, and a steady income' (Australian Government, 2021, p. 12). Such public policy narratives frame education as a method to ensure Australia's global economic competitiveness and, for young people themselves, a personal investment to attain success in the labour market (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016). These narratives also act to rationalise the transfer of the burden of higher education costs onto young people in the form of substantial debts. As of June 2023, current and former Australian university students owed \$80 billion in student loans (Morton, 2023). Yet the claim that increasing the education levels of a population would routinely correspond with improvements in rates of secure, well-paid jobs is a 'fallacy' (Wyn, 2015, p. 54). Far from guaranteeing access to a career of choice, Australia's tertiary education sector is producing record numbers of graduates who are forced to take on low-paid, insecure work. Monash University research revealed that 'as higher education participation rates increased by 41 per cent' in the 10 years to 2021, the "earning premium" of a bachelor's degree fell from 39 per cent in 2005 to 27 per cent by 2018' (Carey, 2021, p. 1).

The financial and emotional commitment to prescribed educational pathways has been described as 'a mortgaging of an uncertain future' (Kelly, 2017, p. 57), as the promised and imagined benefits of an educational investment are often unrealised. This higher education system, which yields a surplus of 'underemployed' and 'overeducated' (Wyn, 2015, p. 50) young people, has had a cascading effect on the broader labour market. The term 'credit inflation' refers to the phenomenon where workers whose qualifications exceed the level of competencies required to perform jobs fill these jobs at the expense of less-credentialed peers (Chesters & Wyn, 2019, p. 674). Hence, neoliberal policies which emphasise a personal investment in a higher education are unlikely to quarantine a young person from employment insecurity:

education has become both more necessary and less sufficient as a condition for social success. Personal investment of time, effort, and

resources into education has become vital, but the 'returns to education' cannot be taken for granted.

(Chauvel, 2010, p. 76)

The debt encumbrance borne by young people through educational and training investments is juxtaposed by neoliberal policies which eschew a co-commitment to the job futures of young Australians. In the six years to 2019, the LNP Coalition government oversaw the creation of 140,000 fewer apprenticeships and cut \$3 billion from vocational education funding (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2019). Vocational education was made even more unaffordable for many secondary-school leavers when the LNP government withheld nearly \$1 billion budgeted for a series of apprenticeship, training and skills initiatives between 2014–15 and 2018–19 in favour of a user-pays system operated by the private sector (Australian Education Union, 2019). Tertiary education was also placed out of reach for many when fees to study law and commerce were increased by 28 per cent, and social sciences by 113 per cent (Duffy, 2020).

3.8 Disrupted transitions to adulthood

A seminal concept established by the literature is the emergence of a 'new adulthood' due to the precarious labour market conditions imposed on young people (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016, p. 122). This concept signifies the changed nature of education-to-work transitions for young people and, subsequently, the phenomenon of delayed progression from a dependant youth category to an independent adulthood. It refers to an elongated period in which unemployed or underemployed young people are more dependent on family support for longer. Chauvel (2010), for example, redefined a youth demographic that has come to comprise three sub-cohorts, and which is representative of the young people interviewed for this research: 'first youth' (before age 25); 'second youth' (until age 30); and 'third youth' (after age 30), for whom membership is associated with a 'déclassement' and which induces feelings of failure for young people and shame for their parents (Chauvel, 2010, p. 75). Similarly, a novel life phase has been conceptualised where young labour market participants inhabit a 'continuous present' due to the deferment of their futures (Bone, 2019, p. 15). A qualitative multi-case study, which explored the lives of young, precariously

employed sessional academics working at a large Australian university, found that these employees ‘felt limited in their capacity to commit to long-term life plans’ and make ‘adult-like’ decisions (Bone, 2019, p. 1). Increasingly, the identities of young people are shaped by their inability to attain the aspirational ‘markers’ which traditionally signalled the successful transition to adulthood (such as stable employment, financial independence, secure housing, intimate relationships and family formation) (Kelly, 2017, p. 62).

This experience is illuminated by longitudinal research which followed the lives of two cohorts of young Australians who completed secondary school in 1991 and 2006 respectively. Data from the *Life Patterns* research showed that ‘it took young Australians who were tertiary-educated up to 10 years for the majority to gain stable employment’ as they experience ‘multiple job and occupation changes and re-entry into education to gain skills and qualifications as needed’ (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016, p. 127). *Life Patterns* data were also used to establish that the necessity for many young people – whom Woodman (2012) referred to as ‘the precariat’ (p. 14) – to combine study and work hindered their ability to maintain healthy and committed social relationships (Woodman & Wyn, 2018). Difficulties young people encountered in balancing multiple life commitments were echoed in responses to a 2014 survey by the second cohort of *Life Patterns* study participants. Over a 10-year period Cuervo and Wyn (2016) charted declines in mental health – as self-reported by participants – ‘in terms of depression, anxiety, tiredness and frequent stress’ (p. 131). A separate study that aimed to capture the contemporary life pressures experienced by young Australians found almost a quarter of those surveyed ‘felt pessimistic or very pessimistic about having children’ (Walsh et al., 2021a, p. 5). Another study which measured family planning concluded that Australia’s cost-prohibitive housing market had slowed birth and fertility rates, as renting couples were more likely to delay having children (Atalay et al., 2021). Meanwhile, an Italian study identified a growth in negative self-image of young labour market participants at perceived failures to achieve expected and acceptable work and life trajectories (Sofritti et al., 2020).

Literature revealed that the idealised, historical conception of a linear career path bore little resemblance to the realities of insecure global labour markets. In 2016, Australia recorded the second-highest rate of casual employment in the OECD (Gilfillan, 2018).

By 2020, the nation's casualised workforce had reduced from 2.6 million to 2.3 million workers. However, this decline did not account for an estimated one million independent (gig economy) workers (ABS, 2021b). Not only are young people working on average 5.8 fewer hours than they did in 1992, they are over-represented in sectors with large proportions of casual, temporal and insecure work, which offer few opportunities for career advancement. More than a quarter (26.3 per cent) participate in gig work (Walsh et al., 2021a). An employee is casual if they are employed knowing there is no guarantee of ongoing work and that they will only be paid for hours worked (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023). To compensate for the absence of sick and annual leave entitlements, casual employees are paid an hourly wage loading (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023). Yet a study of Australia's casualised workforce found that only half received the casual loading. Many of these workers could not be classified as 'genuinely flexible' casuals either, as they performed regular predictable hours and had worked for the same employer for a long period but could still be 'terminated without notice' (Peetz & May, 2020, p. 23). The deterioration of employment outcomes for young people is also attributable to older workers working longer hours.

3.9 Unemployed young people and risk

The neoliberal agenda ascribes labour market participation as an essential prerequisite for 'active citizenship' (Edwards, 2009, p. 30). Accordingly, societal norms and practices reinforce a binary of behaviours viewed as alternatively 'risky' or 'safe' (Brown et al., 2013, p. 334). Through discursive techniques, certain societal groups, including unemployed young people, are said to be predisposed to problem behaviours as a consequence of their personal deficits (Bottrell, 2007). In response, the neoliberal state has embraced solutions intended to 'fix' the individual via 'incursions' into their daily lives to set them on the path to responsible adulthood (Bessant, 2003, pp. 88, 92). The identification of risk populations is fundamental to Australia's welfare approach and is underpinned by the use of actuarial analysis of groups considered more likely to be reliant on income support. Australian Government Minister for Social Services Christian Porter defended the refusal to increase welfare payments on the basis that government analysis showed that there were 'too many instances where young people enter the welfare system and are at risk of remaining in it for their entire lives' (Porter, 2016, p. 1). It is within this context that waged work

is highly valued, the identities of income support recipients considered non-affirming, and the regulation of unemployed young people through Workfare interventions deemed necessary to manage 'youth at risk' and the dangers associated with 'idleness' (Bessant, 2000a, p. 83). The moral interpretation of risk has been extended to explore how so-called 'problem behaviours' (i.e. laziness, idleness and promiscuity) of 'risky youth' (unemployed young people) threaten social order (lower public expenditures) and justify limits on welfare (Brown et al., 2013, p. 336).

Through the application of individualised risk rationalities based on mathematical calculations and algorithms, unemployed young people and single mothers encounter more frequent and intensive surveillance by the state, in practices that reveal class and gendered assumptions (Wilcock, 2016). Although the vast majority of those targeted neither receive overpayments nor engage in welfare fraud (Wilcock, 2016), such targeting fulfills a purpose of managing and shaping human behaviour to move people off income support (Henman, 2004). This is achieved through ethical reconstructions of 'naming, shaming and blaming' which problematises welfare dependency and seeks to instil in income recipients the capacity for self-management and responsabilisation (Rose, 2000, p. 336).

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter detailed, reviewed and integrated literature to depict the definitive challenges confronting young people as they navigate a disrupted, non-linear path to adulthood and with it, an increasingly insecure labour market. It presented historical and contemporary narratives of youth as an at-risk population predisposed to problem behaviours, and the way these descriptions continue to be deployed as a means of control to direct young people to think and act in accordance with dominant neoliberal discourse. Surfacing the additional barriers faced by both young people and young people of migrant background, living in a disadvantaged region of Melbourne highly impacted by globalisation and local deindustrialisation, provided necessary perspective in consideration of the way the research problem is framed. The following chapter, the second part of the literature review, will provide a critical overview of free market ideology and practices which subjectify citizens and have them transform themselves into neoliberal jobseekers. The chapter will introduce and unpack seminal theories which justify the rationale for, and the techniques of, Workfare. It will

juxtapose the theoretical and practical applications of WfD as an instrument of Workfare. The chapter will conclude with a critical appraisal of the underlying contradictions of neoliberalism, and how these were exposed by the social and economic crisis created by COVID-19.

CHAPTER 4: NEOLIBERALISM, THE PROBLEMATISATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CITIZENSHIP IDENTITIES

4.1 Introduction

This chapter incorporates the corpus of theoretical perspectives which foreground the research problem through the problematisation of long-term unemployment. It includes critiques of neoliberal ideology which inform approaches to the allocation of social welfare and construction of citizenship identities tied to employment status. Historical perspectives which justify Australian Government income support payments being tied to compulsory work or training obligations, and the rights and responsibilities of welfare recipients, are explored. Primary and secondary sources are introduced to evaluate Workfare practices, their effectiveness or otherwise, and interpretations of the intended purpose of these practices. These interpretations are shown to be underpinned by neoliberal doctrine and practices which responsabilise and individualise income-support recipients for their life circumstances and compel them to think and act in specific ways that are compatible with labour market rationality.

Further, the review of the literature situates the research problem against the backdrop of COVID-19. The search reveals how neoliberalism was ill-equipped to respond to the challenges and disruption caused by the pandemic, and how the supply-and-demand driven free market system intensified inequality and precarity during this crisis. The literature challenges mantras which afford primacy to unregulated markets by exposing the contradiction of Australia's neoliberal government in reverting to Keynesian-type economic interventions. The literature search further situates the research problem by revealing how these government interventions reinforced narratives of who was and wasn't deserving of state support, and how young people continued to be disproportionately adversely impacted by government policy in response to COVID-19.

4.2 Laurence Mead, and welfare recipients' rights and responsibilities

Australian Government responses to long-term unemployment are contained in the policies and practices of what is referred to as 'Workfare' (Eichhorst & Rinne, 2018, p. 198). American public policy academic Lawrence Mead (Marston & McDonald, 2008) has strongly influenced these policies. Workfare refers to enforced activities such as 'unpaid work experience', 'community service' or 'work for benefits' in exchange for receiving social assistance (Crisp & Fletcher, 2008, p. 3). Mead (1986) contended that for society to move beyond a welfare system which offered 'something for nothing', the receipt of benefits had to be linked to individual responsibilities (Mead, 1986, p. 135). Principal among these responsibilities, according to Mead, was an understanding that welfare recipients must genuinely attempt to support themselves through employment (Weaver, 2000). Mead's influence coincided with a decisive shift away by OECD governments from an entitlement-based system of welfare to one where the receipt of benefits was conditional upon reciprocity. This principle assumes that the welfare state created a dependence amongst the disadvantaged and reduced their capacity to compete for jobs (Eardley et al., 2000). For Mead, long-term unemployment was mostly generated by a person's diminished psychological and moral state. He referred to the attitudes and behaviours of the poor and unemployed, who he alleged lacked ambition, competence and the self-responsibility 'to help themselves' (Mead, 1992, p. 213). Mead maintained that 'a refusal to work' was symptomatic 'of an entitlement mentality' (Mead, 1992, p. 213) and resulted in the unemployed person being pitied as a recipient of charity (Dwyer, 2004).

Mead advocated a solution to rehabilitate the unemployed from what he considered to be their pathological flaws. His response takes the form of paternalistic policies and programs that combine a 'help and hassle' approach to transform the unemployed from 'passive' to 'active' citizens (Mead, 1997, pp. 21–22). Mead insisted that '(re)establishing work connections is so crucial that in some circumstances the use of force can be warranted to achieve this end' (Mead, 1997, p. 210). 'New paternalism' purported that welfare recipients could improve their life chances and integrate into the mainstream by adopting 'certain social norms and values' that were 'both obligatory and enforceable' (Braithwaite et al., 2002, p. 233). Mead wrote that:

people who live without limits soon sacrifice their own interests to immediate gratifications. To live effectively, people need personal restraint to achieve their own long-run goals. In this sense, obligation is the precondition of freedom. Those who would be free must first be bound. And if people have not been effectively bound by functioning families and neighbourhoods in their formative years, government must attempt to provide the limits later, imperfect though they must be.

(Mead, 1997, p. 23)

Mead's influence is unmistakeable in Australian government policy responses to long-term unemployment such as Workfare in which non-compliance attracts a form of financial sanction ('hassle') and 'help' is rendered through the provision of various forms of training and services (Marston & McDonald, 2008, p. 256). Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, when Federal Minister for Employment Services, reaffirmed Mead's contention that the unemployed must be organised and directed to be able to work. Abbott maintained that Mead's new paternalism resonated with responsible parents, who understood their role in making demands of loved ones for their own good (Abbott, 2000). He argued that by requiring every member of society to contribute to the wider community (Abbott, 2020), 'the onus was on the unemployed person to prove that they were deserving of the state's support' (Yeates, 2003, p. 7).

The signalling to the public that unemployment payments should be tied to the discharge of community work (Hawke, 1986) was first made in an address to the nation by an Australia prime minister who had once been Australia's highest-ranking trade union official. And it was under an ALP government that Australia's social security and employment services were reorganised to encourage 'active participation rather than dependence and passivity' (Harris, 2001, p. 17). The Social Security Act that consequently came into effect in 1991 'required eligible unemployment payment recipients to meet an activity test' (Martyn, 2006, p. 4). The Keating-led ALP government's 1994 Working Nation initiative then attached government assistance to 'a strengthened obligation on unemployed people to accept a reasonable job offer', while the availability of more 'targeted support for the long-term unemployed' was accompanied by 'stronger penalties for those who did not meet their obligations' under this arrangement (Macintyre, 1999, p. 105). While these changes represented the

incorporation of neoliberalist economic principles, a commitment remained to a mutuality which honoured a commensurable exchange between the citizen and state. For example, the Keating government's Job Compact provided an undertaking of a six- to 12-month job placement for those who had been unemployed for more than 18 months (Harris, 2001).

4.3 Workfare as mutual obligation

The principal of conditionality on which the Australian Government's Workfare policy framework is predicated was codified in late 1997 by the Howard-led LNP government as 'mutual obligation' (Meijers & te Riele, 2004, p. 11). Validation for the concept is paraphrased accordingly:

If the community has an obligation to provide income support for some members, then those who are being supported have corresponding obligations to the community.

(Kinnear, 2002, p. 248)

For nearly three decades, the most visible, pervasive and contentious expression of mutual obligation in Australia has been WfD. Chapter 2 outlined the stated aims and purpose of WfD, its format and operation, and the requirements placed on eligible participants. The imposition of mutual obligation by the Australian Government, as the framework for a more restrictive and coercive welfare system, recast the social contract to a specific arrangement between individuals and agencies of the state (McClelland, 2002). Fundamental to this change was the reduced role of the state in protecting society's most vulnerable. Three main rationales used by neoliberalists to justify the mutual obligation principle have been that:

the unemployed 'owe' a debt to the community in return for employment payments; mutual obligation requirements deter the unemployed from being 'too selective' about the jobs they will accept; and Workfare programs help to develop the unemployed person's capacity for autonomy and self-reliance.

(Sawer, 2005, p. 47)

Broad public acceptance of the reconfiguration of welfare provision from a limited social right to conditional support was achieved through the framing of mutual obligation as the 'public policy expression of a natural morality' (Shaver, 2002, p. 340). Within the literature, however, mutual obligation – as understood in the context of Australia's welfare system and Workfare – is a highly contested phrase, as is the claim that WfD represented a symmetrical, two-way exchange (Kemp, 1998). Some have contended that mutual obligation requirements were invalidated when 'demands for waged work outweighed the supply of jobs available and given the failure of successive governments to demonstrate a commitment to job creation' (Bessant, 2020b, p. 24). With regard to WfD, the Australian Government acknowledged that the aims of the program were modest by agreeing that WfD was not an employment program and did not directly match jobseekers with employment opportunities (Workforce Australia, 2024). That WfD bore little resemblance to paid employment was also said to undermine the definition of mutuality upon which Workfare was supposedly grounded. In a rebuke of WfD made at the 2009 ACOSS National Conference, the program was unfavourably contrasted with 'real work', which involved 'tangible outcomes with customers and end users' and had 'consequences for all involved if outcomes aren't delivered' (Fowkes, 2009, pp. 26–27). The Australian Government's abandonment of its responsibility to jobseekers was further evident in the design of the WfD program itself, with the activities undertaken unskilled, mostly generic and monotonous (EERC, 2019).

Literature points to the Australian Government's interpretation of mutual obligation as problematic, due to the lack of intrinsic reciprocity in programs like WfD, which had been found to impede transitions to employment. As noted by Martyn (2006) and the OECD (2000), the requirement that WfD activities did not compete with work performed by the private sector denied participants opportunities to attain the skills and experience required by the labour market. Consequently, any skills acquired through WfD activities were more likely to satisfy the needs of the individual project or host organisation, rather than the employment aspirations of jobseekers (Burgess et al., 1999). Such criticisms were repeated in submissions made to the Senate inquiry into the taxpayer-funded jobactive employment services network by WfD participants and advocacy groups, who described the disjuncture between the skills, qualifications and competencies of participants, and the program activities assigned to them (EERC,

2019). As most WfD activity hosts are community NFP organisations which rely heavily on volunteer labour, activities rarely provided participants with potential employment opportunities or with employment-network connections (Carson et al., 2003). Furthermore, mutual obligation has been criticised for placing most of the responsibility on the individual for developing capacity, 'and not sufficiently on the capacity building of institutions and organisations' to deliver 'relevant and effective' responses to unemployment (McClelland, 2002, p. 218).

4.4 Reciprocity and mutual obligation: not one and the same

The defence of Workfare based on the notion of fair reciprocity, through the conjoining of rights and responsibilities, is challenged by social contract theorists, who insist that stipulations and limitations should apply when obligations are imposed on the most disadvantaged members of an unequal society (Goodin, 2002; Moss, 2001). Rawls' (1971) 'principle of fairness' maintains that obligations can only exist 'when institutions are just and when individuals are able to freely accept social benefits in a context of meaningful alternatives' (Rawls, 1971, p. 112). Under mutual obligation the unemployed have no choice but to accept whatever is offered, irrespective of whether the offer is considered 'good, fair, or even remotely reasonable' (Goodwin, 2002, p. 589). Social contract theory also dispels the asymmetry of mutual obligation and the argument that welfare recipients exploit the taxpayer, given electoral support for deflationary measures that ensure an undersupply of jobs (Raffass, 2014). Nor, according to this theory, should an ethical requirement or reciprocal obligation exist, let alone be enforced or promoted, unless there also exists a commitment to provide employment for all those who sought it (Bessant, 2000b).

McClelland (2002) questioned the justness of requiring the unemployed to undertake activities that were unlikely to be of any long-term benefit, and when the labour market actively operated against them. With specific reference to WfD, Australian Government tender documents were 'explicit in describing the program as primarily providing services to the community' but made no reference to 'having to provide training to the participants' (Moss, 2001, p. 4; Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business [DEWRSB], 1999). Kinnear (2002) argued that a welfare system which provided entitlement-based benefits was necessary and more accurately reflective of a mutual exchange, as unemployment was more a result of

macroeconomic policies and structural conditions than a failure of individual motivation. Immediately prior to the permanent introduction of WfD, non-government organisations (NGOs) challenged the Australian Government's definition of mutuality. Leading critics included the Salvation Army, which submitted that as intensified welfare conditionality did not produce meaningful results for jobseekers, the concept of mutual obligation was flawed:

Reciprocal obligation and mutual obligation appear to be two different things, with mutual obligation demanding a much higher standard of personal compliance in order to receive support.

(Senate Standing Committee on
Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1997)

4.5 A human rights critique of Work for the Dole

Prominent within the literature is the interrogation of Australian governments' Workfare policies from a human rights perspective. As a signatory to the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Australian Government is obliged to ensure the right of all citizens to the opportunity to 'employment freely chosen or accepted' (CESCR, 2006, para 32). For almost three decades following the end of the Second World War, Australian governments actively sought to make full employment a fundamental aim 'through an active program of counter-cyclical expenditure on goods, services and public works' (Harris, 2001, p. 12). As outlined in the 1945 white paper:

The maintenance of the conditions which will make full employment possible is an obligation to the people of Australia by Commonwealth and State governments. Australian governments will have to accept new responsibilities and exercise new functions and there will need to be collaboration between them. Unemployment is an evil from the effects no class in the community can hope to escape, unless concerted action is taken.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 1945, pp. 3–4)

In abandoning policies geared towards achieving full employment, and by prioritising lower taxes and price stability over higher budget expenditures to preserve and create jobs, all Australian governments and central bank boards since the mid-1970s have maintained unequal access to employment (Moxham, 2022). In June 2023, Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) Deputy Governor Michele Bullock (appointed Governor the following month) insisted that for the economy to return to balance, the jobless rate would need to rise to about 4.5 per cent over the subsequent 18 months, which equated to 140,000 Australian job losses (Qiu, 2023). This approach, which favours the employed majority, as full employment is associated with higher taxation and inflation, amounts to what Burgess et al. (1999) claimed to be a wilful abuse of citizen rights. A similar position was taken by Raffass (2014), who was critical of deregulated markets for excluding a segment of the population from the workforce and imposing wage discipline on workers whose skills were threatened by technological advances, especially when retraining systems were insufficient. It was in this context that Kinnear (2002) submitted that advantaged Australians 'should feel gratefully obliged' to the unemployed 'for their involuntary sacrifice to the economic well-being of employed people' (Kinnear, 2002, p. 255).

Equally contested is Australian governments' association of WfD with volunteerism, through the provision of community service (Cash, 2017). Benefits of volunteering are said to include an increased sense of belonging, opportunities for using existing skills and acquiring new ones, personal development and pathways to paid employment (Volunteering Australia, 2010, 2012). Proponents of Workfare point to the capacity of programs like WfD to reduce the negative psychological effects of unemployment (Croft, 2016) and to restore the dignity and social status of the unemployed (Abbott, 2000; Coutts et al., 2014). These arguments intersect with latent deprivation theory (Jahoda, 1982), where unemployment is understood to be responsible for far more than financial hardship (Waters & Moore, 2002). Latent deprivation theory links 'psychological distress' caused by unemployment to the deprivation of the latent functions (Paul et al., 2023, p. 2) that employment confers. These functions include 'time structure, regular shared experiences, participation in a collective purpose and effort, the assignment of status and identity, and enforced regular activity' (Jahoda, 1982, p. 188). This theory suggests that by offering routines, activities and environments which simulate the employment experience and mimic aspects of formal

work, Workfare can mitigate psychological distress caused by unemployment (Evans & Banks, 1992; Sage, 2014).

Notwithstanding this, international classifications make clear that volunteerism cannot be conflated with mandated Workfare, as the latter removes an individual's agency and is coercive (Levy, 2006). The UN defines volunteerism as an action carried out according to an individual's 'own free will; not undertaken primarily for financial gain'; and not an 'obligation' stipulated by law, contract or academic requirement (UN General Assembly, 2001, pp. 2–3). In Victoria, the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* makes explicit that 'a person must not be made to perform forced or compulsory labour' (Victorian Government, 2006, p. 12).

Data obtained from a 2019 survey which explored choice and empowerment levels of WfD participants clearly delineated the act of volunteering from Workfare activity. Findings showed 'that 76 per cent' of respondents 'did not get to choose activities, that 61 per cent did not want to do the activities, and '91 per cent did not find the activity useful for helping them get a job' (Casey, 2022b, pp. 11–12). Likewise, the proposition that WfD assists participants by replicating the latent functions unemployment provides is disputed. Martyn (2006) determined that WfD did not provide the unemployed with the skills and experiences as demanded by the labour market, and meta-analysis established that the private sector placed little value on the work experiences delivered by Workfare programs (Card et al., 2010). These findings were substantiated by survey results presented to the Senate inquiry into jobactive, which showed that only 4 per cent of Australian employers used the network for hiring purposes (EERC, 2019).

Wellbeing effects produced by WfD participation are mediated according to whether participation is voluntary or mandatory. Two studies commissioned by the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) evaluated the effects of the WfD pilot 'on self-esteem, psychological wellbeing, work habits and social attitudes' (Carson et al., 2003. p. 21). The first study indicated 'significant improvements in negative mood and psychological distress/mental health' (Carson et al., 2003. p. 22) for pilot program participants. However, the second study revealed that only participants who entered the program voluntarily experienced these benefits. Both studies produced no evidence of any effect on self-esteem, and after exiting WfD,

respondents reported being 'more sceptical about the likelihood of the program improving their employment prospects' (Carson et al., 2003, p. 22). WfD participants were also less likely to volunteer in the future due to resentment that the benefits of their free labour flowed exclusively to governments and community organisations (Warburton & Smith, 2003). Another study chronicled the exploitation felt by WfD participants when made to undertake 'tasks that would normally be done by a paid worker or by roles that have been made redundant' (O'Halloran et al., 2020, p. 502). Philip and Mallan's 2015 study on the implications of WfD on the mental health of unemployed young Australians found no evidence of the program being effective at reducing mental distress. Insights provided by 75 Workfare participants from three separate regions of Australia also found that WfD did more psychological harm than good due to the loss of autonomy and negative interactions with program and employment services staff (Marston & McDonald, 2008).

Workfare as visited upon certain subgroups has been framed as state 'social abuse' (Wright et al., 2020, p. 287). The threat to withdraw means of support from society's most vulnerable has been described as inconsistent with the principles of justice (Bainbridge, 1997; Kinnear, 2002). And far from remedying unemployment, poverty and inequality, Workfare interventions such as WfD and the cashless debit card have been shown to compound existing disadvantages and create new ones (Klein, 2019). The incompatibility of Workfare practices of countries that were signatories to sovereign and international human rights legislation was established by European research which examined how the UK, Germany and Norway balanced young unemployed claimants' right to social benefits with conditions of compulsory activities and sanctions for non-compliance. The research concluded that the 'human right of substantive equity is challenged in all three countries' (Kane & Kohler-Olsen, 2018, p. 317) by Workfare. In applying a legal framework and human rights instruments which address social security, conditionality and non-discrimination, the researchers found that due to Workfare obligations, income-support claimants can experience 'stigma, stereotyping and shame', and that sanctioning was a paternalistic response which ignored the right of social citizenship (Kane & Kohler-Olsen, 2018, p. 317).

4.6 Work for the Dole does not work (in remedying unemployment)

For this research project to be suitably informed given the focus on WfD participant experiences of long-term unemployment, it is necessary to revisit and synthesise in this chapter the findings of seminal program evaluations. The only peer-reviewed study to quantify whether WfD improved employment outcomes was conducted during the program's pilot phase across 1997 and 1998. The pilot involved up to 10,000 participants in receipt of income support, aged between 18 and 24 years, who had been unemployed for at least six months (Borland & Tseng, 2004). This study found that WfD participants were less likely to move off welfare payments and that there appeared 'to be a quite large significant negative effect of participation in WfD' (Borland & Tseng, 2004, p. 4359). The research compared outcomes for a treatment group of payment recipients who participated in the WfD pilot with a matched control group of payment recipients. A key finding of the study was that the treatment group received income payments on average two weeks longer than the control group. The negative effect of WfD was explained as 'participation may cause or allow participants to reduce their job search activity, or may adversely affect the type of job search activity undertaken' (Borland & Tseng, 2004, p. 4363). The presence of a 'lock-in effect' (Borland & Tseng, 2004, p. 4353) similarly emerged as a theme in an evaluation of a Workfare program in New Zealand, where many participants did not search for work as they viewed program participation itself as 'work' (De Boer, 2000, p. 6). A later study of jobseekers' experiences with Australia's employment services system concluded that for people with substantial barriers to employment, engagement with mutual obligation requirements subsumed job search activities (Ziguras et al., 2003). Another evaluation of the WfD pilot that focused on wellbeing effects on participants found the program did not build employment skills and 'failed the most disadvantaged jobseekers because it did not respond adequately to the varying personal circumstances of participants' (Carson et al., 2003, p. 19).

Conversely, an internal net impact study of the WfD pilot reported that three months after exiting WfD, around 25 per cent of participants were in paid employment (DEWRSB, 2000). Analysis independent of the DEWRSB found that the pilot was successful in terms of soft outcomes and in the number of jobseekers who found employment as a result of program participation (Nevile & Nevile, 2006). It is, however,

noted that the DEWRSB defined a successful program outcome to include a participant leaving income support, and data did not measure the program's direct employment impact (Nevile, 2003). Hawke (1998) questioned whether participants in the pilot who gained employment would have done so without the intervention of Workfare. Neither did the net impact study account for the displacement from work of non-program participants by the movement of WfD participants into employment (Biddle & Gray, 2018; Borland, 2014).

Nevile (2003) and Eardley (2002) both concluded that evaluating the effectiveness of WfD with regard to employment outcomes was impeded by the lack of valid data made available to researchers non-aligned with the Australian Government. An example of the DEWRSB's determination to avoid public scrutiny of Workfare concerned a youth-specific WfD activity based in northern New South Wales. This activity aimed to address local skills shortages by delivering community landscaping projects. The employment services provider responsible for administering the activity engaged an independent researcher to produce a proposal to evaluate the program. Yet after designing the evaluation, the researcher was precluded from involvement in its implementation and not shown the study's findings, as were other external parties (Scott & Darlington, 2011). Davidson (2011) concluded that short-term evaluations of Workfare activities were biased by favouring quick outcomes with minimal attachment effects. Davidson's study determined that outcomes occurred at the expense of capacity-building programs, such as vocational training or work experience. Although these programs delayed transitions to work, they were found to produce an overall improvement in future employment prospects (Davidson, 2011).

For the Social Research Centre, it was the limited timeframe made available to it when tasked by the Department of Employment to evaluate the 2014–15 iteration of WfD that led to an inconclusive finding of whether the program was associated with improved employability. While more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of surveyed program participants believed that their 'soft skills' had increased, and 54 per cent of respondents agreed that their WfD participation 'had improved their chances of getting a job a little (24 per cent) or a lot (23 per cent)', more than a quarter of participants had remained in WfD or had repeatedly moved in and out of WfD activity (Kellard et al., 2015, p. 73). The positive effect of the program 'on part-time and casual

employment was due in part to a reporting effect and in part to a threat/behavioural effect' of sanctioning leading to increased income reporting (Biddle & Gray, 2018, p. iii).

More recent data adapted from a Department of Employment Services report on labour market program outcomes indicate that WfD is incompatible with positive employment outcomes. Data showed that those who undertook WfD were more likely to be unemployed within three months than those who participated in other jobactive activities, including training (Casey, 2020). These findings corroborated earlier studies of WfD participants' experiences of mutual obligation requirements. Almost half of WFD participants interviewed by Sawyer (2005) told of being pressured by either Centrelink or their employment services provider to apply for jobs they were either unsuited to or physically incapable of performing. The prescriptive jobactive funding model, in which providers are incentivised by placement payments to facilitate short-term employment outcomes, also inflated the net impacts of WfD and impeded the integration of the unemployed into paid work (OECD, 2001; Productivity Commission, 2002). On the efficacy of benefits conditionality more broadly, a study by Gerards and Welters (2021) determined that those subjected to mutual obligation took 'longer to find employment, despite searching at least as hard' as those who were not (p. 1). Findings also revealed that those with mutual obligation requirements 'spend less time in employment in the first 12 months and, if employed', worked in 'jobs with lower wages and fewer hours compared' to counterparts without benefit eligibility requirements (Gerards and Welters, 2021, p. 1). These findings are consistent with conservation of resources theory, which posits 'that the threat of losing resources (i.e. unemployment benefits) causes stress and fatigue, which reduces job search effectiveness' (Gerards and Welters, 2021, p. 1) and self-determination theory, via the premise that 'external motivation' – as distinct from 'autonomous motivation' – compromises 'goal achievement' (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 257–258).

4.7 Unemployment discourse and 'othering'

Despite overwhelming evidence that programs such as WfD do not improve employment outcomes, and can be counterproductive to job search activity, Australia's income support system continues to be wedded to the principles of Workfare. To understand why this is not only the case but largely approved of by the

populace, it is necessary to review literature which reveals the success of discursive practices intended to consolidate the primacy of neoliberal ideology in Australian welfare debate (Hutchens, 2021). Principle amongst these practices is the propagation of the 'dole bludger' narrative. A colloquialism originally distinctive to Australia and New Zealand, the 'bludger' is understood to 'live off the effort of others and gives nothing in return' and is seen 'to evade one's own responsibilities' (Archer, 2009, p. 178). One of the earliest known uses of the phrase in public debate was attributed to a South Australian parliamentarian, who in 1973 expressed outrage that 'taxpayers' money was funding "bludgers" on unemployment benefits' (Windschuttle, 1979, pp. 156–157). The construction and mainstreaming of welfare recipients as parasites on 'ordinary Australian' taxpayers has been charted by Archer (2009, p. 177) and is regarded as pivotal to the transformation of welfare policy and class discourse in Australia. 'Dole-bludger rhetoric' – which portrays the unemployed as deficient in moral character and discipline and detached from society – is aimed at intentionally intensifying negativity towards welfare recipients (Holdsworth, 2017, p. 612). The exploitation of this narrative has proved highly effective when the indolent 'dole bludger' is juxtaposed with the 'industriousness, self-sacrifice, and respectable' hardworking, taxpaying Australian (Yeates, 2003, p. 1).

The dole bludger metaphor has been consistently weaponised in Federal Parliament to vilify and scapegoat the jobless. A year before WfD was piloted, Senator Jocelyn Newman, Minister for Social Services, defended the need to protect the community against exploitation by those receiving unemployment benefits. 'Australians (are) sick and tired of being taken for mugs by dole bludgers,' Newman railed (cited in Bessant, 2000b, p. 20). Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Mal Brough described unemployment as a personal choice and asserted that 'one in six jobseekers did not want full-time work' and therefore deserved the moniker of 'dole bludgers' (cited in Robinson, 2010, pp. 63, 67). Future Prime Minister Abbott bemoaned a newly defined class of 'job snobs': those who wanted to work but had overly high expectations and were too selective about the jobs they would accept (Sawer, 2005, p. 49). Abbott was particularly disparaging towards young Australians who thought all work should be 'well paid and personally satisfying' (cited in Sawer, 2005, p. 49).

The dominant narrative which blames the poor and unemployed for their own predicament helps explain the ‘substantial’ endorsement by the Australian population of programs like WfD, and the expectancy that the unemployed ‘should be expected to undertake activities in return for income support’ (Eardley et al., 2000, p. 1). At a time when the unemployment payment for a single person was more than \$150 per week below the poverty line, only 29 per cent of respondents to an Australian Survey of Social Attitudes believed that the payment should be increased (Evans, 2017). This was despite a submission made by the Business Council of Australia that the unemployment benefit was below the reasonable community standard of adequacy and acted as a barrier to employment and entrenched poverty (Karvelas, 2012). Further analysis of attitudes towards welfare recipients suggests that the Australian population largely ‘hold negative attitudes towards welfare recipients’ and broadly understand them to be ‘lazy and dependent’, and ‘not doing enough to find work’ (Schofield & Butterworth, 2015, pp. 2, 11).

Representations of the unemployed as intrinsically different are consistent with dominant discursive techniques which construct ‘othered’ groups (Dencker-Larsen & Lundberg, 2016, p. 5). As a critical response to mass threats, othering occurs when people seek to reinforce their self-identity by locating undesirable qualities in others (Joffe, 2007). It is achieved when experts, policymakers and media actors continually present positive images of what ‘good’ citizenship entails, while simultaneously discouraging the ‘stereotypical otherness’ associated with poor attitudes and behaviour (Dencker-Larsen & Lundberg, 2016, p. 2). The construction of the ‘other’ (Krabbe, 2021, p. 2) is fundamental to neoliberal welfare discourse, as those deemed unwilling or unable to participate in the labour market are depicted as aberrations (Edwards, 2009). Othering has been effective in associating youth unemployment with deficient work attitudes (McGann et al., 2020) and in reinforcing discriminatory and exclusionary practices (Krabbe, 2021).

4.8 The criminalisation of welfare

Literature demonstrates how othering welfare recipients has been exploited to conflate unemployment with criminality. Wacquant et al. (2011) explored the growth and glorification of punishment in the US to inform both welfare and justice. Similarities

were observed between welfare conditionality practices and those employed in correctional facilities, which comprise:

constant close-up monitoring, strict spatial assignment and time constraints, intensive record keeping and case management, periodic interrogation and reporting, and a rigid system of graduated sanctions for failing to perform properly.

(Wacquant, 2009, p. 101)

Populist welfare discourse encourages the perception that those receiving income support are likely 'welfare cheats' and must therefore be subjected to 'welfare policing' (Wilcock, 2016, pp. 114, 117). The preoccupation with the use of such pejorative terms implies that almost everyone claiming benefits is assumed to be cheating the taxpayer until proven otherwise (Walsh, 2003). In 2001, less than 0.04 per cent of Australian welfare recipients were convicted of defrauding the welfare system (Hartman, 2005). Despite this, the following year, when assuming the portfolio for Family and Community Services, Senator Amanda Vanstone announced a crackdown on 'welfare cheats', declaring 'I don't have [fugitive businessman Christopher] Skase to chase any more so I need something to do' (Vanstone, as cited in Hartman, 2005, p. 57).

The coerciveness of mutual obligation and Workfare practices has been likened to the enforcement of compulsory community service intended to punish those convicted of crime (Bainbridge, 1997). Others have contended that Workfare represents a reinstatement of the '18th and 19th century punishment and surveillance that the imperial British state used to govern through brutality and fear' (Wright et al., 2020, p. 292). Meanwhile, mutual obligations imposed on welfare recipients often exceed maximum penalties that can be imposed by Australian courts for some criminal offences (Thomas, 2018). Centrelink and jobactive staff are engaged in investigative practices that would ordinarily be associated with the function of law enforcement, while compliance officers are openly referred to as 'welfare cops' (Wilcock, 2016, p. 114). For every hour frontline jobactive staff spend on client engagement, they are estimated to allocate three hours to compliance and administration (Lewis et al., 2017). In 2015, a Taskforce Integrity collaboration involving Services Australia and the Australian Federal Police was launched to monitor those considered likely to commit welfare fraud (Robert, 2015). Subsequent policing measures have included repeated

attempts to drug test recipients of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance (Department of Social Services, 2020; Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee, 2018) and the establishment of a hotline to encourage employers to report young people who declined offers of work. The hotline, euphemistically referred to as ‘DobSeeker’ or ‘Dob in a Dole Bludger’, was widely seen as unnecessary and politically opportunistic by employer and small business groups, social service advocates and the ACTU (Curtis & Bonyhady, 2021; Dawson, 2021). The Senate inquiry into jobactive heard evidence of WfD being mistaken for criminal correction orders that allowed offenders to serve a custodial sentence in the community. As one WfD participant submitted:

Whenever I mention WfD, employers’ faces drop. Some employers I’ve spoken to think WfD is a parole requirement for people who have been released from jail ...

(EERC, 2019, p. 122)

Respondents to an earlier WfD study admitted that they had not disclosed their WfD participation to prospective employers: ‘The employment agencies say to you, “When you’re going for a job don’t say you’re doing Work for the Dole. Say you’re a volunteer”’ (Warburton & Smith, 2003, p. 781). Through the institutionalised othering of the unemployed, programs like WfD create specific forms of alienation and exacerbate powerlessness, societal isolation and personal dislocation (Fletcher & Flint, 2018). The targeting through Workfare of those already experiencing poverty and marginalisation often produced ‘unintended consequences, including distancing people from support, causing hardship and ‘destitution, displacing rather than resolving issues such as homelessness and antisocial behaviour, and negative impacts’ on dependents (Watts et al., 2014, p. 1). The contribution by Henman (2004) to the literature on the othering of the unemployed explored the Australian Government’s use of risk-based calculus to target certain groups for more intense surveillance and compliance. As detailed in Chapter 2, the use of the Robodebt scheme to apply income averaging to raise debt notices was illegal (Gordon Legal, 2020), was linked to the deaths of an estimated 2,000 welfare recipients who were incorrectly breached (Medhora, 2019) and cost taxpayers more than \$1.2 billion in compensation payments (Henriques-Gomes, 2020a) plus an additional \$30 million allocated to establish a Royal Commission into Robodebt (Dreyfus, 2022). In her

report into the scheme, Royal Commissioner Catherine Holmes SC called out populist ‘anti-welfare rhetoric’ and for politicians to ‘lead a change in social attitudes to people receiving welfare payments’ (Holmes, 2023, p. ii). Robodebt, wrote the Royal Commissioner, was a ‘crude and cruel mechanism, neither fair nor legal, and it made many people feel like criminals ... and traumatised them on the off chance they might owe money’ (Holmes, 2023, p. xxix). Rather than ‘recognise that many citizens will at different times in their lives need income support ... and to provide that support willingly, adequately, and with respect’, the Robodebt scheme exemplified an approach:

to regard those in receipt of social security benefits as a drag on the national economy, an entry on the debit side of the budget to be reduced by any means available: by casting recipients as a burden on the taxpayer, by making onerous requirements of those who are claiming or have claimed benefit, by minimising the availability of assistance from departmental staff, by clawing back benefits whether justly or not, and by generally making the condition of the social security recipient unpleasant and undesirable.

(Holmes, 2023, p. xxiii)

4.9 Work for the Dole and ‘non-workers’

How Workfare reconstitutes notions of citizenship and disenfranchises and differentiates the unemployed is further explored by literature with regard to legal definitions of work. Workfare has been described as ‘a violent form of forced labour that allows employers to breach health and safety laws with impunity, injuring and killing workers’ (Wright et al., 2020, p. 282). Certainly, WfD participants are exposed to significant harms due to the way the term ‘worker’ is applied by the Australian Government. Through the legal reclassification of WfD participants as ‘non-workers’, and by describing WfD activity as ‘participation’ – even when the activities performed can be similar to those which draw a wage – the citizenship rights of the unemployed are again weakened by the denial of access to basic legal redress (Bessant, 2000b, p. 29). In its submission to the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Work for the Dole) Bill 1997, DEETYA confirmed that exempting WfD participants from the *Safety Rehabilitation and Compensations Act 1988* was designed to ensure that welfare recipients were excluded from the employee–employer relationship at common law

(Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1997). As a result of the amendment, the Australian Government, jobactive providers and activity hosts administering WfD are not subject to standard workplace laws, including occupational health and safety, anti-sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying, WorkCover insurance and the superannuation guarantee (EERC, 2019). WfD participants are also prevented from joining trade unions or engaging in collective bargaining or industrial action (Burgess et al., 1999).

An Ernst and Young audit of WfD across 12 months between 2014 and 2015 found that '64 per cent of sites did not fully meet appropriate safety standards' (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 31). The Senate inquiry into jobactive heard from participants who sustained permanent and debilitating injuries from undertaking WfD activities, including a 30-year-old male who suffered severe mobility loss following a WfD accident and had to borrow money to pay for specialist treatment for chronic nerve pain (EERC, 2019). The failure of a Queensland jobactive provider to comply with health and safety regulations tragically resulted in the death of an 18-year-old at the Toowoomba Showgrounds in April 2016. The young person, whose earlier complaints of a back injury had been dismissed by provider staff (Workman, 2018), suffered critical head injuries after he fell from a flatbed trailer that was being towed by a tractor during a rubbish collection. An internal investigation, which the Australian Government attempted to block for release (Henriques-Gomes, 2020b), reported key gaps in the provider's hazard identification and controls to manage identified risks. These included inconsistent work health and safety practices, activities that were unsuitably designed and inappropriately supervised, and a history of failing to investigate serious incidents (Department of Employment, 2020).

Mistreatment of the unemployed by WfD activity host and jobactive provider staff is commonplace. Nearly half of all callers to an Australian Unemployment Workers Union hotline reported being bullied by their jobactive provider, while focus group participants shared experiences of the ways the program denied them dignity or procedural fairness (Bennett et al., 2018). As one young unemployed female recalled:

I was treated shocking. I agreed to an activity to do and this woman's coming in, I don't even know who she really was in the organisation, just talking down to us, and saying, while I'm sitting there, saying to someone

else who's running the kitchen, 'Oh, get the people in the Work for the Dole to do it.' It's just that kind of attitude ... she wanted me to go do something, and I said, 'I haven't been shown how to do that', and she said, 'You don't need to be, just go do it.' So, it's just the way you get spoken to.

(Bennett et al., 2018. p. 30)

Accountability measures to protect the basic rights of welfare recipients were weakened when the Commonwealth outsourced the provision of employment services. These services are not subject to judicial and merits review, as they were created via contract and not legislation and therefore do not fall within the remit of freedom of information law (Harris, 2007). As the power to sanction the unemployed is highly concentrated with frontline workers, governance and natural justice cannot be assured (Carney, 2006). Furthermore, the traditional role of community and voluntary organisations to advocate on behalf of the unemployed and to challenge power is compromised by their dependence on the government awarding employment services contracts and approving tax-deductible status (Grey & Sedgwick, 2015; Staples, 2014).

4.10 The intended purpose of Work for the Dole

Australian governments have not attempted to replicate the templates of effective European ALMPs or pursued Workfare reforms such as those advocated by the likes of Borland. Yet more than two decades of uniform Workfare activation across the OECD has not reduced the total share of welfare claimants in the working population (Raffass, 2014). Even the Australian Parliament's website has acknowledged the ineffectiveness of WfD with regard to employment outcomes:

Given the Work for the Dole program's limitations as a labour market program, its main function would appear to be to ensure job seeker compliance with mutual obligation requirements.

(Thomas, 2017, p. 1)

Literature indicates that there is nothing unintended about the punitive consequences of Workfare activity which demoralises and isolates the unemployed (Fletcher & Flint, 2018), exacerbates poverty, and marginalises welfare recipients and their dependents

(Watts et al., 2014). An investigation of Israeli Workfare practices identified the use of time regularity and punctuality to simultaneously discipline the unemployed and prepare them for workplace temporality (Helman, 2020). Peck (2003) and Boland (2016) have each explored how Workfare is deployed to transform an individual's subjective experience of time and reorient them towards accepting any job, no matter how precarious, to ensure a large pool of readily available labour to fill the least desirable jobs. Respondents to a study which examined the interactions of unemployed Australians with the jobactive network claimed that mutual obligation compliance was prioritised over job search activity. Many respondents also reported being hypervigilant to having their payments cancelled on the slightest pretence (O'Halloran et al., 2020). It has further been asserted that mutual obligation requirements are designed to be punitive and unpleasant in order for benefits to be harder to access (Strathdee, 2013). This so-called 'referral effect' (Casey, 2020, p. 15) – whereby conditions placed on a jobless person are so disagreeable to that person that they stop claiming income support – reflected the experience of one disaffected jobseeker who took part in a study of Australia's employment services system.

When I failed to report ... my [unemployment payment] was suspended.

I failed to report because I just got sick of the pointlessness of the exercise.

I am no simpleton. The system is not one I want to fit, not for love or money.

Even the provider staff agreed that the system was failing.

(Casey, 2022a, p. 10)

Testimony provided to a federal parliamentary inquiry shone more light on the implicit intent of WfD. A qualified solicitor told of how his voluntary work with a community legal centre was not recognised as an approved WfD activity. Compelling also was the submission of an unemployed medical librarian and local Citizen of the Year nominee. She had to relinquish volunteering at a district hospital to perform WfD activity in a factory located a 40-minute drive away, despite not having a drivers licence (EERC, 2019). Department of Employment officials have openly referred to WfD as a 'tree-shaking' exercise (Senate Education and Employment Estimates Committee, 2017, p. 41) intended to impose 'onerous conditions on welfare participants to

incentivise them to exit payments', irrespective of whether they gained employment (Casey, 2022b, p. 3).

Jobseekers' distrust of mutual obligation can in part be appreciated by reviewing research which analysed responses to open-ended survey questions provided by 183 employment services staff. The majority of these frontline workers expressed negative views towards the unemployed, who were accused of 'playing the system' and 'being content on benefits' (McDonald & Marston, 2008, p. 320). Most staff interviewed supported a 'big stick' approach to forcing the unemployed off welfare (McDonald & Marston, 2008, p. 320). Such perceptions were invalidated by two DEETYA studies which concluded that WfD participants 'had high levels of work involvement and employment commitment before starting the program' (Carson et al., 2003, p. 22). A subsequent study of mutual obligation requirements established that jobseekers were more likely to disengage because of the ineffectiveness of the services provided and the lack of local job market knowledge of jobactive consultants, rather than work-shy attitudes (O'Halloran et al., 2019). UK research also discredited the narrative that challenges the motivations of jobseekers by incorrectly attributing the unemployment of interview respondents to 'wrong choices' and their dependency on benefits being 'a preferable state of living' (Wright, 2016, p. 243). Notwithstanding these findings, stereotypes depicting the unemployed as lazy and undeserving of support continue to dominate welfare discourse and sustain the neoliberal objective of reducing the state's exposure to the financial and psychological consequences of unemployment (Boland, 2016).

By competing with low-paying jobs and acting as a lever to push wages downward, Workfare helps maintain the labour market flexibility that neoliberalism demands (Bainbridge, 1997). Programs like WfD economise the labour market by framing wages 'as a cost of production rather than a means of redistribution and social cohesion' (Jessop, 2002, p. 459). The supply-side economic effects of Workfare manifest in endemic labour market displacement and substitution. If WfD participants do obtain work, it is invariably insecure and low paid in nature, and mostly at the expense of other low-paid, insecure workers (Peck, 2003). WfD was pivotal to the Howard LNP government's agenda to achieve labour market deregulation and dilute employer responsibilities under common and industrial law. By redefining what it

meant to be a 'worker' or 'employee', legislation which enabled the roll-out of WfD reflected free market policies intended to diminish 'the role of unions', introduce 'individual employment contracts', constrain the powers of the nation's independent industrial umpire and weaken worker protections, including 'unfair dismissal laws' (Bessant, 2000a, p. 76, 77).

Australia's longest-serving Liberal Party Finance Minister, Matthias Cormann, acknowledged that downward pressure on wage growth was 'a deliberate design feature of our economic architecture' (cited in Quiggan, 2019, p. 1). Measures that have operated in conjunction with Workfare to suppress wages include public sector wage caps and a 34 per cent reduction in private-sector workers covered by enterprise agreements in the five years to 2018, representing a decline of more than 600,000 employees (Pennington, 2018). Changes to visa rules, which allowed international students to work unlimited hours in tourism and hospitality, agriculture or aged care; for an approved National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provider; and in a supermarket or associated distribution facility (Department of Home Affairs, 2021) further created a disposable supply of low-wage labour excluded from social services and vulnerable to wage theft and other forms of exploitation (Clibborn & Wright, 2021). Until recently, the lack of any meaningful response by Australian governments to systemic wage theft was a consequence of the neoliberal reliance on low-wage business models and a decentralised and individualised system of employment arrangements. Underpayment of international students is also widespread. Research found that 49 per cent of study respondents (aged 20 years and above at the time of their lowest-paid job) were paid below the statutory minimum wage, and 26 per cent were paid approximately half of the minimum wage for a casual employee. Sexual harassment, workplace accidents and injuries, and termination for complaining to their employer of mistreatment were also found to be commonplace (Farbenblum & Berg, 2018).

When Australian visa amendments were announced in 2021, there were over 700,000 unemployed and 1.3 million underemployed Australians. The aggregate monthly hours worked had reduced by one million, and a record number of Australians were working multiple jobs (ABS, 2021b). Data also revealed that there were 1.81 million Australians who were not in work, and who were able to work and wanted to work but had given

up looking for a job and were therefore not counted in the official unemployment rate (ABS, 2021b; Taylor, 2021). According to the ACTU, these figures exposed the labour-shortage argument as erroneous and pointed more to a refusal of employers to change their business models and increase wages (McManus, 2021). LNP Coalition MPs have cited anecdotal evidence of the unemployed refusing reasonable offers of work, and former Prime Minister Morrison threatened to cancel the payments of those who were claimed to have refused to relocate for seasonal fruit-picking jobs (Jericho, 2021). Yet arguments that jobseekers would be disincentivised from accepting employment – due to the temporary Coronavirus Supplement or a permanent increase in the JobSeeker payment – were not substantiated by the evidence (Borland, 2020).

Depictions of the unemployed as lacking the resolve to find a job also downplayed obstacles to work that confronted over half of JobSeeker recipients. For instance, of the 1.2 million Australians who received JobSeeker in 2021, more than 700,000 were either a parent of young children and/or a single parent, a primary carer for another family member, or disabled or managing a long-term illness. For these people, accepting a job that, for example, required them to relocate under the threat of cancelled payments was simply not feasible (Dawson, 2021).

In 2021, wage growth failed to keep pace with cost of living increases for the ninth consecutive year (RBA, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, real wages in Australia were 0.7 per cent lower compared to 2013, and Australia ranked 33 out of 35 OECD countries for wage growth (Hill, 2019). In Melbourne, house prices were almost 18 times greater than the median employee income (Burke, 2021). Reserve Bank Governor Phillip Lowe warned that negligible growth in average real hourly earnings in the six years since 2012 risked ‘diminishing our sense of shared prosperity’ and eroded trust in economic policies (Lowe, 2018, p. 5). And despite the fact that Australian workers produced almost four times as much output every hour than in the 1960s, inequality of earnings, household income, wealth inequality and top income rose markedly over the past generation, in what was termed by the OECD as the ‘productivity–inclusiveness nexus’ (Leigh, 2019; OECD, 2016, p. 10).

4.11 Discursive Workfare techniques and the subjectified jobseeker

An enduring legacy of Workfare discourse and techniques has been the reconfiguration of the unemployed person into that of the archetype jobseeker (Boland, 2016). Reflecting neoliberal doctrine which responsabilises the individual for their life path and prospects, the jobseeker is subjectified through the internalisation of discursive Workfare practices to think and act in specific ways that are compatible with labour market rationality (Cromby & Willis, 2013). Through the command to view themselves as autonomous and self-directed, the jobseeker becomes entirely 'responsible for the choices, outcomes and consequences' of managing themselves and their own resources, however finite these might be (Kelly, 2017, p. 65). Subsequently, one's failure to attain the formal qualifications or skills demanded by the labour market at any particular time can be attributed to that person's lack of interest, motivation or ability, rather than an outcome of an arbitrary social order (Dick & Nadin, 2011). Mutual obligation and conditionality are oriented to transform the unemployed to conduct themselves in ways that are 'socially desirable' (Kissová, 2021, p. 151). In the neoliberal context of Workfare, socially desirable means that one will accept any available job, regardless of whether that job is aligned with the person's qualifications, skillset or aspirations (Boland, 2016). The literature connects this act of accepting any job to the most disingenuous and exploitative elements of Workfare. Drawing upon Bourdieu's premise on unequal employment relationships and the phenomenon of misrecognition (2001), literature has shown the subjectified jobseeker to perceive the acquisition of even low-skilled, low-status employment as a success or stroke of good fortune by virtue of having escaped the constraints on freedom (Dick & Nadin, 2011) when receiving income support. These discursive practices, when incorporated into the subjectivity of the jobseeker, serve a critical function for the neoliberal state through the suppression of wage growth (Sheen, 2010). Young people in particular encounter reduced opportunities for ongoing, full-time employment and are increasingly exposed to precarity. Moreover, the attainment of higher education and vocational education and training qualifications 'offers no guarantee of work' (Peters & Besley, 2013, p. 783). Yet under the conditions imposed by neoliberalism, these matters are afforded little practical consequence. Government policies and neoliberal narratives perpetually ascribe unemployment as the result of individual deficits and absolve the state of the burden of risk for managing societal failures

(Diprose, 2015). Rather, the onus is on unemployed young people to address their psychological and moral inadequacies and to build their human capital (Wyn, 2015).

To adhere to the prescribed ways of engaging with a labour market bound by the rules of competitive conduct, the jobseeker must assume the habits and characteristics of the entrepreneur. The enterprising or 'entrepreneurial self' is 'ambitious, calculative, shows initiative and responsibility', and demonstrates 'adaptability, flexibility, and mobility' (Oinonen, 2018, p. 1346). The subjectified jobseeker is required to invest in their 'employability' by ensuring their skills are aligned with the ever-evolving needs of an uncertain labour market (Giugni et al., 2020, p. 2). The entrepreneurial self must develop psychological resilience to positively adapt to changed circumstances in their environment, especially when these changes are difficult or pose a direct threat (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). Resilience requires an acceptance of the concept of active citizenship, and the notion that being responsible for one's own social and economic wellbeing is contingent upon an awareness of, and preparation for, risk and uncertainty (Joseph, 2013). The embrace of the resilience chronicle further requires an acknowledgment by the jobseeker that engagement with the labour market is characterised by a personal trial of 'self-transformation' (Boland, 2021, p. 7). These assertions were reinforced by a study which drew on the experiences of tertiary-educated young workers as they navigated a precarious labour market in regional Italy. Findings established that the entrepreneurial self is an ongoing, tradeable commodity that has to be continually reinvented, and highlighted how young people accepted that any existing or future failure to attain full-time employment was attributable to their past decision-making, including educational choices (Sofritti et al., 2020). A study of precarity experienced by Canadian millennials (born from the early 1980s through to the mid-1990s) similarly concluded that many young people did not resist self-responsibilisation discourse, as precarity was all they had known, and refused to blame structural inequities for their circumstances due to the high value their society placed on 'personal achievement' (Worth, 2018, p. 2).

The emphasis on lifelong learning, as championed by the OECD and the European Commission (Field, 2000), is central to government policy which advances responsabilisation as a prerequisite for the individual to maintain competitiveness in the free market (Cotoi, 2011). Resilience requires the jobseeker to regard themselves

as an ongoing work in progress to continually acquire and offer skills which make them employable according to the vagaries of the labour market (Vesterberg, 2015). This logic posits that the entrepreneurial self recognises that their career trajectory is non-linear, involves constant reinvention (Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2012) and requires an ability to strategise (Brown, 2005). Entrepreneurial-self discourse serves as justification for the proliferation of the gig economy, in which work is contracted out on a for-fee basis, and employment relationships are predicated on 'free market forces and competition and are associated with relatively weak labour market institutions, standards and regulations' (Wood et al., 2019, p. 59). The trend towards outsourcing and short-term contract work – including work that requires high-level knowledge and skills – creates increased levels of underemployment and erodes the 'traditional nexus between higher education qualifications and skills, and stable employment conditions' (Chesters & Wyn, 2019, p. 672). Under this flexible employment model, young people have come to be defined 'as primarily a human resource for economic development', by virtue of the roles ascribed to them 'as students, consumers and flexible workers' (Wyn & Woodman, 2006, p. 504).

4.12 The contradiction of neoliberalism

Fundamental to the construction of the responsibilised, self-reliant and enterprising jobseeker is the neoliberal assertion that optimal economic development is contingent on open, competitive markets, free from all forms of state interference (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Yet after four decades of free market ideology that has afforded unchecked superiority to the supply side of the economy, promises of increases in growth, employment, productivity, prosperity and cohesion have not materialised (Ryan, 2015). Essentially, the Australian Government's fiscal interventions during the pandemic were a tacit admission that deregulated markets cannot respond to crises (Spies-Butcher, 2020). And despite these interventions, the *16th Annual Statistical Report of the HILDA Survey* showed that inequality is unchanged, poverty continues to rise and the casualisation of work is endemic (Wilkins et al., 2021).

The economic and social disruption caused by COVID-19 exposed what critics argue is the reality of neoliberalism. The term 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 353) describes the dependency on some form of government intervention by corporations of all sizes, and across all sectors. Direct and indirect

state support to corporations is deeply embedded within the operation of the neoliberal state (Farnsworth, 2013). Illustrative of this was the administration of the JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme. Under JobKeeper, \$38 billion was allocated to businesses – including a third of Australia’s wealthiest companies – which did not incur sustained downturns below eligibility thresholds during the quarter for which they made claims (Conifer, 2021). That JobKeeper did not include provisions to reclaim money incorrectly paid emphasised the contrast between the strict conditions imposed on individual recipients of income support because they required ‘discipline’, and the absence of reciprocity for entities awarded public subsidies to ensure access to ‘economic incentives’ (Van Dyke, 2003, p. 115). The ‘hallmark of actually existing neoliberalism’ is said to be the ‘selective application of market-based logics’, where these ‘logics are strictly enforced in some areas (i.e. social services) and yet actively suppressed in others (i.e. ‘corporate welfare’) (Ryan, 2015, p. 94). While corporate welfare exceeds the funding of unemployment benefits, it is spending on social welfare that neoliberalist governments insist is unaffordable and thus targeted for cutbacks (Whiteford, 2015). The redistribution of wealth upwards by Australia’s neoliberal state was evidenced through the use of debt collectors to pursue welfare recipients suspected of having received overpayments during the pandemic (Terzon, 2021). Alternatively, in the five months following the introduction of JobKeeper, the ATO received 8,000 tip-offs of reported abuse, yet not a single business was fined for defrauding the program (Gladstone & Bonyhady, 2020).

4.13 Market forces ineffectual in responding as COVID-19 intensified inequality

The profound worldwide health, economic, social and environmental impacts of COVID-19 were accelerated by the volatility of economic globalisation and neoliberalism’s ‘dismantling of state capabilities in favour of markets’ (van Barneveld et al., 2020, p. 134). At the beginning of the pandemic, contraction of global consumption was forecast to increase the number of people living in poverty by as many as 580 million – or 8 per cent of the world’s population (Sumner et al., 2020). Coincidentally, the crisis created opportunities for ‘disaster capitalists’ to profit from the emergence of new markets and commodities (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020, p. 675). Within Australia, the intensification by the pandemic of existing inequalities

and precarity caused by neoliberal labour market policies was unmistakable. The Bloomberg Billionaires Index reported that the combined wealth of Australia's billionaires rose by 53.4 per cent in the 12 months to December 2020 (Hurst, 2020). Meanwhile, COVID-19 affected Australians differently depending on their profession, income, postcode, age, gender and cultural background, and reinforced the failings of health, economic, industrial relations and other policy settings under the neoliberal framework (van Barneveld et al., 2020). The gendered impact of the pandemic was pronounced. Whereas five of the top six job losses during the early 1990s recession and the GFC occurred in industries dominated by males, the top three Australian industries most impacted by job losses during the first six months of COVID-19 were in those which females comprised a majority of workers (Jericho, 2020). As a high proportion of the frontline essential workforce, Australian women were more at risk of being exposed to and contracting COVID-19 than their male counterparts. Women aged between 20 and 29 years recorded the highest national infection rates during the initial outbreaks of COVID-19 infections (Department of Health, 2020).

For much of Australia's youth, key impacts of COVID-19 included compromised quality of education and the loss of employment and income. As previously documented, young workers comprised almost half of all job losses arising from Australia's first COVID-19 lockdowns (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). Young workers were more likely to be both casual employees and concentrated in sectors heavily impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns and, consequently, excluded from accessing JobKeeper (Cassells & Duncan, 2020). Young and low-paid workers were also more likely to draw down on their superannuation due to experiencing financial distress (Butler, 2020). The long-term consequences of the erosion of one's retirement savings was aggravated by the fact that the average 30-year-old Australian was \$40,000 worse off in 2021 than 10 years earlier, as a result of low wage growth and the decision by LNP governments not to honour the legislated-for superannuation guarantee (Maiden, 2021). While the nation's labour market recovered in the 12 months to May 2021, insecure work emerged as the employment practice favoured by employers. Of all new jobs created during this period, over half were casual positions that did not offer basic employment protections and entitlements, and almost 60 per cent were part-time jobs (Stanford, 2021).

The implications of these adverse impacts and working conditions on young people were revealed in a study of the mental wellbeing of the general population. This study found Australians aged 18 to 24 years experienced the greatest deterioration in mental health as a result of COVID-19 (Rossell et al., 2021). The economic disadvantaging of young people was not an ‘unprecedented’ outlier caused by the pandemic. Rather, it reflected a ‘decades-long’ precedent of government policy economically disadvantaging young people to ‘fend for themselves’, and it normalised ‘precariousness’ (O’Keeffe et al., 2022, pp. 4, 13). Another study which examined the disruption caused by COVID-19 to young people’s education and employment trajectories concluded that ‘what appeared to be new economic challenges were, in fact, pre-existing social issues magnified by the pandemic’ (Walsh et al., 2021b, p. 3).

The inability of neoliberalism to summon an adequate response to the effects of COVID-19 was laid bare during Victoria’s second-wave outbreak in July and August 2020. This was when the pandemic intersected with the precarious employment arrangements intrinsic to two frontline sectors: security services and aged care. The outbreak of COVID-19 community transmissions – which led to over 800 deaths and triggered protracted lockdowns (Sakkal & Fowler, 2020) – was attributed to shortcomings in the state’s hotel quarantine program and compounded by the hiring of low-paid, contract security guards who were inadequately resourced, supervised and trained in infection control (O’Keeffe et al., 2022). Risks were exacerbated by the propensity of private aged care operators to employ a highly casualised workforce and the way such arrangements compelled staff to work across multiple sites to earn a living wage. These health vulnerabilities associated with precarious employment did not prompt a re-evaluation of practices that promoted insecure employment practices by those controlling the policy levers at the national level. To the contrary, more than a year after the first recorded COVID-19 fatality in Australia, amendments to the Fair Work Act paved the way for employers to use casual employment in any role they desired. Doing so swelled the numbers of workers in non-standard, insecure employment who were unable to stay home when ill, or to care for sick dependants, due to the absence of paid leave entitlements (Stanford, 2021). Scant consideration was also given to the mitigation of COVID-19 infections to the unemployed or jobactive staff during the spread of the highly infectious Omicron variant in early 2022. Although state government jurisdictions including Victoria continued to advise non-essential

workers to work from home if able, welfare recipients, including those with chronic illness and the immunocompromised, were required to attend face-to-face mutual obligation appointments or risk being sanctioned under the federal government's Targeted Compliance Framework (Henriques-Gomes, 2022).

4.14 Conclusion

Chapters 3 and 4 have synthesised and contextualised existing research, policy, debates and critiques as these relate to the overarching research question concerning long-term unemployed young people and Workfare. The literature review commenced by recognising that young people are a socially constructed and controlled identity category that – depending on the historical and political context at a particular time – are represented in various and often contradictory ways as a means to deny their citizen rights and maintain dominant power structures. Chapter 3 then explored how intersectional youth identities are produced by multiple discourses used to depict them. Recurring among these characterisations are deficit narratives of young people as a risk population predisposed to problem behaviours and therefore needing to be managed. The chapter examined young people in the context of insecure employment and precarity, their deferred transition from adolescence to adulthood, and how the shifting of economic risk from the state onto the individual emphasised ongoing self-investment in higher education as a means-end to labour-market participation. The research question was further contextualised by identifying barriers distinctive to young people, including those of migrant backgrounds, living in the western suburbs of Melbourne, and examining how these barriers were experienced as structural violence.

Chapter 4 reviewed the literature relating to neoliberal ideology and discursive Workfare practices. While these critiques addressed the broader context of how long-term unemployment was problematised and responsibilised, key themes examining WfD from a human rights perspective, and the criminalisation and othering of welfare recipients, overlapped with and further emphasised ways young people are subjected to everyday forms of social control. Such discursive practices extended to the way Australian Government's COVID-19 interventions were applied during pandemic lockdowns. Exclusion from these interventions further marginalised young people –

and particularly those who participated in this study due to their geographical and sociocultural disadvantage. That this exclusion occurred during a time of social, economic, political and environmental crisis, which allowed for the neoliberal characterisation of unemployment as an individual failing to be contested, led to the identification of a knowledge gap in the literature which informed the overarching research question. That is, whether young people who experienced long-term unemployment while living in Melbourne's west during COVID-19 lockdowns were ever 'in it together' with more advantaged segments of society, as espoused by Prime Minister Morrison.

The following chapter will explain the conceptual lens which informs the research problem through the framework of Foucauldian governmentality theory. This examination of the exercise of power to control long-term unemployed young people and young people engaged in insecure work will also utilise Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's belief in just-world (BJW) theory.

CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

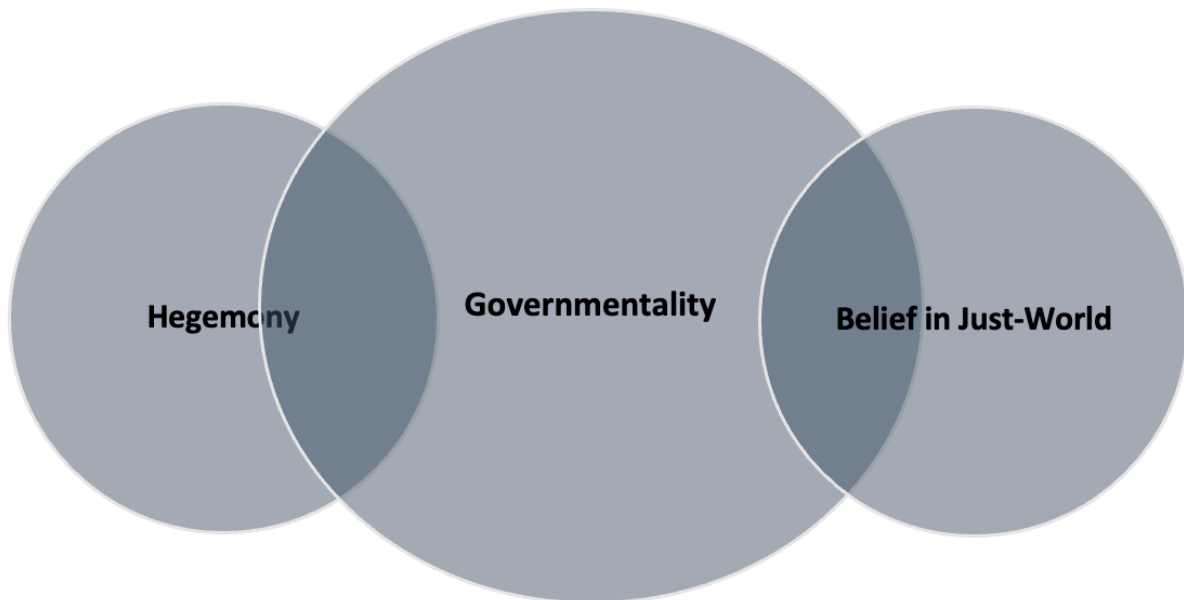
5.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework which served as the ‘blueprint’ (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12) to both inform and structure all aspects of the research. This framework outlines and describes the theory used to ascribe meaning to, and critically analyse how, eight young people from Melbourne’s west, each of whom had been subjected to mandated Workfare, described their experience of long-term unemployment during Victoria’s COVID-19 lockdowns. The framework located the research within the wider context of unequal power relations generated and maintained by the neoliberal state. The framework was underpinned by Foucault’s governmentality theory, which is a compatible conceptual lens through which to explore the how and why components of the research problem. To further strengthen understanding of, and add nuance to, the phenomenon studied, relevant elements of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Lerner’s belief in just-world (BJW) theory – to further the critical analysis of how power is exercised – were incorporated into the overall theoretical framework. A synopsis of each of these theories and their key concepts are provided.

Gramsci’s conceptualisation of hegemonic power, as ‘political leadership based on the consent of the led ... secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class’ (Bates, 1975, p. 352), serves as an important precursor to Foucault’s theory of governmentality. Critical to this contextualising of a Foucauldian analysis of how power is exercised through cultural, ideological and psychological mechanisms is Gramsci’s writings on the structural impediments which inhibited people from critically interpreting their objective world. This false consciousness is a result of an inability to engage critically with one’s world to identify the true causation of their exploitation (Gramsci, 1971) and allowed for the normalisation of injustices (Dick & Nadin, 2011; Freire, 1998; Furnham, 2003). Linkages to a Foucauldian analysis of power relations are further provided by Lerner’s BJW theory as a form of false consciousness. BJW was formulated as a proposition to explain how people falsely develop a general justice motive to rationalise negative life events so that people ‘get what they deserve’ (Lerner, 1980, p. 11). By framing a world view where ‘good things

happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people' (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, p. 1528), BJW accounts for how injustice is explained away by blaming the victim – that is, unemployed young people are deserving of their social situation.

Figure 5.1: The theoretical framework which underpinned the research



5.2 Governmentality theory

French philosopher Michel Foucault (15 October 1926 – 25 June 1984) introduced the concept of governmentality in his 1977–78 lectures *Security, Territory and Population*, and further elaborated on governmentality in his *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978–79) lectures (Oksala, 2013). In exploring the development of the modern administrative state, Foucault conceived governmentality as the study of 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2008, p. 186). Governmentality speaks to the way people regulate and control their 'own behaviour and attempt to control the behaviour' of others in 'given situations' (Warburton & Smith, 2003, p. 773). The purpose of governmentality is to 'manage and optimise the productivity of [the] population' (Boland & Griffin, 2015, p. 33). Analysis of governmentality is therefore concerned with the techniques and procedures involved in 'directing human behaviour' towards 'human capital formation' (Foucault, 2009, as cited in Fraser, 2018, p. 441) and establishing the market – via

the dominance of neoliberalism – as the ‘organising principle of society’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 30).

Governmentality is not confined to the state sphere. It exists as an omnipresent phenomenon which intervenes in ‘all procedures, inventions, calculations, tactics and institutions’ (Doherty, 2007, p. 195) to direct conduct that best serves what the state perceives as its own interest. Foucault recognised that in modernity, all aspects of the social, including the family, the school and the workplace, are sites where governmentality occurs and transforms everyday practices into an extension of economic policy. According to Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics*:

We are seeing the economic policies of all the developed countries, but also their social policies, as well as their cultural and educational policies, being orientated in terms of creating human capital ... Neoliberalism involves generalising the economic form throughout the social body and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges.

(Foucault, 2008, p. 243)

5.2.1 Mediation of discourse

How neoliberalism is ‘realised and constituted within mundane and immediate practices of life’ (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 88) can be understood by observing governmentality as the dimensions of political rationalities and governing technologies. Political rationalities as frameworks of meaning are historically produced in connection with specific discursive practices and their related governable objects, and act as apparatuses to create malleable realities (Cotoi, 2011). It is the effects of discursive practices or ‘discourses’, not whether they are scientifically true or otherwise, which are critical to the formation of governmental rationalities (Watson, 2000, p. 70) that are universally taken as self-evident. In determining which people and institutions exercise power to define what is established as knowledge, ‘the place of the expert is key’ (Watson, 2000, p. 70). For Foucault, it is the mediation of discourse that allows ‘power relations’ to be ‘established, maintained, extended, resisted or mobilised into action, or given material form’ (Doherty, 2007, p. 195). Governmentality can similarly be viewed as the governing technologies or tactics which continually

define what 'should or should not be a part of the state's domain' (Foucault, 2008, pp. 108–109).

5.2.2 Power relations

To fully appreciate the indirect techniques of governmentality for leading and controlling individuals, it is necessary to become familiar with Foucault's conceptualisation of power. Essential to this insight was an acknowledgment 'that any analysis of power had to engage with the way power relationships constituted the subjects involved in them' (Thomas, 2016, p. 6). Far from being an entity that is possessed, power is exercised, and is a strategy that is fluid in its formulation, operating via a capillary network of multiple small nodes to constitute all social relations (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011). Foucault conceived power as a 'multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their organisation' (Foucault, 2007, p. 194). Those who ordinarily might be considered powerless also help to create power relations through their thinking and actions (Kopecký, 2011).

Foucault rejected depictions of power's effects in negative terms: 'that power 'excludes', 'represses', 'censors', 'abstracts', 'masks', or 'conceals' (Foucault, 2000, p. 195). 'Power is not about something done to people over which they have no control' (Watson, 2000, p. 67). Writing in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault defined power in productive terms due to the presence of power relations in all encounters:

In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and ritual truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belongs to this production.

(Foucault, 2000, p. 195)

A Foucauldian account of power relations is always an account of resistance: 'If there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all' (Foucault, 1997, p. 292). Whereas resistance might ordinarily be associated with a 'collective exercise of public political activity' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85), Foucault's interest was on the local and immediate nature of resistance (Hamann, 2009) and of

‘subjectivity as a site’ of this ‘struggle’ (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85). As power is diffusive, ‘resistance to power must then be diffused across social systems and incorporated into the everyday’ (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 5). Consequently, this ‘micro-physics’ of power implies that there are ‘innumerable points of confrontation and instability and numerous possibilities for tactics and strategies of resistance’ (Watson, 2000, p. 68).

Foucault identified late 18th-century Europe as marking a decisive point when sovereign power was surpassed by power characterised by the emergence of ‘a new range of techniques, strategies, subtle forms of control and surveillance’ (Watson, 2000, p. 68). He argued that throughout the history of sovereignty, the sovereign had the privilege of acting directly over ‘vassals’, decided upon life and death, and had a ‘divine right’ to declare war and sacrifice lives (Guizzo & de Lima, 2015, p. 196). The objective of the sovereign and sovereign power was the maintenance of territory. By contrast, under power’s new paradigm, the target of this power, and of most interest to the state, are populations (Walters, 2012). To understand how deductive and violent sovereign power was replaced as the predominant form of power (Oksala, 2013), it is instructive to revisit Foucault’s critical analysis of power relations. Here, specific attention turns to his explications of what he respectively termed ‘disciplinary power’ and ‘bio-power’, and how these configured the power–knowledge nexus.

In illuminating how the new form of power signalled ‘the transition from the disciplinary society’ to modernity’s ‘society of control’ (Hofmeyr, 2011, p. 34), Foucault drew on the metaphor of the Panopticon, as devised by 18th-century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The Panopticon was represented as an annular building with a central tower allowing supervisors – themselves unseen by the surveilled – ‘to efficiently and effectively exert permanent surveillance and examination in prisons, hospitals, schools and factories’ (Sargiacomo, 2009, p. 275). The proliferation in modern society of Panopticon-like systems confirmed that disciplinary power was much more effective when it acted ‘surreptitiously and through small details involving space, time and normalising evaluations’ (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011, p. 131). Punishment, as dispensed by the sovereign through overt forms of violence and control (Sargiacomo, 2009), gave way to the Panopticon as a ‘procedure of subordination of bodies and forces that must increase the utility of power’, while

dispensing with the need for a central authority, like the monarch (Foucault, 1975, p. 208). It is the ubiquitousness of possible observation which leads the subject to internalise the relations of power and be complicit in their own control through self-discipline (Schulzke, 2015).

5.2.3 *Bio-power*

Although the two forms are complementary, bio-power differs from disciplinary power insofar as power as a multiplicity of relations cannot be reduced to a single discipline (Kissová, 2021). Whereas the 'disciplinary power exerted over people in schools, prisons, hospitals and factories' involves 'anatomic techniques focused on individuals and the individual body, biological interventions treat humans as part of a population' that must be managed (Peeters, 2017, p. 52). Bio-power, as recognised by Foucault (2007), was 'the set of mechanisms of power through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy; a general strategy of power' (Foucault, 2007, p. 1). The era of bio-power was made possible by the new technology of government that constituted the body 'as the site for the production, transmission and legitimation of knowledge' (Watson, 2000, p. 68). Through an explosion of diverse techniques to statistically monitor populations, 'power is transformed into bio-power that is exerted over all life itself throughout its unfolding in the species body' (Hofmeyr, 2011, p. 33). 'A body is docile (that) may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). Among the scientific and continuous bio-political techniques deployed to create docile bodies and control populations are those that 'coordinate medical care, normalise behaviour, rationalise mechanisms of insurance and rethink urban planning' (Oksala, 2013, p. 321). By 'utilising administrative and managerial procedures legitimised as expert knowledge' (Oksala, 2013, p. 322), bio-power is more permeating but less overt than punitive disciplinary power in regulating populations.

5.2.4 *Management of freedom*

Technologies of governmentality create an illusion that neoliberalism is not the practice of governing governing (Cotoi, 2011). This rationality is based on the presumption of the existence of freedom, and of how freedom is manipulated as an instrument of power over 'those whose conduct is the target of that governance' (Walters, 2012, p. 12). Governmentality is the management of freedom which

emphasises voluntary obedience over coercion and having ‘people act’ in specific, productive ways (Peeters, 2017, p. 52). Freedom is only practiced under certain conditions which the subject does not control (Kopecký, 2011). It is therefore ‘the social production of freedom and the management of the conditions in which one can be free’ (Foucault, 2008, pp. 63–64) through which neoliberalism is sustained. In structuring the ‘possible field of action of others’ by producing a subject as ‘a subject, as well as an object’ (Foucault, 2003, pp. 195, 217) freedom, as conceptualised by Foucault, acted as an invisible form of governing. With freedom and power not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent (Kopecký, 2011), the paradox of the free market is its dependence on interventionist governmental policy based on market economy principles.

In comprising both choice and force, governmentality – described as ‘government through freedom’ (Rose, 1999, p. 74) – is inherently ambiguous. Freedom implies subjects have autonomy to determine the course of their existence and life path (Baumgarten & Ulrich, 2012). Yet freedom is accompanied by an expectation that neoliberal citizens must follow the rules of competitive conduct. Neoliberal discourses and techniques disguise as an exercise of freedom the imposition of market discipline. Freedom, as a prerequisite for competition, can only be attained if one is enterprising, active and responsible (Joseph, 2013). A consequence of this conceptualisation of freedom is that the onus for personal success or failure is solely on the subject who has the freedom to choose and act, and unrelated to the ‘wider social, economic and political contexts in which that individual is embedded’ (Thomas, 2016, p. 5). It is this responsibilised, socialised citizen who, because of their freedom, conducts themselves in accordance with the state’s interests (Doherty, 2007).

5.2.5 Security

The ‘management and production of freedom is made possible by practices of security’ (Walters, 2012, p. 31), which Foucault termed a specific mode of governing. Security is the exercise of power over a territory, individual bodies and an entire population. It is the ‘techniques of security’ that allow ‘freedom of circulation’ and ‘create mechanisms of self-regulation that make people act responsibly of their own accord’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 49). Apparatuses of security built into people’s everyday lives include ‘surveillance in the public domain, designing policies that ensure high levels of

economic productivity and the implication of non-state experts and other actors (i.e. psychologists, planners, social workers, entrepreneurs) to manage social life' (Peeters, 2017, p. 52). Foucault envisaged a society dominated by security concerns and governmental measures to plan for future uncertainties and threats. In managing populations, 'technologies of security deal in probabilities, risks and variations, rather than absolutes and finalities' (Walters, 2012, p. 35). These calculations ensue in spaces of security, which are 'a series of possible events, temporal and uncertain, which must be inserted within a given space' (Kissová, 2021, p. 148). For Foucault, the construction of spaces of security:

is simply a matter of maximising the positive elements, for which one provides the best possible circulation (of capital, goods, and people), and of minimising what is risky and inconvenient, like theft and disease, while knowing that they will not be completely suppressed.

(Foucault, 2007, p. 19)

Income support can be viewed as a space where security is practised through Workfare framed around narratives of idleness, delinquency and crime. Kissová (2021) noted the asymmetrical power relations between actors who construct these discourses, and those who become subjects of them, and provide 'political calculation for restrictive measures towards groups that must be regulated' (p. 8) such as the unemployed. In considering the conditions through which security practices emerge, have evolved and get dismantled, it is recognised that 'technologies can be available before a new technique of power is deployed' (McKinlay & Pezet, 2016, p. 60). For example, 'statistics and forecasts were established before there was a concern with demographics or public health to modify any given phenomenon or to modify a given individual' (McKinlay and Pezet, 2016, p. 60).

5.2.6 *The market as 'regime of truth'*

As 'a rationality for governing', neoliberalism 'created new forms of human conduct shaped by the market' (Fraser, 2018, p. 440). Foucault predicted that the 'market' would become the 'organising principle of society' (Fraser, 2018, p. 441). The market was to act as an effective mechanism for regulating the extent, purpose and reach of government, and creating a new 'regime of truth for governing' human beings

(Foucault, 2008, p. 30). Within this rationality, the individual is reconfigured as *homo economicus*, or economic man: 'a free and autonomous "atom" of self-interest who is fully responsible for navigating the social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculation to the express exclusion of all other values and interests' (Hamman, 2009, p. 38). Governing the conduct of economic subjects occurs through their subjectification, as the social domain is encoded as an economic domain. Hofmeyr (2011) explained that the rational and narrowly interested economic man applies market criteria and cost-benefit calculations to all decisions pertaining to their professional and personal lives.

Homo economicus materialised through the neoliberalist method of governing, which produces individualising discourses targeted at individuals and constructs them as wholly responsible for their positions (Vesterberg, 2015). Among the discursive strategies mobilised by neoliberalism is the rationality of risk, which operates to individualise risk and identity and attach it to personal characteristics. This rationality recasts the social contract by supplanting the idea that the capitalist state has a responsibility to protect those in society who are victims of the market (Henman, 2004). The shared vocabulary referred to by Cotoi (2011), and which characterises the discursive fields through which governmentality works, is reflected in the language of public policy emphasising 'that individuals, communities and the private sector take responsibility for their welfare and economic and social well-being' (Joseph, 2013, p. 44). The foresight of Foucault was discerned by his expectation of the state's welfare institutions becoming critical sites of governmentality under neoliberalism, and of how social policy and professions would be fused with economic policy. As remarked on by Vesterberg (2015), Foucault envisaged the utility of civil-society bodies as agents governing populations because they are not perceived as being associated with state authorities. An example is discourse which positions lifelong learning as more an implicit commitment from civil society than that of the state (Field, 2000). It is as much through these indirect techniques that the individual is reconfigured as *homo economicus*, whom the state leads and controls but is not considered responsible for (Hofmeyr, 2011).

5.2.7 *Individualising discourses*

Intrinsic to individualising discourses is the concept of governance as self-governance, and the requirement to identify with self-optimisation (Kopecký, 2011). The neoliberal state approves of the citizen who is responsabilised and socialised and possessing of a 'particular mentality ... that is actualised in habits, perceptions and subjectivity' (Read, 2009, p. 34). Governmentality can consequently be described 'as much about what subjects do to themselves as what is done to them' (Doherty, 2007, p. 197). In efforts to optimise the labour market, workforce participants are shaped by governmentality rationalities which frame the jobseeker as competitive and self-directed (Boland, 2021), and constantly offering their skills (Boland & Griffin, 2015). The phenomena of individuals regulating their own behaviour to adapt to increasingly precarious employment conditions is surfaced through the neoliberal 'discourses of the entrepreneurial self, employability and self-responsibilisation', as investigated by the Sofritti et al. (2020, p. 1054) study, which used a theoretical framework of Foucauldian governmentality to examine how subjects' work experiences were shaped. These discourses produce certain subjects who must continuously work on themselves in order to 'meet the needs and demands of post-industrial knowledge economies' (Vesterberg, 2015, p. 3).

Boland and Griffin (2015) extrapolated how the self within the 'system' comes to internalise the 'system' of governmental power (Boland & Griffin, 2015, p. 34). By embodying the concepts of employability and lifelong learning as belonging to the dominant discourse, individuals conduct themselves as jobseekers. They are obliged to navigate a labour market that is 'less the intersection of supply and demand matching skills to opportunities', and more 'a personal trial of self-transformation' (Boland, 2021, p. 7). As the welfare state retreats, according to Foucault, all judgements and practices are market-laden, in order for individuals 'to amass sufficient quantities of human capital and thereby become entrepreneurs of themselves' (Hamann, 2009, p. 38). Such entrepreneurial citizenship is predicated on 'communities "learning" the entrepreneurial skills required for self-government' (Fraser, 2018, p. 444). Those who do not thrive under such social conditions are posited as having only themselves to blame. Within the context of the labour market, self-governing rationalities problematise unemployment as being incompatible with the constructed 'normality' of the neoliberal social order (Kissová, 2021, p. 148). In failing

to acknowledge the impacts of macroeconomic factors, individualising discourses champion the meritocratic ideal that unemployment is a result of personal deficits and failings (Kampen et al., 2013; Sofritti et al., 2020).

5.2.8 *Citizenship identities*

As the neoliberal state's response to the problem of unemployment, Workfare seeks to rehabilitate those reliant on income support by directing them to behave in a 'socially desirable' way (Kissová, 2021, p. 151). It reinforces a narrative of those 'deserving' of state support and those 'undeserving' (Watson, 2000, p. 74). This binary describes how the unemployed are 'othered' as fundamentally flawed (Dencker-Larsen & Lundberg, 2016, p. 1), and befitting the subject of targeted surveillance and 'obligatory and enforceable' (Braithwaite et al., 2002, p. 233) paternalistic state interventions. Through a moralising, social pathology discourse, the citizenship identities of the unemployed are weakened (Warburton & Smith, 2003), as witnessed through their portrayals as, for example, dole-bludging 'parasites' (Archer, 2009, p. 177).

Governing those who are regarded as either unwilling or incapable of accepting responsibility for their unemployment is facilitated by the rationality of risk. This rationality views a 'client population as readily divisible into many subpopulations, through a grid of personal characteristics' (Henman, 2004, p. 178). Risk rationality is predictive by simulating 'characters of possible future transgressors of possible future transgressions' (Henman, 2004, p. 179). Under this paradigm of pre-emptive targeting based not on absolutes but on mathematical calculations, responsibilisation is extended beyond the transfer of tasks from the state to social actors. Herein is implied 'the construction of responsibility where it does not exist yet' (Peeters, 2017, p. 51).

5.2.9 *Veridiction*

Building on Foucault's statement on the efficacy of civil society to govern populations, Bessant (2000a, 2000b) identified WfD as a tool of the Australian Government to manage risks popularism associates with youth unemployment. WfD derives legitimacy from the association of volunteerism with good, active citizenship, and for addressing a young person's diminished sense of responsibility and obligation. Workfare activities help to frame policy debate which considers communities better suited than the state for addressing social problems (Warburton & Smith, 2003). Yet

how can sense be made of the absence of any resistance of consequence to governmental processes that enable neoliberal labour market rationalities to remain unchallenged? Foucault located the answer in the shift away from a governmental jurisdiction oriented towards justice to one where the market was the regime of truth (Cotoi, 2011). The 'truth' of the market established that the wage one commanded represented the true indicator of one's value (Boland, 2021, p. 14). In this way, the market acts as a mode of 'veridiction' (Foucault, 2008, p. 35). That is, the market is a 'natural mechanism through which the practice of governing' (Cotoi, 2011, pp. 112–113) is disseminated as truth, though not necessarily objective truth, and the validity of government practices are verified. Foucault stated:

the market ... is becoming what I will call a site of veridiction. The market must tell the truth; it must tell the truth in relation to governmental practice. Henceforth, and merely secondarily, it is its role of veridiction that will command, dictate, and prescribe the jurisdictional mechanisms, or absence of such mechanisms, on which (the market) must be articulated.

(Foucault, 2008, p. 35)

The ideal of neoliberalism as a limitless, single truth that could not be contested by alternate forms of governance was famously advanced by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who claimed there is 'no alternative' (Hamann, 2009, p. 54). The remark was made at a press conference for American correspondents in June 1980, at a time when neoliberalism was being embedded into the economic apparatus of western states and discourse emerged which prevailed upon the citizen that their obligation to society was greater than the state's duty to them (Eardley et al., 2000). In capturing neoliberalism's pervasiveness in eroding the collective, Harvey (2005) wrote: 'All forms of social solidarity (collectivism) were to be dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values' (Harvey, 2005, p. 23).

5.2.10 Resistance suppressed

The all-encompassing force of neoliberal rationality is revealed in not just how the state is absolved of responsibility to fulfil a social contract but in also suppressing resistance to the neoliberal approach by depoliticising the population. Brown (2005)

cited as ‘unprecedented’ the degree of ‘passivity and political complacency’ of the model neoliberal citizen ‘who strategises for her or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organise these options’ (Brown, 2005, p. 43). She concluded that the body politic as a body had ceased to exist and was now comprised of ‘a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers’ (Brown, 2005, p. 43). With regard to welfare policy, Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen (2014) observed that the reduction of benefits and requirement to constantly job-seek limited the resources of those without jobs to organise politically. These resources were further diminished by moralising discourses which ignored the structural causes of inequality, unemployment and poverty while imposing punitive judgements and Workfare practices. As Boland and Griffin (2015) noted, governmentality may be negotiated and resisted, but as recipients of income support are subjected to more intense and frequent governmentality and the associated negative psychological consequences, they are increasingly coerced to assume the subjectivity of the jobseeker.

5.3 Theory of hegemony

Half a century before Foucault’s seminal works on the displacement of sovereign power by the techniques and rationalities of governmentality, Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (22 January 1891 – 27 April 1937) had analogously asserted that hegemony, not overt domination, was the primary form of power in the modern world (Schulzke, 2015). Not unlike Foucault, Gramsci conceptualised power as residing ‘in the complex relations of force within society’ (Daldal, 2014, p. 150). As the dominant mode of power, cultural hegemony manifested itself through the broad acceptance and perpetuation by subordinate groups of ruling class ideology and the existing social order. In an earlier contribution to the *Prison Notebooks*, a series of essays written between 1929 and 1935, Gramsci characterised hegemony as:

the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 12)

An essential premise of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is that in modern liberal society, people are led by ideas as much as force. Through the coexistence of consent and force, in which one or the other predominates depending on whether the times are 'normal', 'hegemony and dictatorship are mutually dependent phenomena' (Bates, 1975, pp. 363, 354). In adhering to Marxist orthodoxy that power in the economic sphere was mostly exerted by the dominant bourgeois class, Gramsci insisted that a binary relation of power was ever-present. That there are always rulers and ruled was a 'primordial and irreducible fact' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 144) of the first element of politics. In this way, hegemony as a notion of power can be recognised as 'political leadership based on the consent of the led' and 'secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class' (Bates, 1975, p. 352).

5.3.1 *Civil society*

Where Gramsci's theory departed from classical Marxism was in his formulation of a more flexible approach to the superstructure in relation to the economic base. He accomplished this by narrowing 'the economic base to include only the material and technical instruments of production', and by broadening the 'superstructure to include political society, civil society and the state' (Lears, 1985, p. 570). The superstructure of the modern state is not simply an apparatus operating within the public sphere but also part of civil society (DiMaggio, 2015) – that is, schools, civic associations and religious groups. Power is constituted and functions via 'the established cultural elements of the political society and the civil society' (Pyykkönen, 2010, pp. 29–30), through which a social-cultural unity or 'collective will' is established (Ives, 2005, p. 458). Civil society emerges as the site of hegemony, with the state presenting itself beyond the political society as representative of the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities by which power is attained and maintained. As the 'marketplace of ideas', it is within civil society where the intellectuals act to shape social and political consciousness to extend the world view of the rulers and secure the 'free' consent of the masses (Bates, 1975, p. 353). Only when the intellectuals fail in these aims and hegemony is threatened does political society revert to the use of discipline through state apparatuses (Pyykkönen, 2010) such as the courts, police and military. That these powers are rarely asserted, except in times of crisis, is testament to the tacit acceptance by subjects of the legitimacy of the state, and of the covert power of hegemony (Schulzke, 2015).

5.3.2 War of position

Winning consensus in the marketplace of ideas was a practice Gramsci termed 'a war of position' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 234). In contrast to the use of force in the form of a frontal assault, or 'war of manoeuvre', a war of position is 'the whole organisational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the rear of the army in the field' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 234). In being carefully planned and considered, a war of position is 'concentrated, difficult, and requires exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 239). With regard to the ongoing, organic war of position waged by the neoliberal project, while it is mostly a mediated discursive war, it is one with real material consequences. It is a war primarily dedicated to 'controlling and defining the parameters of what is considered to be sane and rational, what common sense really looks like, and crucially, what falls outside of these parameters' (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 21). Whereas Foucault would not countenance that governmentality could be prevailed over, Gramsci's hegemony theory acknowledged the possibility for resistance and counter-hegemony (depending on specific circumstances at a particular historic moment), by the assemblage of combinations of groups that cannot be anticipated (Robinson, 2005). Gramsci's ambition for hegemony, through a position of war in civil society, was in itself counter-hegemonic, as its aim was to disable capitalist hegemony and cultivate conditions where a consensual society emerged (Buttigieg, 1995). More recently, Gürcan and Bakiner (2015) identified an 'emerging consensus' of 'progressive forces' (p. 131) aligning to address socio-economic, political and cultural inequality, by instituting decision-making which posed a counter-hegemonic challenge to neoliberalism. However, the prospect of counter-hegemony requires an ability to first analyse hegemonic practices and be aware of alternatives to those practices, in order to comprehend precisely what needs to be resisted (Bieler & Morton, 2016). For Lears (1985), the production of counter-hegemony depended on where hegemonic societies were placed on a continuum from 'closed' to 'open' (Lears, 1985, p. 573). Where a closed version exists, subordinate groups 'lack the language necessary even to conceive concerted resistance; in the open version, the capability for resistance flourishes and may lead to the creation of counterhegemonic alternatives' (Lears, 1985, p. 574).

5.3.3 Historic bloc

The primacy of a hegemonic world view is contingent on the attendance of an historic bloc. The bloc ‘refers to the way in which leading social forces within a specific national context establish a relationship over contending social forces’ (Bieler & Morton, 2016, p. 90). More evolved than a political union comprised of different class interests, an historic bloc functions as an integration of various class interests ‘propagated throughout society, bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity on a “universal” plane’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 180–182). This view of cultural and economic solidarity is again a part repudiation of the Marxist preoccupation with class, as hegemony is concerned with social formations that transcend ‘categories of ownership and non-ownership and that are bound by religious or other ideological ties, as well as those of economic interest’ (Lears, 1985), p. 571). Achieving cultural hegemony requires historic bloc leaders to develop an ideological and economic world view that appeals to and is perceived to serve the interests of a wide range of societal groups (Lears, 1985). In illustrating how hegemony – through both the construction of an historic block and establishment of social cohesion – can transcend the state, Bieler and Morton (2016) cited as an example the proliferation of Fordist assembly plant production globally during Gramsci’s latter years.

5.3.4 The modern ‘prince’

Gramsci modernised Machiavelli’s figurative protagonist in *The Prince* to explain the workings of hegemony in generating universalistic and general political principles. Unlike Machiavelli’s prince, Gramsci’s modern prince is not a concrete person in possession of divine-like powers. As stated by Kalyvas (2000) ‘the political, social and cultural environment of modernity does not permit the creation of a new state out of the force and domination that an individual can exercise over the entire social field’ (p. 359). Rather, Gramsci’s reimagined prince is a productive, collective subject that is unified in structure and objectives. The prince as ‘political party’ represents a single economic class and manifests the interests of this class, although it is composed of several distinct parts (Schulzke, 2015, p. 65). The prince functions to formulate a national popular will that is organised and expressed concurrently, and to realise intellectual and moral reforms (Gramsci, 1980, p. 133). This will can only be formulated

and guided as the autonomous basis of political action when it is the will of the political party, or the 'collective will' (Daldal, 2014, p. 155).

5.3.5 *Language*

The expression of the collective will as ruling-class norms, through the available vocabulary, have penetrated all strata to become the accepted norms of a society (Pyykkönen, 2010). In making the connection between language and hegemony, Gramsci identified language as the means by which civil society constructs subjectivity (Smith, 2010). The prominence Gramsci afforded to the power of everyday language to create 'historically and socially universal truths' of the world (Gramsci, 1971, p. 348) reads as a precursor to Foucault's emphasis on the role of discursive practices to underpin and sustain governmentality. For Gramsci, contained in language is a specific world conception, a 'spontaneous philosophy ... which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 323). The process of language is based on metaphor, through which people create their own symbolic universes. This spontaneous philosophy makes life 'understandable and tolerable', as symbolic universes assume what is seemingly an 'objective validity' (Lears, 1985, p. 573). The spontaneous philosophy that everyone has and uses constitutes them as philosophers (Ives, 2005). Once hegemonic, a symbolic universe will 'serve the interests of some groups better than others, and subordinate groups may even 'participate in maintaining a symbolic universe' that exerts domination over them (Lears, 1985, p. 573).

5.3.6 *Common versus good sense*

Central to Gramsci's conception of language in producing a hegemonic world view is the distinction he made between 'common sense (conventional wisdom) and good sense (empirical knowledge)' (Lears, 1985, p. 570). Common sense, according to Gramsci, was the 'incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any society', whereas good sense referred to the 'philosophy of criticism and the superseding of religion and common sense' (Gramsci, 1980, pp. 323, 326). Common sense is what informs the world view of those who non-reflexively perceive their environment. It is a vital resource for people to make sense of themselves and their place in the world, and to inform their everyday practices and behaviours (Augoustinos, 1999; Smith, 2010). Conversely, the attainment of the more advanced

thought of good sense was only possible, Gramsci argued, through coherent and critical thinking (Daldal, 2014). The realisation of good sense is entirely dependent upon the ability to engage critically with one's social world. Gramsci understood that irrespective of the level of knowledge a person possessed, structural impediments existed which inhibited people from critically interpreting their objective world.

5.3.7 *False consciousness*

A consciousness based on external schemas and concepts of the world instituted by the hegemonic world view leads one to operate with false consciousness. As a defective way of thinking, false consciousness is more than just the consequence of being deceived. If one is unable to understand or challenge the premises put to them, their ability to think and act rationally is impaired. Gramsci attributed the failure of the working class to revolt, in spite of their consciousness of being exploited by capitalism, to a consciousness that was false because they couldn't analyse the true causation of their exploitation (Gramsci, 1971). The essential role performed by civil society in establishing and maintaining hegemony is evidenced by class or group conflict being implicitly denied by institutions such as schools and mass media, which present a narrative of 'competitive strivers within a benevolent nation-state' (Lears, 1985, p. 577). Thus, the reality of actual experience is obscured. In a contemporary context, the false consciousness of neoliberal capitalism was exhibited in Chatterjee's 2012 study of female workers in India's informal economy. Her research – conceptualised through a Gramscian lens – concluded that false consciousness was established by workers being incapable of identifying the means of their exploitation, and by assumptions that their exploitation and living conditions could be alleviated through bargaining and reformist tactics. Similarly, a majority of US citizens are accused by DiMaggio (2015) of false consciousness due to their inability to acknowledge growing inequality. This false consciousness of ignorance of an economic divide was ascribed to America's individualistic culture, 'in which the failures of the poor are rationalised as "deserved" due to their alleged lack of work ethic or commitment to personal sacrifice in the pursuit of prosperity' (DiMaggio, 2015, p. 502). Lears (1985) acknowledged the various forms false consciousness can take but posited each as being essentially opposed to critical cognition.

False consciousness can be observed when ‘the oppressed engage in self-hate and deprecation, when people come to view existing social relations as natural and inevitable and when stereotypes’ (Augoustinos, 1999, p. 302) – for example, dole bludgers (Archer, 2009) and sole parents (Holdsworth, 2017) – conceal ‘the real relations of dominance and exploitation within a society’ (Augoustinos, 1999, p. 302). Jost (1995) documented a body of social psychological research that demonstrated how many disadvantaged and oppressed groups hold ‘false beliefs’ that are not only contrary to their own self and group interests but rationalise and legitimate their own subaltern status (Jost, 1995, p. 1). His research proposed the presence of six categories of false consciousness: ‘(1) failure to perceive injustice and disadvantage; (2) fatalism; (3) justification of social roles; (4) false attribution of blame; (5) identification with the oppressor; and (6) resistance to change’ (Jost, 1995, p. 401). In the context of his research involving marginalised and oppressed young people, I was drawn to Jost’s category of failure to perceive injustice and disadvantage in relation to Lerner’s BJW theory.

5.4 Belief in just-world theory

Just-world theory, also referred to as belief in a just world, is summarised as the construal of a world in which people ‘get what they deserve’ (Lerner, 1980, p. 11) and a world where ‘good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people’ (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, p. 1528). The theory was formulated by Melvin J. Lerner (1965) as a proposition to explain how people develop a general justice motive to rationalise negative life events (Hafer & Begue, 2005). Lerner acknowledged the abundant evidence that ‘people recognise the myriad instances in which innocent people suffer’ (Lerner, 1998, p. 249) and that malfeasance goes unchecked. Yet ultimately, he found people’s need to defend BJW highly compelling as a critical adaptive function to enable them to view the world as ‘stable and orderly’ (Lerner & Miller, 1978, p. 1030). In the absence of BJW, it is maintained that individuals would struggle ‘to commit to the pursuit of long-term goals, or even to the socially regulated behaviour of day-to-day life’ (Lerner & Miller, 1978, pp. 1030–1031). For Lerner, BJW endured as a ‘fundamental delusion; fundamental in the notion that it is essential for most people’s sense of security and sanity, and delusional to the extent that it was a set of factually false beliefs that were motivationally defended’ (Lerner,

1998, p. 267). It is this fundamental delusion Lerner speaks of which acts as a psychological buffer against the world's harsh realities and provides a consciousness that one has personal control over their destiny (Furnham, 2003).

A key assertion of BJW theory is that people, having organised their lives around principles of deservingness and a personal contract (Hafer & Begue, 2005), adopt a number of strategies when this belief is threatened. The more strongly a person believes in a just world, and the greater the contradiction to this belief that is posed by an injustice, the higher the motivation to reduce the threat (White et al., 2012). The effects of BJW, wrote Lerner, are maintained and expressed in two forms: 'One involves consciously held conventional rules of morality and rational social judgements, while the second is characterised by preconscious processes with primitive rules of blaming and automatic emotional consequences' (Lerner, 1998, p. 247). Responses when threatened by ambiguous evidence of a just world manifest in behaviours ranging from 'helping or compensating the victim to psychological justification of the victim's fate' (Hafer & Begue, 2005, p. 129). According to BJW theory, the provision of support in the face of a just-world threat is enhanced when the opportunity to assist and redress an injustice is available. Lerner and Simmons (1966) established as much in their groundbreaking study of observers' reactions to an innocent victim's suffering. The researchers were able to show that when presented with a victim who suffered, observers compensated the victim if they believed they could effectively do so. In such situations people appeared to recognise unfairness and responded with compassion (Hafer & Begue, 2005). However, when presented with the same victim who was expected to continue to suffer, observers depicted the victim's character in negative terms. Lerner and Simmons (1966) correlated the derogation of the victim to a concern with justice and, specifically, the need of people to eliminate injustice. It is this cognitive bias which lessens personal feelings of vulnerability and perception of risk, as people preserve the belief they have done nothing to warrant negative outcomes (Furnham, 2003).

5.4.1 Threats to BJW

Within BJW literature exists a multitude of studies which present ways innocent victims threaten BJW. Examples include an investigation into the attribution of fault to a rape victim which provided partial support to the predication BJW affected explanations for

sexual assault (Furnham & Boston, 1996). Likewise, victim blaming forms a consistent thread through research concerning negative attitudes towards homosexuals and AIDS infection. This theme was illuminated in a study which associated the belief that AIDS was deserved for those who engaged in 'unnatural and unhealthy sexual behaviour' (Glennon & Joseph, 1993, p. 584) with stronger BJW and lower self-esteem among Northern Irish college students. Research examining BJW and attitudes to poverty identified a 'Pro Just World' factor allied with 'blame-the-poor' beliefs, which in turn, were closely linked to blame of 'Third World' governments (Harper et al., 1990, p. 235). The inverse of this belief was found when the data were reanalysed, with more low BJW respondents agreeing with the premise that Third World poverty was the product of 'exploitation, war and world economic systems' (Harper & Manasse, 1992, p. 783).

5.4.2 *BJW positive illusion*

By providing instruments for people to interpret their world as meaningful, the 'positive illusion' of BJW can be associated with positive mental health (Dalbert, 1999, p. 80). Consider, for instance, the effects of unemployment on psychological wellbeing. In a study of unemployed female East German blue-collar workers, the more subjects believed in a just world, the more likely they were to attribute their unemployment to their own behaviour, and the lower the probability they ruminated over the 'why me' question, where depression was positively related to those who engaged in unanswered 'why me' rumination (Dalbert, 1997, p. 175). The utility of BJW to enable one to identify their unemployment as being partly self-inflicted was similarly found to provide individuals with a conceptual framework in which justice can be rediscovered and feelings of agency over future life events enhanced (Hafer & Correy, 1999). This adaptive relationship between mental health and personal BJW was also endorsed by research involving adolescent Slovaks. For long-term unemployed adolescents in this study, personal BJW was shown to serve as a protective mechanism for mental health – namely, 'life satisfaction, positive affect and self-esteem' (Džuka & Dalbert, 2002, p. 2).

5.4.3 *Injustice normalised*

Intrinsic to the rationalising of blame is the false consciousness of self-blame as a mechanism to neutralise anger or anxiety caused by events incongruous to one's

BJW. A typical technique to remove or mitigate the element of injustice from a suffering or loss encountered is the normalisation of an event (Lerner, 1998) as articulated in colloquialisms such as 'It is what it is!' The 'downward comparison', through which people experiencing negative affect enhance their subjective wellbeing 'by comparing their fates with people "worse off" than them, is another common BJW coping strategy (Wills, 1981, p. 245). Adherence to religious beliefs is a particularly recognised way in which individuals neutralise the personal impact of injustices. That good people are often the victims of injustice can be rationalised through the belief in an afterlife which rewards the virtuous and punishes the wicked (Lerner, 1998). Indeed, cross-country differences in views towards causes of poverty and income redistribution have been ascribed to an economic class of religious beliefs, principally those traced to the Protestant ethic and the Calvinist notion of predestination (Weber & Kalberg, 2013, p. xi). With salvation contingent upon effort and industriousness during one's lifetime, the religious, hardworking individual is characterised as one demanding fewer taxes so as to avoid the redistribution of income to those regarded as less hardworking and of low moral standing (Bénabou & Tirole, 2005).

5.4.4 *Personal versus general BJW*

To understand responses to injustices and how these are perceived in one's direct social environment, it is necessary to note the significance of the variance between a general and more personal BJW. This is because individuals have been shown to 'endorse more strongly the belief in a personal just world compared to a general just world' (Dalbert, 1999, p. 81). In investigating the impact of self-construal levels on people's tendency to blame innocent victims for their fates, van Prooijen and van den Bos (2009) substantiated the hypothesis that 'when threats to just-world beliefs were high, social self-activation produced more victim blaming than individual self-activation did' (Prooijen and van den Bos (2009, p. 1528). This effect was not found when just-world threats were low. Results further showed that in the context of a just-world threat, an interdependent self-construal measure was positively related to victim blaming but an independent self-construal measure was not (van Prooijen and van den Bos, 2009). The differences in responses to injustices were shown to be the result of distinctions between the independent self versus the social or interdependent self. The individual self is the part of the self-concept that emphasises an individual's 'uniqueness', whereas the social self is the part of the self-concept that stresses 'similarities' with

others (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, p. 1529). An assimilative, social self mindset is inclined to increase the commitment one feels towards others, who are psychologically experienced as an extension of that self (Gardner et al., 2002). A consequence of social self-construal is 'that people are increasingly attentive to injustices that they observe happened to similar others' (Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, p. 1529). The observation that similar others are exposed to uncontrollable harm can likely be 'indirectly experienced' as an existential threat toward the self (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, p. 1529). Moreover, the threat to BJW posed by an innocent victim is increased if the victim is an in-group rather than an out-group member (Hafer, 2000).

5.4.5 *BJW as an ideology*

In accordance with the primacy afforded to the discursive fields through which governmentality operates, and the use by civil society of language to create a hegemonic world view, some theorists have claimed that just-world theory can be understood as an ideology rather than a belief. This perspective argues that displays of beliefs or attitudes are recast as ideological positions when they are intended to perform actions within specific contexts. Billig (1997) contended that ideology comprised ways of thinking and behaving within a given society which appeared 'natural' to and unquestioned by its members and was therefore the 'common sense of the society' (Billig, 1997, p. 48). This assertion draws upon the action-oriented nature of talk, where talk about topics, especially contentious ones (Edwards & Potter, 1992), is always designed to achieve an outcome, such as to justify and support (or oppose) a public policy position (Goodman & Carr, 2017). Through this conceptual framework, BJW is viewed as an ideology 'reproduced as an incomplete set of contrary themes, which continually give rise to discussion, argumentation and dilemmas' (Billig et al., 1988, p. 6).

5.4.6 *Income redistribution*

How BJW accounts for the ways people make sense of inequality is further evidenced in commonly held attitudes towards welfare recipients. Goodman and Carr's 2017 discourse analysis of two feature-length British televised panel discussions focused on benefit claimants. It predictably followed that those panel members who exhibited high BJW sentiment (conservative politicians and populist, right-wing social

commentators) attributed unemployment to the absence of effort on the claimants' behalf. The counterbalance to the attribution of blame to the individual was provided by panellists who prosecuted an unjust-world argument that unemployment was caused by 'external factors' – that is, a lack of jobs (Goodman & Carr, 2017, p. 316). It was Gibson (2009) who had previously centralised the concept of effort to the invocation of BJW into welfare distribution discourse. His research took the form of an interpretative analysis of the deployment of what he termed the 'effortfulness repertoire' (Gibson, 2009, p. 397). He identified this repertoire in the specific context of an internet forum where individuals posted comments on Britain's welfare system. 'Effortfulness' was used 'not only to attribute individual responsibility for unemployment' but to also 'manage the accountability of the posters themselves and to hold the welfare system to account for the extent to which people who do not display "effort" are formally held to account' (Gibson, 2009, p. 398). The analysis by Goodman and Carr (2017) produced novel findings by demonstrating that people drew on both just- and unjust-world arguments simultaneously, and also topicalised what could be considered as just when advancing their positions on welfare recipients. The authors concluded that these findings were inconsistent with what BJW theory would predict, as a just-world argument – which held benefits claimants responsible for their circumstances – was proffered alongside an unjust-world argument, 'where effortful hard workers are presented as unfairly having to support the effortless unemployed people who choose not to work' (Goodman & Carr, 2017, p. 320).

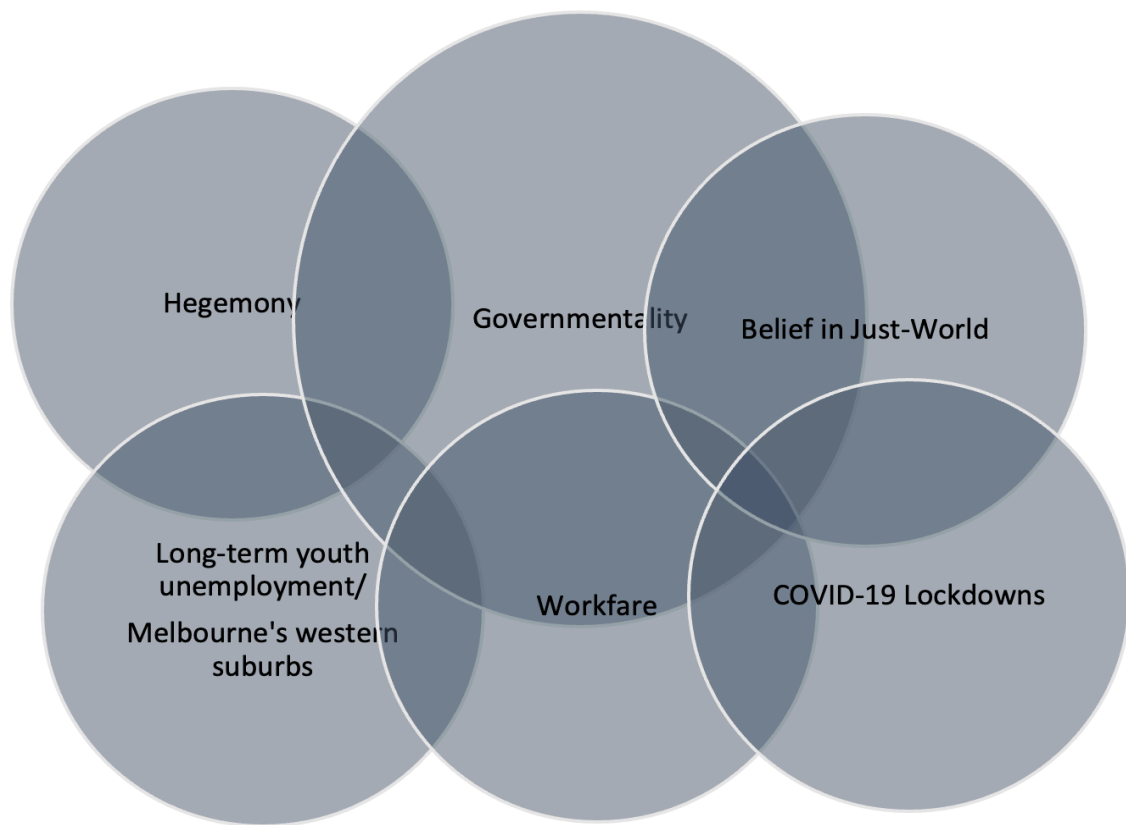


Figure 5.2: The theoretical framework, overlain and intersecting with the research problem, setting and context.

5.5 Reconciling the tensions that exist between the theorists

In combining the works of multiple theorists to develop this thesis' conceptual framework, it is necessary to acknowledge the differences in philosophical underpinnings that exist between the core concepts of Foucault and those of Gramsci and Lerner. Foucault eschewed explanations of power in classed or ideological terms. Instead he drew attention to the decentralised network of government techniques or technologies which had individuals internalise discipline and self-regulate (England, 2019). The theory of hegemony reflected Gramsci's adherence to Marxist precepts that power was mostly wielded by a dominant bourgeois class. Gramsci claimed that by deploying civil society institutions to establish a popular mentality or 'collective will' (Ives, 2005, p. 458), the dominant bourgeois class was able to achieve hegemonic values which were accepted as normal by the subordinate classes. In this conception, 'power, ideology and the philosophy of action (praxis) are inseparable' (Daldal, 2014, p. 150). Likewise, Lerner's contention that people are effectively resigned to their fate

by their just world beliefs infers a similar ideological assumption tied to hegemony; that is, an acceptance of the status quo as a critical adaptive function (Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Other key divergences include how the theorists viewed power in an historical context. Foucault conceived of power as being omnipresent and manifest in the governing techniques of bio-power used to control populations – albeit from a distance – to strengthen the modern state (Oksala, 2013; Sum, 2018). Gramsci, meanwhile, referred to power relations in binary terms (i.e. leaders and the led; rulers and the ruled) and insisted that power operated via mutual interactions of culture, economy and politics to sustain the primacy of capitalism (Daldal, 2014).

To reconcile the tensions between theorists, the conceptual framework has been organised to allow for the theories of governmentality and hegemony to be complementary in the analysis of how power relations are embedded in societal structures, discourses and practices. The relationship between the two theories has been explored from the perspective of the development of neoliberalism. Joseph (2014) observed that ‘if governmentality provides a detailed account of the techniques, then hegemony provides a better account of their strategic deployment’, (p. 8). According to Sum (2018), the Gramscian approach enhances understanding of the ‘why’ question in regard to the way social power is dispersed and exercised, whereas Foucauldian governmentality provides a richer conceptualisation for addressing the ‘how’ question (p.45). Hegemony attends to the function of power and underlying social relations at the macro or institutional level to describe how social and class forces are represented and achieve dominance through the construction of political projects (Joseph, 2014). Alternatively, by focusing on how rationalities of truth inform the actual practices of governance that shape ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 186), Foucault examined the effects of power in the everyday or micro-level (Gunn, 2006). Synthesising the finer detail of governmentality theory with the broader overview offered by Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, and the way these theories intersect and overlap, allows for the research question to be prosecuted with a nuanced appreciation of the multidimensional concept of power relations.

The synergy between Lerner’s just-world theory and Gramscian hegemony is discerned in the way BJW is a form of false consciousness arising from one’s inability

to recognise the actual cause of their exploitation (Gramsci 1971). BJW reinforces the theory of hegemony by legitimising systemic inequality (Goodman & Carr, 2017) through the 'consent of the led' (Bates, 1975, p. 352), aligning with Gramsci's emphasis on ideological domination. At the same time, BJW offers critical insight into the subjective dimension of hegemony, specifically the internalisation of structural power through individual belief. By positing that people deserve their social position, BJW becomes a psychological mechanism through which inequality is rendered tolerable. This highlights how hegemony is not only maintained externally through institutions, but also internally through emotional and cognitive investments. Yet BJW can also be applied to a deepening understanding of power from a Foucauldian perspective as it reflects how disciplinary power is diffused and normalised across populations (Boland and Griffith, 2015), shaping not just what people do, but what they believe and feel to be right and fair.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the theoretical frameworks of Foucault's theory of governmentality, Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's BJW theory. These were applied in combination to highlight how the neoliberal state produces and maintains unequal power relations. This framework provided the foundation from which all knowledge was generated by the research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This chapter examined the key concepts which underpin each of the theoretical frameworks which organised the ontological, epistemological, methodological and analytical assumptions of the study. The application of these frameworks informed understandings of the power relations embedded in social, economic and political contexts, and acted to surface, analyse and conceptualise the experiences of the young people who participated in the research. Having established the 'rationale' (Green, 2014, p. 35) and framing upon which the research was structured in this chapter, Chapter 6 details the methodological approaches employed in the design and implementation of the research, and the justifications for these choices.

CHAPTER 6: METHODOLOGY

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology that was adopted and applied to critically analyse the overarching research question:

How did young people residing in Melbourne's western suburbs, who had participated in mandated Work for the Dole activity, understand their experiences of long-term unemployment during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

This chapter provides an outline of the justifications for the ontological and epistemological assumptions which guided the philosophical approach to the research question. It describes the rationale for the choice of research design, data collection methods and method of data analysis, which informed the research findings. This chapter will further demonstrate that data were generated in ways consistent with accepted qualitative research procedures to ensure the study's validity, and that the methods used were appropriate to address the research question and study's objectives.

6.2 Research paradigm

A paradigm has been described 'as a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). As a set of philosophical assumptions, a paradigm represents a world view 'that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to the world and its parts' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Paradigms provide the belief system through which the researcher views the world and guides their approach to the research problem and how the research should be conducted within the scope of this world view (Davies & Fisher, 2018; Mulisa, 2022). The components of these philosophical assumptions are the nature of reality or truth (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how the researcher knows what they know (epistemology), the role of values and what is valuable to know (axiology) and the strategy used to find what can be known (methodology) (Creswell, 2007).

The research question was explored through the theoretical framework of Foucault's governmentality theory, with elements of Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's BJW theory also used to provide nuance to this framework. Embracing a subjectivist ontological position revealed my researcher standpoint that reality is dependent on individual actors, and that it is these actors who contribute to social phenomena (Wahyuni, 2012). The Foucauldian perspective on knowledge, power and social control fortified the conceptual lens to identify and critically analyse the power relations embedded in the social, economic and political context of young people's experiences of mandated Workfare and unemployment during COVID-19 lockdowns.

By referring to how reality can be understood or knowledge is generated, epistemological assumptions focus on 'the relationship between the knower and the knowledge' (Levers, 2013, p. 3), and reality. While the fundamental question of ontology is 'what', the fundamental question of epistemology is 'how' (Mulisa, 2022, p. 120). When considering the epistemology of their research, researchers must determine how they know what they know by asking:

Is knowledge something which can be acquired on the one hand, or, is it something which has to be personally experienced? What is the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would-be known? What is the relationship between me, as the inquirer, and what is known?

(Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 27)

Ontological issues and epistemological stances tend to emerge together, 'as to talk of the construction of meaning is to talk of the construction of meaningful reality' (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). The answer to the epistemological question 'What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?' is constrained by the answer to the ontological question (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). It is maintained that research is best practised when the relationship between what a researcher believed could be researched (their ontological stance) and how this was linked to what they knew about this reality (their epistemological stance) was clearly set out (Grix, 2004). Just as a researcher's ontological assumptions inform their epistemological assumptions, these assumptions inform their methodology for undertaking the research (Mack, 2010). It is the methodological question, through the

critical analysis of data production techniques, that leads the researcher to ask how the world 'should be studied' (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p. 50). To engage in research, the researcher must therefore commit to ontological and epistemological positions (Scotland, 2012).

Axiology, the remaining philosophical assumption that characterises a paradigm, is concerned with ethics, and encompasses the roles of values in the research and the researcher's standpoint in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Wahyuni, 2012). All researchers bring values to a study, and in qualitative studies they acknowledge the value-laden nature of the study and make known their values and biases (Creswell, 2007). With regard to my interest in this study's research question, I experienced ongoing unemployment for the first time when aged in my 40s and was subjected to mutual obligation requirements I found to be impersonal, demeaning and of no utility. My experience as both a volunteer and in paid employment supporting disadvantaged community members reinforced how structural and systemic inequalities deny many young people experiencing disadvantage the social capital and agency required to participate fully in social and economic life. Undertaking tertiary study at Victoria University (VU) further encouraged an interest in youth advocacy, by informing me of ways neoliberal ideology systemically marginalises and disenfranchises the vulnerable.

To critically examine the power relations embedded in the social, economic and political context of long-term unemployment as experienced by young people from Melbourne's west, the research was situated in the critical paradigm. The study placed central importance on the experiences of the disenfranchised (Romm, 2015). It sought 'to address the political, social and economic issues which lead to social oppression, conflict, and struggle' (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 35). It aimed to understand the forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression and injustice (Denzin, 2017; Mack, 2010) experienced by the young people researched.

The ontological assumption of the critical paradigm is historical realism. This paradigm positions realities as socially constructed and shaped by context, time, cultural changes and language (Frowe, 2001, p. 185). The epistemology of the critical paradigm is 'transactional and subjectivist', insofar as the researcher and the researched are considered to be 'interactively linked with the values of the investigator

'inevitably influencing the inquiry' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). As findings produced through a subjectivist epistemology are value mediated, it is recognised that 'no object can be researched without being affected by the researcher' (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p. 57). Social constructivism insists that the external world cannot be known 'without an individual's ability to construct, reflect and interpret what is already there' (Mulisa, 2022, p. 121). It is assumed that humans enter a world in which meaning already exists, and there is consensus about knowledge already reached (Scotland, 2012). As the 'institutions constituting our publicly available system of intelligibility precede us', we therefore 'come to inhabit this pre-existing system and to be inhabited by it' (Crotty, 1998, p. 53).

Critical paradigm methodology must be dialogic and dialectical to transform ignorance and misapprehensions into informed consciousness. For critical theory researchers, 'knowledge does not accumulate in an absolute sense' but evolves through a 'dialectical process of historical revision that continuously erodes ignorance and misapprehensions and enlarges more informed insights' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). In critical research, interactions between the researcher and participants are paramount because knowledge is understood as co-created. A critical methodology interrogates values and assumptions, draws attention to 'hegemony and injustice', challenges 'conventional social structures' and engages in 'social action' (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). Through dialectic transactions, critical researchers set about affecting change by identifying how research participants perceive the social systems that deprive them of their social, economic and political needs (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

All research is shaped by the values, experiences and knowledge of the investigator. To downplay the role of values in shaping inquiry outcomes ignores the power differentials that exist between researchers and participants. The original (emic) constructions of research participants deserve equal considerations with those of the powerful, including the inquirer as outsider (etic) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To this end, advancing social justice and challenging societal inequalities are central to my values and philosophical positions. Conducting research which resonates with the researcher's belief systems can produce significant insights (Sikes, 2006), particularly when data are produced through a dialectical exchange and the epistemological assumption is social constructivism (Harrison et al., 2017). Equally, I needed to

recognise that personal motivations and preconceptions can compromise research integrity, and that researcher assumptions should not take advantage of the goodwill of research participants (Reid et al., 2018).

6.3 Research approach

A qualitative approach was adopted in alignment with critical theory research, which requires a transactional form of inquiry between the researcher and the researched. In adhering to the position that knowledge is socially and historically constructed, a qualitative methodological approach enabled the research to focus on the meaning young people ascribed to their experiences of long-term unemployment and Workfare, and what this meant within the context of their lives and futures. This emphasis on meaning facilitated an attempt to understand the ‘beliefs, values, and perspectives’ held by the young people being studied, and as they themselves understood these, rather than ‘as conceptualised by the researcher’ (Maxwell & Reybold, 2015, p. 686). The efficacy of qualitative research in allowing for more extensive exploration of meaning and experience was illustrated by a study that investigated how health professionals and those who self-harm made sense of self-harming behaviour (Silcock, 2013). By surfacing what were previously overlooked perspectives, the research questioned the ‘status quo’ of how self-harm was viewed and stigmatised by medical and mental health practitioners (Silcock, 2013, p. 222).

The researcher–participant interactions enabled by qualitative research provide contexts through which to best frame the inquiry’s research question (Mulisa, 2022). The production of these contexts to interrogate the conventional values and narratives associated with young people, long-term unemployment and programs like WfD presented the opportunity for a qualitative approach to contribute new knowledge to the area of inquiry. Providing the young people interviewed with the platform to name their experiences and the realities they inhabited was intended to produce detailed understandings of a cohort which is consistently silenced (Scotland, 2012; Silcock, 2013). In providing the methodology by which answers to questions concerning the construction of social experience can be answered (Denzin, 2017), this approach allied with my axiological commitment as a researcher in aspiring to challenge societal inequalities.

As qualitative research seeks to understand the meanings participants attach to their experiences, and the ways in which these experiences are meaningful to them, it can be beneficial for researchers to have proximity to research participants. Research conducted in the 'field', where participants lived and worked, provided important contexts for what was said by participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 18). In applying the critical paradigm, it is through the 'active participation of a researcher in social phenomena' that reality is socially constructed (Mulisa, 2022, p. 120).

6.4 Research design

A Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was considered the design most appropriate for a study centred on young people as subordinate subjects, and which investigated how their identities and social realities were shaped by the intersection of knowledge and power relations. At its core, FDA examines how power relations are embedded in societal structures, discourses and practices. FDA is concerned with 'the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge and the relationship between such knowledge, the possibilities for social action, and power' (Burr, 2005, p. 119). 'FDA seeks to expose and ultimately resist social inequality' (Quayle & Sonn, 2009, p. 12) by taking a 'critical, progressive and political stance to the truth claims made by discourses, which help maintain oppressive power relations, and to increase the voice of marginalised discourses' (Burr, 2005, p. 119). This focus of FDA aligned with one of the study's research aims, which was to surface the voice of low social status, highly controlled young people who are systemically silenced.

A research design applying FDA to analyse power relations recognises that power is not something that is exercised over people who are powerless (Watson, 2000). As contextualised in the previous chapter, Foucault rejected depictions of the effects of power in negative terms. He conceptualised power as being productive. For Foucault, 'any analysis of power had to consider the way power relationships constituted the subjects involved in them' (Thomas, 2016, p. 6). As a 'multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate' (Foucault, 2007, p. 194), 'power produces reality, domains of objects and ritual truths' (Foucault, 2000, p. 195). As people create power relations through their thinking and actions (Kopecký, 2011), accounts of resistance will always be integral to a FDA of power relations: 'If there

were no possibility of resistance ... there would be no power relations at all' (Foucault, 1997, p. 292).

Willig explained that 'FDA seeks to describe and critique the discursive worlds people inhabit and to explore their implications for subjectivity and experience' (Willig, 2008, p. 96). In the context of this research, a FDA design enabled knowledge to be generated with regard to the positioning of unemployed young people living in a disadvantaged region of Melbourne, and of the actions and experiences that are compatible with these young people's subjectivities. FDA allowed the research to examine how long-term unemployment for young people is constructed and regulated through discourse, and to analyse the role performed by state institutions and policies, such as Workfare and WfD, in maintaining and reproducing power relations.

As introduced in Chapter 5, Foucault conceived political rationalities as frameworks of meaning historically produced in connection with their specific discursive practices or 'discourses' and their relatable governable objects (Cotoi, 2011, p. 111). It is the effects of discourses, not whether they are scientifically true or otherwise, which are critical to the formation of political rationalities (Watson, 2000). For Foucault, it is the mediation of discourse that allows 'power relations' to be 'established, maintained, extended, resisted or mobilised into action, or given material form' (Doherty, 2007, p. 195). As a complex set of practices, discourse allows for the circulation of certain statements and utterances and the exclusion of others (Mills, 2003). A FDA therefore does not reveal true meaning in terms of what is or is not said. Rather, it analyses statements with regard to how these constitute social actions (Khan & MacEachen, 2021).

As a methodology FDA examines how language, text and practices create knowledge and truths and how these are linked to power structures. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse analysis sets out to 'deconstruct' (Parker, 2014, p. 42) or take apart texts to identify how they are configured to present certain images of people and their actions (Burr, 2005). According to Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), any context or setting is suitable for FDA 'as long as it contains a historical sensitivity towards the objects and problems investigated' (p. 115). They added that FDA is conducted on a variety of speech activities and settings, including research interviews which collected data of participant accounts and narratives. In illustrating how FDA

can be applied to research, Arribas-Ayllon's own doctorate was referred to. His study utilised FDA to investigate the problematisation of Australian welfare recipients and the effects of 'contemporary welfare rationalities' on 'practices of self-formation' (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, pp. 117–118).

With its emphasis on the constructed nature of language, FDA positions the researcher as an interpreter of meaning. Consequently, analysis produced by this approach presents one reading or version of the world, as informed by the researcher's own world view (Willig, 2013). Given the 'interaction between participants and the researcher' necessary to 'generate data', the researcher is 'immersed in the field' (Harrison et al., 2017, pp. 8–9). As interpretations are central to the research and therefore contribute to producing or resisting dominant discursive practices, researchers employing a FDA design must reflexively consider their own experiences, preconceptions and social and cultural contexts. They need to acknowledge potential discrepancies between the words of the researched and their interpretation of these (Etherington, 2007).

6.5 Gatekeeper access to participants

YouthNow Inc. is a NFP provider of training and employment services which markets itself as allowing young people 'to access high quality support in their community, and to build life skills to improve their learning and working lives' (YouthNow, 2020a, p. 1). The organisation claims that by being 'imbedded' in Melbourne's west for over two decades, it is able to respond to the unique challenges many of the region's youth encounter (YouthNow, 2020a, p. 1). YouthNow hosted WfD participants through its Sunshine 'BizE Centre', which is located approximately 14 kilometres west of the Melbourne central business district. This activity was available to eligible jobseekers aged up to 30 years. The BizE Centre provided participants with on-the-job training in customer service, reception, call centre work and business administration (YouthNow, 2020b). Participants were supported by YouthNow staff with job searching, job applications and interview preparations. The BizE Centre formed part of the Visy Cares Hub, which consisted of a range of youth services that offered support in education and employment, legal matters, mental health, drug and alcohol counselling, youth leadership and social justice (Brimbank Youth Services, 2020).

As long-term unemployed young people, the interviewees had been referred to YouthNow's BizE Centre program by jobactive providers operating in the western Melbourne LGAs of Brimbank, Maribyrnong, Hobsons Bay, Wyndham and Melton. Under the jobactive system, unemployed Australians who had received income support for a period of 12 months were required to undertake an 'annual activity requirement' for six months each year they remained unemployed. WfD was one of a number of approved activities that unemployed young people could be required to undertake to meet their mutual obligation requirements (DESE, 2021). At any one time, YouthNow hosted up to 17 WfD places in its BizE Centre. A single place could be occupied by multiple participants who transitioned in and out of the BizE Centre over the duration of the six-month activity period. DESE contributed \$1,000 per single place towards the cost of hosting the WfD participant; however, a portion of this amount, negotiated between the WfD host and referring jobactive provider, was retained by the provider as an administrative fee (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations [DEWR], 2022).

6.6 Recruitment and sampling

In qualitative sampling participants are recruited by virtue of the 'richness' of information they can provide (Moser & Korstjens, 2018, p. 11). O'Leary (2004) cited a growing acknowledgment that non-random samples can credibly represent populations due to the applicability of knowledge generated for alternative or broader populations. YouthNow was identified as an accessible gatekeeper to recruit participants using a purposive convenience method of sampling. This method was necessary to select participants for whom there was a shared experience of a 'particular condition, event or situation' (Willig, 2013, p. 91). Young people enrolled in the BizE Centre program all possessed desired characteristics (Carman et al., 2015) with regard to age, length of continuous unemployment, geographic location and type of annual activity requirement performed.

A convenience sample, one that is built by locating convenient or readily available individuals (Ruane, 2015), was required due to barriers anticipated in accessing a WfD cohort with specific relevance to the project's aims and research questions. As previously detailed, WfD studies conducted by researchers independent of the Australian Government have been constrained by difficulties in obtaining relevant

program data (Davidson, 2011; Eardley, 2002; Kellard et al., 2015; Nevile, 2003; Scott & Darlington, 2011). Identifying a setting or scenario which provided access to potential participants capable of generating data required to fully comprehend the phenomenon being studied was therefore essential (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). To the best of my knowledge, YouthNow was the only WfD host located in Melbourne's west which offered a WfD activity specifically targeted at the unemployed youth cohort. Critically, gatekeeper cooperation to access the target cohort was facilitated by the alignment between YouthNow's mission, values and community footprint, and research sponsored by VU, which has a particular focus on community engagement with Melbourne's west (VU, 2022; YouthNow, 2020a).

Due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements, the BizE Centre program was suspended in March 2020. Those identified for recruitment were young people enrolled in the BizE Centre program between September 2019 and March 2020 (when COVID-19 lockdown measures were first introduced to metropolitan Victoria), and also the preceding program block, which ran from February to August 2019. After referring to BizE Centre enrolment records, a YouthNow program coordinator emailed an electronic copy of my recruitment flyer to each young person who had been enrolled in these two six-month program blocks. The email was sent to 49 former enrollees on 11 April 2022. The sender received eight non-delivery notifications to indicate that the email wasn't delivered successfully to the recipient.

Titled *Young People's Experiences of Unemployment During COVID-19* (see Appendix C), the one-page flyer asked recipients whether they had been unemployed at any time in the previous 24 months, had participated in the WfD program and lived in Melbourne's west. These questions were followed by a brief outline of the research project, an invitation to be interviewed and instructions on how recipients could register their interest to participate in the research. The covering note of the email sent by YouthNow explained the purpose of the correspondence, detailed the aims of the research project and what would be required of participants, and introduced myself as researcher. Recipients of the email were informed that YouthNow was supporting the project by assisting with the recruitment of young people to be interviewed. The email stated that the research was not affiliated with Centrelink, the recipient's jobactive provider or YouthNow, and that being interviewed would not improve a young person's

employment prospects. Recipients were also assured that their contact details or any personal information had not been provided to me. While the second program block concluded prior to the start of the pandemic, it was reasonable to assume that enrollees from this cohort continued to experience unemployment post-March 2020, given multiple studies had established that WfD does not improve employment outcomes (Borland & Tseng, 2004; Casey, 2020; Crisp & Fletcher, 2008; Kellard et al., 2015; Martyn, 2006) and how the contraction of the labour market due to COVID-19 had disproportionately impacted young people (Walsh et al., 2021b).

6.7 Participants

The following profile portraits of the eight young people interviewed provide a snapshot of their key demographic details, educational attainment, labour market experiences and self-descriptions. These appear in the chronological order interviews took place. Pseudonyms have been used.

Lucas

Australian-born Lucas was a 25-year-old male raised in an English-speaking household in Melbourne's north-west. During his tertiary studies Lucas worked in retail as both a casual and permanent part-time employee. After graduating with a Bachelor of Psychology with Honours, Lucas experienced 18 months of continuous unemployment. He returned to live with his parents shortly before the imposition of COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020. A part-time role Lucas had been offered as a census data collector did not eventuate due to these lockdowns. When interviewed in April 2022, Lucas was working in permanent full-time employment as a data analyst with a Victorian Government department.

Ally

Ally lived with her parents and siblings during the COVID-19 lockdowns which had caused her loss of employment. The 26-year-old was born in Melbourne to parents who had emigrated from Vietnam. Proud of her western suburbs heritage and community connections, as a tertiary graduate Ally had been employed in various roles in retail and hospitality and also as a receptionist with a mental health service. As COVID-19 restrictions eased, Ally chose to pursue a career which aligned with her

creative interests. When interviewed in May 2022 Ally was working in the gig economy as a photographer and illustrator and living independently with her partner.

Xavier

Married father of two Xavier, 28, had relocated to Melbourne's west five-and-a-half years earlier to enable his wife to be closer to family. She was the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, and English and Vietnamese were spoken at home. Having left school during Year 10, Xavier's employment had comprised entirely of low-skilled, insecure work. His longest period of continuous employment had been 13 months. Xavier had been working as an unskilled labourer with a construction firm for eight months when the pandemic rendered him jobless. He was not eligible for JobKeeper payments, and lockdowns prevented his wife from earning an income as a beauty therapist. When interviewed in May 2022, Xavier was receiving WorkCover payments following a workplace injury.

Ruby

Like Ally, Ruby identified strongly with her western suburbs community and had established extensive local networks which enhanced her employability. Australian-born, Ruby lived with her Vietnamese-born parents, grandmother and four younger siblings. She was a Bachelor of Design (Architecture) graduate with Honours but withdrew from the sector due to her incompatibility with office environments. Ruby had since worked a variety of casual or fixed-term contract jobs, including as a Vietnamese translator, disability support worker, mental health youth worker and graphic designer. At 27, Ruby had never held permanent, full-time employment. She had previously commenced WfD activity but withdrew and forewent income support for eight months. Ruby was interviewed in June 2022.

Skye

The daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, Australian-born Skye lived alone in Melbourne's inner west. Despite her precarious existence, she could not return home due to cultural differences with family. Skye had left school during Year 10 when her mental health deteriorated, and was later diagnosed with a learning disorder. Skye had worked in retail and hospitality but was subjected to workplace exploitation and wage theft. She had completed a Certificate IV in Youth Work and been employed as

a youth worker but had never advanced beyond short-term or zero-hours contracts. When interviewed in July 2022, 29-year-old Skye was unemployed and receiving income support.

Ashleigh

Ashleigh was born in Australia to parents who had emigrated from Lebanon. She lived in the family home with three of her five siblings. Two of these attended secondary school, while a brother subcontracted to real estate agencies, performing maintenance works on rental properties. Two older siblings – a brother employed as a plumber and a sister who performed home duties – were married and lived independently with their respective spouses and children. In accordance with her family's cultural beliefs, Ashleigh intended to remain at home until married. She had completed work experience at both a major retailer and a pharmacy during secondary school. After completing Year 12, her only paid employment had been as a casual stock filler and cleaner in a deli. Ashleigh had been unemployed for more than two years when interviewed in March 2023.

Caitlin

Caitlin was aged 29 and living with her younger sister, who was employed in the retail sector. She had completed Year 12 and worked in part-time roles in retail and hospitality. For approximately two years she had worked full time in a restaurant until the business closed just before the first COVID-19 lockdowns. Shortly after, Caitlin stopped seeking paid employment to be an unpaid carer for her mother. Caitlin's parents are both now deceased. When interviewed in March 2023, Caitlin was applying for office administration positions.

Cassie

Twenty-year-old Cassie and her younger sister had been raised by their mother and maternal grandmother. Both siblings remained in contact with their father, who resided in a different region of Melbourne. After disengaging from school at the end of Year 11, Cassie enrolled in a childcare course at TAFE, although she ultimately withdrew before completion due to the passing of her 'Nan'. Cassie's interests were gaming, reading and singing. When interviewed in March 2023, she had been working minimal hours as a casual retail assistant in a women's clothing store. Cassie's mother and sister

were also receiving income support. Four days after her interview Cassie relocated interstate to live with her partner.

6.8 Ethical considerations

Recruitment sought to minimise the extent to which YouthNow's endorsement of the project would influence young people's autonomy to provide informed consent to participate in the research. Pre-existing relationships between research participants and others can compromise the voluntary character of participants' decisions (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council & Universities Australia, 2018a). The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* includes government and private service providers (especially when the service is provided to vulnerable communities) as examples of 'where one party has or has had a position of influence or authority over the other' (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2018a, p. 68). Relationships that had existed between YouthNow staff and young people enrolled in the BizE Centre were dependent and unequal, due to the former having exerted authority and power over the latter (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). As WfD activity hosts were responsible for monitoring the compliance and behaviours of those enrolled in their programs, actions taken by YouthNow staff could result in a young person being found in breach of their mutual obligation requirements and subject to sanctions, including the suspension of income support. It was common for former BizE Centre trainees to maintain contact with YouthNow staff. This occurred through informal interactions and also via the use of the BizE Centre facilities to prepare resumes and cover letters and to role-play job interviews. In circumstances where a young person remained in contact with a YouthNow staff member – most notably in relation to the final three participants who were interviewed while still enrolled in WfD – the relationship continued to involve dependency and unequal status.

The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* affirmed that although the influence of being in a dependent or unequal relationship did not necessarily invalidate a person's decision to participate in research, 'particular attention' should be paid 'to the process through which consent is negotiated' (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2018b, p. 68). The declaration included in the covering note of the emailed recruitment flyer that the research was not affiliated with

Centrelink, the recipient's jobactive provider or YouthNow was clearly stated in the *Information to Participants Involved in Research* sheet (see Appendix D). The reader was also advised in plain language that participation in the research was voluntary and that they should not feel obliged to take part. Young people were encouraged to speak with a family member, friend or trusted person before consenting to participate. For recipients of the recruitment flyer who wished to register their interest in being interviewed, the only contact details provided was my student email address. Similarly, the only option available to readers of the *Information to Participants Involved in Research* sheet requiring further research information was to contact me via my email address or mobile phone number, or the email address of Principal Supervisor Baker. Admittedly, recipients of the flyer could not be prevented from contacting a YouthNow staff member with whom they had a trusted relationship to seek guidance on whether to participate in the research. Despite the directive of the YouthNow CEO for staff to be impartial if questioned, it was unrealistic for staff to be perceived by young people as entirely distanced from the research, given the organisation had facilitated the recruitment process. Yet the fact that only 15 per cent of recipients of the recruitment flyer – including three of the five approached while still undertaking mandated Workfare – agreed to participate in the research might reasonably indicate that young people did not feel coerced by their WfD activity host to join the study.

It is commonplace in youth studies to offer an incentive 'to young people in return for their participation in research'. Typical 'strategies include the exchange of cash, a voucher of some kind or entry into a prize draw' (Heath et al., 2012, p. 14). The young people invited to be interviewed for this study were offered a \$30 retail voucher for their participation. It has been claimed that incentives can increase the likelihood of an interviewee to fabricate information to obtain the benefit or motivate participation in an interview which raises topics or themes which elicit distress (Robinson, 2014). Some researchers assert that incentives are generally unnecessary, as prospective research participants are more likely to 'make themselves available' if they believed the study 'is legitimate, will not demand excessive time, will respect their limits on what they choose to disclose, will protect their confidentiality, and will in some way be advantageous to them' (Grochos, 2018, p. 463). Others regard the exchange of a benefit as an appropriate expression of gratitude to participants. In defending making

cash payments to young men involved in her research on masculinities, one researcher wrote:

I strongly believe it is important to recompense the individuals who are prepared to answer what must often seem like intrusive questions from social scientists.

(McDowall, 2001, p. 90)

The incentive offered for participating in my research seemed relatively tokenistic. Yet Heath et al. (2012) noted that to a materially disadvantaged young person, even a small sum could be regarded as questionably persuasive. Despite this, the offer of a \$30 voucher for participation in the research was predicated on the application of 'relational' ethics, where decisions are made case by case when conducting research with vulnerable young people (Daley, 2012, p. 27). Relational ethics draws on the theoretical writings of Noddings (2003), who rejected the notion of specific ethical principles that maintain universality by claiming there was no useful way of applying universality when each human interaction was unique (Daley, 2012). In justifying the provision of a modest gift voucher to interviewees in recognition of their time, and to not take their participation for granted, an anecdote provided by researchers who studied young people's views on consultation resonated with my position. These researchers recalled that when the possibility of a payment was mentioned to focus group participants:

They did not want to seem grasping, and did not feel they should be bribed, but felt that a slight financial incentive might help 'because everyone's always skint.'

(Stafford et al., 2003, p. 366)

6.9 Sample size

Research embracing an idiographic commitment commonly uses smaller, concentrated sample sizes (Noon, 2018), with 'the most important criterion being the availability of enough in-depth data showing the patterns, categories and variety of the phenomenon under study' (Moser & Korstjens, 2018, p. 11). Moreno et al. (2017) recommended a sample comprising fewer than 10 interviews for phenomenological

studies, while Clarke (2010) favoured a sample size capped at 10 interviews for doctoral research. Others believed that interview research underpinned by an idiographic aim was best served by a sample size sufficiently small enough for individual cases to have a 'locatable voice' within the study, but large enough to 'provide scope for developing cross-case generalities', without the researcher being mired in the data (Robinson, 2014, p. 5). Based on these rationales, it was determined that for this project, the number of young people to be interviewed would not exceed 12.

In support of this decision, it was useful to reference existing qualitative research which collected data from semi-structured interviews involving similar sample sizes. For instance, a study which critically explored the role of risk rationality in welfare surveillance practices in Australia drew on semi-structured interviews with 12 Department of Human Services integrity staff. The researcher of this study acknowledged that the small and selective sample prevented 'the making of wide-ranging and emphatic conclusions about welfare policing in Australia' (Wilcock, 2016, p. 117). However, this was not the study's intent. Rather, this particular research sought 'contextualised insights into ... risk-based strategies from the perspective of participants involved in crafting and implementing these strategies' (Wilcock, 2016, p. 117). Likewise, in their study of how younger workers experiencing employment precarity in a specific geographic region of Italy recounted their work trajectories, Sofritti and colleagues (2020) used data obtained from 10 semi-structured interviews to demonstrate that in-depth understanding of phenomena can 'come from the few, rather than the many' (O'Leary, 2004, p. 104).

The recruitment of study participants was significantly impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns. Initially, only five young people responded to my recruitment flyer and agreed to participate in the research. These semi-structured interviews took place between 27 April and 4 July 2022. The flyer was subsequently resent to the same distribution list by a YouthNow staff member but yielded no additional responses. YouthNow's CEO then arranged to have the flyer distributed to its next intake of WfD participants. By this time the organisation had cautiously revised its anticipated resumption date as a WfD activity host to November 2022. However, this date came and went, and correspondence with the CEO ceased shortly thereafter. Then in late

February 2023 I was unexpectedly contacted by the CEO, who informed me that the BizE Centre's WfD activity had resumed. Her offer to distribute the recruitment flyer to new program enrollees was readily accepted. The following week I attended the BizE Centre and addressed five young people to outline the content detailed in the *Information to Participants Involved in Research* sheet and *Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research* and answer any questions the young people had about the research or their potential participation. Subsequently, I was contacted by email by three young people who agreed to be interviewed. Once arrangements had been made, these interviews took place in the second week of March 2023.

6.10 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight young people. Seven were conducted in person and one (at the request of the interviewee) was via online communications platform Zoom. Interviews spanned approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration, were audio-recorded, and consisted of me in the role of interviewer asking open-ended questions to elicit dialogue. The semi-structured interview was deemed the most appropriate data collection tool to capture the meanings young people attached to their experiences of long-term unemployment, precarity and mandated Workfare. Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, in a semi-structured interview the interviewer typically draws on some specific, predetermined questions that function as 'triggers' to encourage respondents to discuss particular aspects of their experiences (Adams, 2015, p. 493), which are then accompanied by 'follow up 'why' or 'how' questions' (Willig, 2013, p. 29). By providing interviewers with the latitude of not having to strictly adhere to a schedule of questions in both topic and order, semi-structured interviews can generate novel insights through the introduction of unanticipated responses from interviewees (Grochos, 2018). It is through this framework, and the flexibility offered by open-ended questioning and probing, that the semi-structured aspect of this data-collection method is constituted (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Semi-structured interviewing has been described as a tool that is non-directive. However, Willig (2013) maintained that it was the researcher who, in ultimately driving the interview, needed to find the right balance between 'maintaining control of the interview' and its direction and 'allowing the interviewee the space to redefine the topic

under investigation' (p. 29). In semi-structured interviews, interviewee responses are directed to specific areas of inquiry, hence the use of research participants with shared common experience (Grochos, 2018). Crucially, this format reduced the degree to which interviewees 'had to express themselves in terms defined by the interviewers and encouraged them to raise issues that were important to them' (Shiner & Newburn, 1997, p. 520).

The effectiveness of the semi-structured interview to gain contextualised insights is dependent upon the rapport established between the interviewer and interviewee (Willig, 2013) and having interviewees feel comfortable enough to speak openly and honestly (Kalof et al., 2008). Prior to the data collection phase, I had supported disadvantaged young people in Melbourne's western and north-western suburbs across the education, criminal justice, residential care and homelessness sectors. These experiences had developed competencies advantageous to the role of interviewer, including active listening and the use of non-verbal cues, trauma-informed care principles, the ability to convey empathy, cultural awareness, duty of care protocols and maintaining professional boundaries. It was still necessary for me to be reacquainted with literature which addressed the vulnerability of young people in the context of ethical research. Young people who have experienced unemployment and voluntarily participate in research are vulnerable by virtue of their disadvantage (Baker & Plows, 2015). Vulnerable status can also be applied to 'any population or group within a society ... if they lack basic rights and freedoms that form an essential part of choosing the basic course of their life' (Zion et al., 2000, p. 615). As identified in Chapter 4, the classification of WfD participants as non-workers excluded them from standard workplace legislation and protections (EERC, 2019), while mandated Workfare, by being coercive and removing individual agency (Levy, 2006), contradicted the concept of volunteerism (UN General Assembly, 2001).

In employing reflective qualitative research, I was cognisant of balancing interactions that were personalised, engaging and empathetic, yet equally, conveyed to the interviewee the purpose of the interview and made clear the different roles of the interviewer and interviewee. The 'often deeply personal nature of the interview' can lead an interviewee to perceive the relationship as being of a deeper substance, and result in their sharing more information than they might have intended (Daley, 2012,

p. 29). While recognising that the young people being interviewed were capable and competent in determining their lives (Fox, 2013), ensuring the integrity by which data were obtained by reaffirming the purpose of the interaction was paramount. A technique I employed to avert the misassumption of a false bond between the interviewer and interviewee was adopted from the practice of a qualitative researcher who wrote of the management of closure with research participants:

I then explained that the research protocol was drawing to a close and that the time was nearing when the story would become independent of its author and exist on its own in the world.

(Martin, 1998, p. 7)

COVID-19 protocols permitting, it was always intended for interviews to be conducted in person. Interviews which take place over the telephone or via visual online platforms undoubtedly economise the researcher's time, and for the interviewee, can be less intrusive or uncomfortable than in-person interviews (Ruane, 2015). When responding to 'sensitive questions face to face', there can be a tendency for respondents to provide 'more socially desirable answers and conventional answers' (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 7). Yet it is only through face-to-face interviews that the interviewer is able to accurately interpret responses by noting whether a question has been properly understood, and to use non-verbal cues, such as nods and smiles, to encourage the interviewee to expand on or clarify their responses (Walliman, 2011). As noted by Grinnell and Unrau (2018), disrupted eye contact, an unexplained smile or frown or a puzzled or blank stare can prompt the interviewer to verify whether a question was properly understood or probe for further explanation and detail.

In the *Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research*, and immediately prior to the commencement of the interviews, participants were required to provide written and verbal consent respectively for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Verbal consent was audio-recorded at the beginning of each semi-structured interview. To confirm their comprehension of the terminology used in the *Consent Form for Participants Involved in Research*, young people were asked to repeat the meanings of key phrases in their own words. Of particular importance was having participants demonstrate their understanding of how they would be de-identified through the use of pseudonyms. To provide a degree of agency in the data collection process, young

people were offered the opportunity to select their own pseudonym. Heath et al. (2012) wrote how anonymity made it easier for a young person to speak openly, although as noted by Ellard-Gray et al. (2015), the use of pseudonyms did not completely overcome the limits placed on confidentiality when conducting face-to-face interactions.

Audio-recording the interviews ensured that the information provided by interviewees was captured accurately and could be transcribed verbatim, and for raw data to be interrogated for researcher bias and secondary analysis by others (Walliman, 2011). I was mindful that the presence of a recording device could have distracted the interviewees or inhibited them from revealing information they would otherwise have disclosed. Yet as Willig (2013) described, most qualitative methods of analysis require material to be transcribed verbatim, and excessive notetaking during an interview can distract both the interviewee and interviewer, by disrupting rapport, eye contact and non-verbal communication.

Interviewing has been described as a 'specific form of social interaction' reliant on the skills and methods that individuals employ in 'everyday life' (Rapley, 2001, pp. 308–309). When conducting the interviews, I relied on probes to seek greater clarity or insight into answers provided by the interviewees, and to explore all areas of relevance to the research question. Techniques employed when probing for responses, as recommended by Grochos (2018), included repeating the question, repeating the answer, indicating understanding and interest through encouragement, pausing and the use of neutral questions or comments. The ability of the interviewer to implement active listening skills to 'hang on' the respondent's every word was an essential interviewing skill, in order to paraphrase mirrored responses in 'a clear, concise and non-evaluative way exactly what the respondent has communicated', to confirm interpretations of what was said and to encourage further dialogue that delved deeper into the topic (Ruane, 2015, p. 196).

I was attentive to ethical considerations integral to research practice when interviewing the young people about sensitive topics, including unemployment and insecure employment, precarity and uncertain futures. According to the Council for International Organisations of Medical Sciences, vulnerable population categories include 'those receiving welfare benefits or social assistance' (Levine et al., 2004, p. 46).

6.11 Data analysis

Data collected from research participants were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-step method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This section provides a description of thematic analysis as an analytic tool of qualitative data and explains why this method was considered most appropriate for the research. It is followed by a breakdown of how each of the six phases of the analysis were undertaken.

6.12 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis functions to identify and analyse 'patterns of meaning' in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). It was selected as the analysis method to make sense of the 'shared meanings and experiences' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57) identified in the study's dataset. Thematic analysis is a form of analysis that illustrates which themes are important in the way 'the phenomenon under study' is described and constitutes 'a form of pattern recognition within the data' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). This is achieved by developing codes to represent the identified themes. These are then applied to raw data as summary markers for later analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The most salient patterns of themes identified from the dataset ultimately provide the overarching findings of a thematic analysis (Joffe, 2012). The efficacy of thematic analysis lies in moving 'beyond counting explicit words or phrases' to 'focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas contained within the data' (Guest et al. (2014, p. 8). Thematic analysis has been described as the embodiment of qualitative research being a 'creative, reflexive and subjective' undertaking, and where researcher subjectivity was considered a resource (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591).

The adoption of thematic analysis for this thesis was based on the suitability of its application to a variety of research disciplines and questions. This analysis tool is particularly useful in illuminating the process of social construction and representation (Joffe, 2012). As a method, as distinct from a methodology, thematic analysis 'is not tied to a certain epistemological or theoretical perspective' (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). It is this flexibility, coupled with the fact 'thematic analysis is the most widely used qualitative analytic method in the social sciences' (Swain, 2018, p. 5), which

appealed to me when deciding upon the methodological framework. Thematic analysis would also accommodate the integration of FDA as a research design, as was required to achieve alignment with this research's theoretical framework. This method of analysis provided the structure to explore the broader concepts of power relations as these applied to the overarching research question. In this way, thematic analysis could serve as an entry point for a deeper analysis using FDA to identify higher-level descriptions and interpretations of how language, text and practices create knowledge and truths, and how these are linked to the operation of power structures.

Fundamental also to this commitment to thematic analysis is the contention that it is 'the first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should learn' due to its foundational core techniques and skills that are used in many other forms of qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 78). There is no 'hard-and-fast answer to the question of what proportion of a dataset needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Nor should a theme have to capture 'the majority experience' for it to be deemed significant, although it must 'capture a salient aspect of the data in a patterned way' (Scharp & Sanders, 2019, p. 117) 'Overarching themes are supported by excerpts from the raw data to ensure that data interpretation remains directly linked to the words of the participants' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). The flexibility of thematic analysis allows for themes to be identified in a number of ways. Yet as I demonstrate in relation to my own analysis later in this section, to maintain the integrity of the analysis, consistency must be applied throughout the process of identifying themes.

The thematic analysis used in this study employed a hybrid approach of top-down, deductive theoretical reasoning and bottom-up, inductive data-driven reasoning. The deductive process drew upon relevant literature as it related to the research question (Willig, 2013). Themes identified deductively enabled me to confirm and build upon existing studies which examined long-term unemployment, Workfare and citizenship identities of young people. Key questions asked during the semi-structured interviews did not act as precursors of themes identified deductively. To do so would have meant that data had been summarised and organised, but not analysed (Swain, 2018). Further, while having approached the data with a set of preconceptions informed by the literature, I was conscious of being alert to the presence of novel or unfamiliar

concepts. It served little purpose to undertake qualitative research that did not inductively draw upon 'naturalistically occurring themes evident in the data itself' (Joffe, 2012, p. 210). By definition, a deductive process, as it is theoretically informed, is highly interpretative. Yet the inductive process I undertook also involved a high degree of interpretation, as data cannot be analysed in an epistemological vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Researchers undertaking thematic analysis must determine the level at which data will be engaged with. Typically, themes are 'identified at a semantic or explicit level, or at a latent or interpretative level' (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). At the semantic level themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data. Here, the researcher 'is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). At the latent level the focus of analysis are the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations identified in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was at this level that I sought to engage with the data, while recognising that the generation of latent meaning would often be dependent upon first identifying manifest or semantic themes (Joffe, 2012).

6.13 The six-step process

The researcher is responsible for making known the processes employed to identify patterns, construct descriptions and develop interpretations to frame the rationale of the analysis (Peel, 2020). This study's analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative and reflective six-step process of (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) generating coding categories; (3) generating themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.

6.13.1 *Becoming familiar with the data*

This process began with transcribing the audio-recorded interviews verbatim using Microsoft Word. This commenced within 24 hours of each interview. The task was labour-intensive, with interviews being between 45 and 60 minutes in duration, and the transcripts denoting each non-verbal form of communication (i.e. pause, sigh, moment of laughter), as well as incomplete, incoherent or grammatically incorrect statements, references using mixed metaphors and inaudible remarks. The production of verbatim transcripts was essential to capture the essence of meanings young

people attached to their experiences of long-term unemployment. Importantly, the process enabled me to immerse myself in and engage with the data from the start of the analysis. Once an interview had been transcribed, the transcription was read against the audio-recording to check for accuracy. Invariably, it was discovered that a word, statement, form of phrasing or non-verbal cue had either been omitted or transcribed incorrectly, and amendments were made accordingly. Familiarity with the data occurred gradually by reading and re-reading the transcripts. As data collection and analysis were undertaken concurrently due to sizeable intervals between interviews, transcripts were revisited after pauses of hours, days, weeks and months. Annotations of initial impressions and observations were made by highlighting in colour particular sections of text of transcripts.

6.13.2 *Generating coding categories*

Each individual interview transcript was coded manually using Microsoft Word. Transcripts were coded line by line for codes to be identified through both inductive and deductive reasoning. Electronic copies of transcripts were reformatted to allow for codes in coloured text to be inserted adjacent to relevant data extracts within the page margins. Predetermined codes were not used. Instead, an open coding method was applied in which codes were constructed and modified throughout the coding process. As a theoretical framework was observed to address the specific research question, preconceptions about codes from a deductive perspective did exist as data were analysed. Consequently, a majority of codes were identified by a top-down theoretical reasoning framed by the relevant literature. An example of a code identified inductively was 'family support'. This code did not relate to any specific questions asked of research participants and was therefore driven by the data, not my theoretic presumptions. Braun and Clarke (2006) made clear that thematic analysis did not occur as a linear progression. In my research, it took multiple coding attempts, across several months of leaving and then returning to transcripts, working on others, and even after moving ahead to the generating themes phase, to develop a coding approach that could be applied reflexively. By the time an interview transcript had been coded a third or fourth time, earlier iterations of coding categories appeared unsophisticated. On reflection, these initial attempts, characterised by a more generic or wide-ranging approach to coding, ultimately underpinned subsequent coding efforts in which data were analysed at a different complexity. What proved most practical for

the generation of higher-level codes was the practice of moving back and forth between the data and the theory, and to overlay the transcripts with the lens of the conceptual framework. Once satisfied that each transcript had been applicably coded, a document containing all the code categories was generated, and accompanied by copies of every data extract from the entire dataset which matched these respective codes.

6.13.3 *Generating themes*

Overlap existed between the coding process and the stage of identifying preliminary themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The search for and generation of initial themes involved the grouping of similar or related codes and their respective data extracts. By examining these codes, I was able to identify those which appeared to contribute to the construction of a theme. For example, several interconnected yet distinct codes described the ways research participants regulated their thoughts, behaviours and attitudes in response to increasingly precarious employment conditions. From these codes an early iteration of a broader theme that specifically addressed the research question was identified. It was titled 'How internalised individualising discourses produced the subjectified jobseeker'. The distinction between themes being identified through thematic analysis, as opposed to these emerging, is crucial to make. Describing themes as 'emerging' or being 'discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis' and ignores 'the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes' (Taylor & Ussher, 2001, p. 4). Other themes initially generated during this stage were 'The family as a site of governmentality' and 'The jobseeker surveilled and controlled'. Codes which couldn't be identified as belonging to a particular theme were arranged under a heading obliquely titled 'leftovers', so they were not imprudently discarded. Codes which fitted this criterion included 'COVID scepticism', 'conspiracy theorist' and 'public housing lockdown failures'. When conducting interviews, through to transcribing them, reading and re-reading transcripts, and the initial coding of these, there existed certain data extracts which did not seem to be of significance to the research question. Yet the Braun and Clarke (2006) instruction to avoid casting aside data that did not seem to fit was sensible. Through repeated re-reading of the transcripts and specific data extracts, cross-referencing with the theoretical framework and literature, and by re-coding, some codes that had once appeared disparate and inconsequential were actually able to

contribute to a narrative which addressed the research question. The codes 'COVID scepticism' and 'conspiracy theorist' eventually came to be understood within a context of how governmentality practices which reinforced neoliberal ideology advocated for individual responsibility against communitarian interests. These codes provided evidence of how internalised individualising discourses produced the 'subjectified jobseeker'. Likewise, the code 'public housing lockdowns failures' came to be identified with an initial theme. This theme, which evolved and was ultimately broadened and renamed during the writing process, concerned the young people's narrowed expectations of the role of the state in regard to their welfare.

6.13.4 *Reviewing themes*

By re-reading all of the collated data extracts for each sub-theme, it was established that some of the preliminary themes identified could not be substantiated as standalone themes. Given a lack of coherence, as well as considerable overlap, themes tentatively titled 'Citizenship identities' and 'Problematising the unemployed' were initially reassigned as sub-themes belonging underneath a theme notionally named 'The jobseeker surveilled and controlled'. Conversely, another initial theme was revised into separate themes when distinct patterns were identified within coding categories. Initially, these coding categories, which described how young peoples' experiences of neoliberal governmentality was manifest in their lowered expectations of the state as custodian, were collated to generate a sub-theme beneath the higher-level, albeit still evolving, theme, 'How internalised individualising discourses produced the subjectified jobseeker'. It was true that these lowered expectations revealed how each of the young people had assumed a neoliberal mentality in habits and perceptions. Therefore, a sub-theme comprised of all relevant coded data extracts might not have been out of place within this framework. However, clear and identifiable distinctions could be made between the aforementioned theme, and that of a separate theme subsequently generated and titled 'The subjectified jobseeker's reduced dependence on the state'. The central tenet of the former theme was how everyday discursive neoliberal practices directed the conduct of the young people interviewed in ways that were not easily detectable. The new theme dealt more directly with the young people's relationship with the state, and how they compensated for the state's limited provision of welfare through a greater reliance on self, as well as families, peer networks and communities.

The second phase of the reviewing themes stage required me to re-read the entire dataset. The purpose was two-fold. The first was to confirm whether themes ‘worked’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91) in relation to individual transcripts, the entire dataset and also the theoretical framework. The second was to seek out any additional data relevant to themes that had not been identified in earlier coding iterations. An instance of a data extract of significant meaning that was discovered via this process concerned a popular culture reference made by a research participant which, through multiple prior readings of the transcript, had been viewed as an incidental, throwaway remark. This remark proved not only relevant to a particular theme, but it also succinctly described a phenomenon that had been the experience of other research participants who were reliant on family support well into adulthood.

6.13.5 *Defining and naming themes*

To identify the story or ‘essence’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92) of what each theme captured, the collated data extracts were coherently organised to provide structure and consistency to the written analysis and accompanying narrative. Fundamental to this process was the arrangement of sub-themes within themes to demonstrate the way these related to the main theme, were interrelated to other sub-themes and provided an order of meaning within the data. This stage also served to reduce overlap between themes through the identification of certain data extracts within themes which, after increased scrutiny, were found to better validate the substance of a different theme. This refinement was necessary as the coding stage identified certain data extracts that produced more than one coding category and therefore could be referenced in support of several themes. A case in point concerned the way young people internalised blame for their unemployment, which again could, and initially did, serve as a sub-theme to the individualising discourses theme. Following a more intensive-level analysis of the young people’s remarks and data extracts, this coding category was recognised as contributing to a broader account of how bio-power had been diffused and exerted over the bodies of the young people being studied. For the purpose of best addressing the overarching research question, this coding category, which represented a reoccurring pattern across the entire dataset, was determined to have greater application to the theme that would ultimately become ‘How Workfare techniques and discourse transformed young people into jobseekers’.

6.13.6 *Producing the report*

Producing the final analysis required me to provide an analytical account of the data as it related to the research question, and in a way which convinced the reader of its 'merit and validity' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). The most compelling data extracts were selected to provide evidence of themes contained within the data and to demonstrate their prevalence across the dataset. Discipline was necessary on occasions when certain data extracts – although meaningful and relatable to a theme's narrative – were not included in the written analysis. This allowed for the production of accounts that were concise and logical, and avoided repetition. I was mindful that my role as researcher extended beyond providing a description or summary of the data. The data had to be conceptualised by analysis that connected it with, and derived significance and context from, the theoretical framework and literature. During the writing stage, data also had to be analysed at a latent level in order to identify and interpret underlying meanings that informed the semantic content of the data. With regard to the literature itself, additional literature continued to be accessed and applied to data during the report-producing stage, to advance understanding of the data as they related to themes and ensure a comprehensive analysis of data produced through inductive reasoning. An example concerned research which attributed opposition to COVID-19 public health measures to the discursive individualising practices of neoliberalism (Aly, 2022; Cardona, 2020; Kampmark, 2020; Richards, 2022; Watson et al., 2020).

6.13.7 *Refining the report*

When producing the analysis, submitting drafts to my supervisors, and receiving feedback in written form and during supervision meetings, it became apparent that themes still required considerable reworking and refinement. It was demonstrated that the four 'themes' I considered to be overarching themes could not be substantiated as standalone themes. My first theme, 'How internalised individualising discourses produced the subjectified jobseeker', and the fourth, 'The jobseeker surveilled and controlled', were shown to contain content that was interrelated, that overlapped and that at times was disjointed. By consolidating these two themes into the single theme titled 'How Workfare techniques and discourse produced the subjectified jobseeker', a more coherent and compelling narrative, pieced together with revised and more

robust sub-themes, was constructed to better reflect young people's experiences. Likewise, it was established that my third theme and its content, 'The family as a site of governmentality', was insufficient to remain an overarching theme. By revisiting data, the literature and the theoretical framework, I came to recognise that 'the family', in the context of my research, represented a sub-theme in accounting for how the jobseeker was constituted and subjectified under the conditions of neoliberalism. This realisation was significant, as Foucault maintained that all aspects of the social, which included the family, were sites where governmentality occurred (Foucault, 2008). Gramsci's hegemony theory is similarly predicated on the function of family as a civil society institution critical to sustaining power relations exerted by the dominant social group (Gramsci, 1971). Consequently, the themes of 'The family as a site of governmentality' and 'The subjectified jobseeker's reduced dependence on the state' were collapsed into the second overarching theme titled 'How civil society reinforced the transformation of young people into jobseekers'. This theme depicted how the realm constituting the social, including schools, civic and social groups, political affiliations, religious orders and indeed families, acted to sustain the dominant ideology in ways arguably more surreptitious and less overt than could be achieved by state apparatuses.

6.14 Conclusion

This chapter summarised how data were obtained, analysed and interpreted to produce the analysis in the following two chapters. It detailed the rationale for situating the research in the critical paradigm, as well as the selection of the research approach and design, data collection methods, including the recruitment process, and choice of analysis. Extensive explanations to justify the use of these were necessary as the methods chosen and implemented not only determine a study's findings but guide how findings are analysed and interpreted. This chapter examined challenges encountered with recruitment, and how ethical considerations were addressed. Results of the analysis of the data are contained across the following two chapters, which attend to the two overarching themes identified in response to the specific research question.

CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS PART 1 – HOW WORKFARE TECHNIQUES AND DISCOURSE TRANSFORMED YOUNG PEOPLE INTO JOBSEEKERS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises the first of two overarching themes identified from detailed analysis of the interviews with young people. By utilising thematic analysis to analyse the patterns of meaning young people attached to their experiences of long-term unemployment, mandated Workfare and the COVID-19 pandemic, a narrative was constructed of how the neoliberal state transformed the young person – whether they be unemployed, precariously employed or engaged in higher education – into the neoliberal jobseeker. Critical to this understanding was the application of Foucauldian governmentality theory to underscore how the neoliberal state produced and maintained unequal power relations to surveil, discipline and control citizens. The techniques of governmentality, as evidenced through accounts provided by young people, ensured that prescribed ways of thinking and behaving were normalised through internalised individualising discourses.

By employing a FDA research design the analysis will also demonstrate that although the young people experienced marginalisation and forms of subordination as a result of their experiences of long-term unemployment, Workfare, sociohistorical disadvantage and the COVID-19 pandemic, in numerous instances they were able to exercise power and agency. Central to any critical analysis of power relations undertaken through a Foucauldian lens is the recognition that wherever power exists there is the possibility for resistance (Foucault, 2007). Conceiving power as operating exclusively as a top-down function ignores the omnipresent tension that exists in power relations at a proximal level (Hamann, 2009) and in the ways resistance is ‘diffused across social systems and incorporated into the everyday’ (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 5).

Therefore, while the findings chapters draw attention to the ways the young people in this research were disciplined and punished, how they were reconfigured according to neoliberal narratives, and contributed to and reproduced dominant discourse, they

were able to resist attempts from above to construct, regulate, control and normalise them. These micro or nascent acts of resistance by the young people represent a recurring thread throughout the findings chapters to present a contrast to prescriptive theories and understandings of the exercise of power.

In this chapter and the one following, nuanced understandings of each of the sub-themes were enhanced by analysis drawing upon Gramsci's theory of hegemony and particularly the phenomenon of 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 323), and also Lerner's BJW theory. These complemented the conceptual framework of governmentality with regard to the exercise and diffusion of power. The theories of hegemony and BJW were also applied to identify how the neoliberal state had citizens be complicit in their own control, and its effectiveness in eroding the collective.

To assist the reader to become familiar with the content which underpinned the two overarching research themes, a snapshot of the sub-themes identified by thematic analysis is provided in two tables which present summaries of the findings. Part 1 of the findings is summarised in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Presentation of results – Theme 1**How Workfare techniques and discourse transformed young people into jobseekers**

Sub-theme	Description
<i>Workfare as bio-power</i>	As a political strategy Workfare produced lasting psychological and physical effects which pervaded all aspects of the young people's lives and compelled them to think and act in accordance with neoliberal ideology.
<i>How Workfare as bio-power punishes and dehumanises</i>	The symbolic violence of Workfare enacted a double suffering upon the unemployed young people by embedding everyday practices which criminalised poverty and problematised the individual.
<i>Unemployed young people reconfigured as jobseekers</i>	Disciplinary and exploitative Workfare techniques contributed to young people acquiring a false consciousness which reoriented them towards accepting undesirable and precarious employment.
<i>Individualising and citizenship discourses internalised</i>	Navigating economic uncertainty required young people to adhere to market conduct, which emphasised competitiveness, self-responsibility and entrepreneurialism.
<i>Resilience, adaptation, transformation and engagement with the narrative</i>	The neoliberal ideal of what constituted a jobseeker had young people mostly accept, but at times question, existing social relations, and enact adaptive behaviours to buffer against the harshness of their world.
<i>Becoming entrepreneurial in their quest for freedom</i>	To build social capital in their quest for the self-realisation of freedom, young people developed the self-governing habits of resourcefulness, building connections and investment in continual improvement.
<i>False attribution of blame</i>	Through indoctrination to individualistic ideology, the young people incorrectly ascribed blame for their misfortune during COVID-19 lockdowns and supported a system of market-laden judgements which failed to support them.
<i>Complicit in their own control</i>	By creating and reproducing power relations, the discursive techniques of neoliberal governmentality had the young people endorse the very Workfare practices which caused them untold material and physical harms.
<i>Challenge to the narrative through shifted discourse</i>	Unemployed young people experienced less stigma due to the context of COVID-19 having exposing millions to economic uncertainty. Yet joblessness continued to be problematically internalised by policies which delineated who deserved income support.
<i>Erosion of the collective</i>	In directing individuals to concentrate their focus on the self, neoliberal governmentality splintered young people and obstructed them from forming in solidarity to challenge the market's 'ritual truth' that perpetuated their oppression.

7.2 Workfare as bio-power

The research reinforced how Workfare techniques of surveillance, discipline and control, through the application of time regularity and punctuality, the imposition of onerous conditions and repetitive tasks and the conflation of welfare with criminality, advanced the neoliberal agenda. Having internalised individualising discourses, young people targeted for restrictive regulation spoke of deep-seated feelings of shame, guilt, self-loathing and anger as consequences of their unemployment and Workfare experiences. The impacts of Workfare as a form of bio-power deployed and exerted over every aspect of one's life (Hofmeyr, 2011) was manifest in young people becoming withdrawn and socially isolated, grieving the loss of identity and self-worth, and caused some to suffer adverse health effects, including sudden weight loss or gain, disrupted sleep and depressive episodes. These accounts coalesced to mirror Foucault's description of modern power relations, and specifically, his conceptualisation of bio-power, which constituted the human body as 'the site for the production, transmission and legitimation of knowledge' (Watson, 2000, p. 68). The recognition of bio-power as a political strategy (Foucault, 2007) which treated humans as part of a population to be managed through a multiplicity of relations (Peeters, 2017) was integral to contextualising the young people's narratives. The efficacy of Workfare techniques and rationalities to regulate and control income support recipients, and which compelled them to think and act according to neoliberal ideology, was evident in all of the young people's testimonies.

Ally recalled a prevailing mindset which made her feel 'somewhat like lesser' as an unemployed person. She equated her value to the 'crappy' \$5 dollars an hour she estimated her JobSeeker payment amounted to and became self-conscious when she ventured into public spaces. Charlesworth (2005) explained that social phobia was a predictable response to unemployment under the conditions of neoliberal governmentality, as the social realm was a constant mediator of one's failure. Lucas, who also engaged in overt self-blame, told of the effects of his unemployment on his psyche.

You ... kind of start doubting yourself and you just get angry. You're not good enough, you're not this, you're not that. You start hating the world,

people. Like, your worth. Like, 'I've studied all this,' like and, 'is something wrong with me?'

Scarring inflicted by long-term unemployment was manifest in the erosion of Cassie's self-esteem and her trepidation of interactions with prospective employers when applying for jobs. 'Scarring' in an unemployment context refers to how a person's prospects of being employed declined the longer they remained out of work (Casey & Lewis, 2020, p. 6). Cassie described the deterioration of her mental health due to the cumulative effects of being continually passed over for jobs.

I'm scared that they're not going to like me. They're not going to accept me. I've been sad. Not as much angry. I've just been a little upset where I've cried a few times about like [pause]. I've wondered why? Like, why can't I get employed?

The way young people were critical of their own culpability for their joblessness demonstrated the surreptitiousness of bio-power in having the individual discipline themselves to become a productive element of the economic order (Peeters, 2017). It revealed that 'modern governmentality is not only the governance and conduct of other people, but also the governance that people practice towards themselves' (Pyykkönen, 2010, p. 31). Ally's recollections of her job search efforts similarly conveyed how the techniques of Workfare, in maintaining the omnipresence of possible observation through small details involving space, time and normalising evaluations (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011), led her to internalise power relations and be complicit in her own control (Schulzke, 2016).

You're trying to apply for jobs but you're not getting call backs and it's just like this back and forth that you're just kind of stuck in your head ... You feel kind of like helpless in a way.

The psychological effects produced by close-up monitoring, time regulation, standardised evaluations and the withholding of agency was a recurring premise of the research. These mechanisms, as routinely applied to jobseekers such as Ashleigh under the guise of mutual obligation, highlighted the efficacy of Workfare in producing a 'certain personhood' (van Dijk, 2010, p. 60) by policing, punishing and disciplining unemployed young people. Ashleigh expressed resentment at her treatment by

jobactive providers who ‘treat me like shit ... like I’m from the streets’. Her internalisation of the contempt she was held in by employment agency workers was telling. It offered insight into how, through the rationality of risk, Workfare assigned responsabilisation for unemployment on possible future transgressions and warranted the pre-emptive targeting of individuals (Henman, 2004). This conflation of unemployment with criminality through Workfare discourse and rationalities was the everyday experience of the jobseeker. Cassie too described a consciousness of being unreasonably judged by Services Australia staff – ‘like there has [sic] been eyes on us’ – which she suspected was a result of her mother also being an income support recipient. The fact that face-to-face reporting requirements were suspended during COVID-19 lockdowns, only to be reinstated after much of the labour market had shifted to flexible working arrangements, further reinforced the classed and moralised assumptions of particular populations which guided welfare surveillance practices (Wilcock, 2016). For Caitlin, the requirement under mutual obligation to attend in-person jobactive provider appointments was not only an unproductive use of time but acted as a reminder of her classification as a welfare risk through the targeted intensive scrutiny she faced. The subsequent question Caitlin posed, by offering insight into the pandemic’s effect on the subjectivities of long-term unemployed young people, reflects a coherent association with the theoretical framework. Her remarks achieve this by surfacing how individuals considered powerless can exert power through resistant discourse or, in other words, the expression of good sense.

That’s what I don’t understand [sic] why they don’t just do a phone call? It’s so much easier, especially since all COVID and that happened. Like, they just want to see you and make sure you’re still there.

The disciplinary techniques of Workfare in mandating adherence to specific behaviours had a physical bearing on Caitlin during job interviews. The interview process itself served as an extension of the scrutiny applied to jobseekers in order for them to establish citizenship credentials and demonstrate their compatibility with flexible labour market arrangements.

I feel like I’m being like put on trial. [laughs] I’m so scared I’m going to say the wrong thing. And it’s like they just want these perfect answers and I’m like, ‘I don’t know.’ I just get really nervous.

Further impacts of the diffusion of bio-power on recipients of income support were revealed by young people's subjective experiences of time when unemployed or engaged in insecure work. These typically related to the loss of routine and agency, delayed timelines to attaining aspirational markers of adulthood, such as independent living, and a deterioration of generic job and social skills due to extended periods spent outside of the workforce. Cassie revealed that she avoided discussing her joblessness with friends, as did Ruby when asked how she made sense of her unemployment: 'Well, I didn't talk about it ... I don't know if I want to go back there.' The avoidance to revisit what for Ruby was a distressing period of young adulthood highlighted the challenge for researchers to bring the reality of 'social suffering' (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 113) to the public domain. Ruby's unwillingness to elaborate on her experiences of unemployment depicted how suffering could be silenced by the dominant discursive practices which were internalised to engender shame, anxiety and a sense of worthlessness in individuals, and isolated them from the world (Frost, 2019). In Ruby's case, this manifested in the subjugation and humiliation she experienced as a result of demeaning and controlling WfD activity. It signposted how individualising discourses which produced the subject as 'object' (Foucault, 2000, p. 217) created further loss and grief by legitimising the detachment of these experiences from the social relations which generated them (Frost & Hoggett, 2008). Suffering that was silenced and acted to suppress critical thought also maintained a false consciousness which preserved the ideological orientations of society's dominant groups (Thompson, 2015). The phenomenon of false consciousness – a fundamental tenet of Gramsci's theory of hegemony – will be introduced and contextualised later in this chapter. This way of thinking provides a valuable lens through which the experiences of young people in this study can be interpreted and critically analysed.

The pervasiveness of bio-power upon those subjected to unequal power relations was apparent in Skye's experience of precarity and trauma. Bio-power, as intellectualised by Foucault as power 'exerted over all life itself throughout its unfolding in the species body' (Hofmeyr, 2011, p. 33), compounded the abjected individual's suffering when the strategies deployed to cope with hurt and loss led to 'destructive consequences for self and others' (Hofmeyr, 2011, p. 33). In this respect, the 'secondary damage' (Frost & Hoggett, 2008, p. 442) produced by Skye's social suffering was instructive. The vigilance she required to budget for rent and utilities and tertiary-education loan

repayments, and to 'meal-prep' to maximise her groceries' outlay, had caused Skye to endure 'constant panic attacks' and rendered her socially isolated. 'I guess it limits my chances of going out,' Skye disclosed when relating her difficulties in maintaining friendships and social connectedness due to her precarious existence.

I kind of lost a lot of friends during that time. Mainly the first time I had ... financial hardship ... they couldn't understand that I wasn't making that money. Like, you don't have money to go out. We can't do things. I need to put things aside. I'm not paying a portion of rent. I'm paying for everything. I have to pay for all the bills.

Dislocation from friendships and relationships, which are critical to movement within both social and institutional spaces, and the achievement of upward mobility, constituted an 'inert violence' (Charlesworth, 2005, p. 300) in which the isolated suffered in relation to how they experienced their own presence. Caitlin, for instance, was alert to the social exclusion she experienced when in the presence of friends and acquaintances who held jobs and discussed work-related matters:

You're like, 'Oh, well. I can't really contribute to that.'

Thus, feelings of shame and its depressive affects were not just consequences of long-term unemployment but factors in and of themselves which further aggravated the plight of the unemployed (Renault, 2010). In neoliberal societies where unequal power relations predominated, social suffering was inflicted upon, or 'done to', certain types of individuals more than others (Frost & Hoggett, 2008, p. 442). Skye's experience as a precarious worker subjected to systemic wage theft and unethical practices were prescient in exposing injustices which enacted social suffering on those deemed to be without power. The asymmetrical power relations between actors whose positions are sustained and strengthened by the discursive practices of neoliberal individualism, and young people like Skye who are diminished by their adverse effects (Kissová, 2021), could possibly be interpreted as a resignation that there was no recourse against such mistreatment. 'It's a game of luck ... you've got to make do,' was Skye's succinct appraisal of her labour market exploitation and precarious existence. In this way, the practices of hegemony – to be examined in greater detail later in this chapter – provide one explanation as to why unjust neoliberal labour

market techniques invariably went unchecked. To resist the dominant ideology, one must first be able to analyse the governmentality or hegemonic practices that sustain this ideology, and also identify alternatives to these practices, in order to comprehend precisely what needs to be resisted (Bieler & Morton, 2016).

However, Skye's reflections did represent a critical consciousness of how power is embedded in societal structures and operates. This was apparent in the way she approached Workfare as a 'game'. Strategising as a tactic to survive the harsh conditions imposed by governmentality is a key tenet of resistance in power relations as conceptualised by Foucault. Skye further enacted agency through an imagined alternate world view by 'calling out dodgy' work practices, even if her actions were met with real-world consequences. A former manager denigrated her 'as one of those hard-to-control workers'; she was denied shifts and did not have her contract renewed after rejecting below award payments. Yet her refusal to accept injustice enabled Skye to maintain her moral code and self-respect and demonstrated how 'critical resistance offers possibilities for an experience of de-subjectification' (Hamann, 2009, p. 58). It also revealed how non-compliance and subversive language could disrupt power structures and the dominant ways of doing and being.

Undeniably, the adverse effects of Workfare as a political strategy which constituted the human body 'as the site for the production, transmission and legitimation of knowledge' (Watson, 2000, p. 68) exacted a considerable physical and psychological toll on the young people in this research. However, despite their low social status and the high degree of control exercised over them by the neoliberal state, like Skye, they were not helpless or uncritical actors. Through their resistance to local-level struggles, the young people's actions revealed how power is 'fragmented and inconsistent' (Raby, 2005, p. 161) as a consequence of the tension that exists between domination and resistance as central elements of power (Foucault, 1978). The young people's reflections interspersed throughout this chapter's subsection demonstrated as much.

The description by Ally of her 'crappy', below poverty JobSeeker payment represented a form of critical resistance, as did Ashleigh's refusal to accept her *déclassement* by jobactive provider staff based on her unemployment status. Anger expressed by Lucas due to his prolonged unemployment were nascent acts of defiance. Cassie's ability to critically analyse her environment through an awareness that she and family members

were subjected to surveillance by Services Australia employees offered a counterpoint to Workfare discourse that associated income support to criminality. Equally, in opting out of WfD activity and then refusing to revisit this distressing episode of her life, Ruby revealed how withdrawal and rejection offered young people powerful forms of action (Beck, 1997) to shun neoliberal discourse and reclaim a sense of agency and dignity.

7.3 How Workfare as bio-power punishes and dehumanises

For Cassie, the causation of barriers to employment could be traced to an education system that reproduced social inequality through practices which undermined the performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Croizet et al., 2017). She had intended to complete secondary schooling but did not progress beyond Year 11. It was the drawing to attention of Cassie's socio-economic deficits by certain teachers, who she maintained were more concerned with the enforcement of dress codes than the enablement of an inclusive learning environment, which occasioned her decision. As Cassie recounted:

So, we'd be working and they'd come up to us. Come up to people who had like rolled up pants or different coloured socks. They had for term 1, I think, or semester 1, you had to wear white socks. Semester 2 you had to wear black socks. It was ridiculous. They're like, 'Oh, we don't have the right uniform on.' When we're working as well. Like they're taking us away from the work to [pause] talk about our uniforms. In front of everyone as well, one of the teachers would take us in front of the class. It'd be like, 'Do you need us to provide you with the correct uniform?' So, they'd get it for us, but I feel like that was very unnecessary in front of the class as well to do that. Because that can be embarrassing for a person, [pause], like students thinking, 'Oh, can't you afford a uniform? Can't you like, get this and that yourself?'

Cassie's marginalisation through the essentialist construct of a neoliberal-informed education, and her consignment to ongoing precarity, reflected the argument by Fine and Ruglis (2009) that in low-income communities, dispossession in one aspect of everyday living traversed to others, including across generations. In disengaging from secondary education, Cassie's actions were typical of self-protection strategies

enacted by disadvantaged students when confronted with damaging typecasts. These actions spoke to the threat of intellectual inadequacy and inferiority when one's group is judged or portrayed according to negative stereotypes (Croizet et al., 2017). The symbolic violence that created the conditions which led to Cassie's disengagement from education remained ubiquitous through her lack of social capital to escape precarity, and the criminalisation of poverty through Workfare (Fine et al., 2016). Cassie's experiences were also consistent with how the mechanisms of symbolic violence sustained social suffering by being disguised and embedded into the practices of the 'everyday' to problematise the individual and ignore broader social determinants (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016, p. 47). As synthesised by Bourdieu (2001), it is this symbolic violence which 'impacts how we think, understand, and thus can act on the world' (pp. 1–2).

Yet Cassie's disagreement with the assertion that she was a disengaged and disruptive student for not complying with officious uniform regulations represented resistance as understood by the way power relations operated according to a FDA. Not unlike the consequences associated with Ruby's choice to withdraw from WfD activity, Cassie's decision to discontinue secondary schooling limited her further education options and employability. Her withdrawal nonetheless reflected opposition to attempts to impose institutional control over her life and have her enact self-discipline. Like Skye, it is the questioning and the refusal to play the game that becomes the core of their resistance.

Especially revealing in this research was the frequency of symbolic violence perpetrated upon young people as jobseekers mandated to perform mutual obligation. Their accounts further reinforced how Workfare, as a form of symbolic violence, framed 'social advantages and disadvantages' as 'understood to be the consequence of one's own choices and dispositions' (Dick & Nadin, 2011, p. 297). The dehumanising aspects of Workfare were surfaced through young peoples' recollections of being belittled and diminished by everyday practices intended to remove their agency and voice (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016). Skye's description of her interactions with Australia's employment services system reflected a failure by jobactive providers to recognise the capabilities of young people or afford them dignity. As she explained:

Like I said, I can read people quite a lot ... I can observe and read people.
[Case workers] ... I think half of them think we're stupid to be honest, and I think that's very insulting. I know when they say something, I know what that line actually means ...

Again, Skye's refusal to accept patronising characterisations made by jobactive provider staff represented pushback against the discursive techniques of neoliberal governmentality which attributed a young person's unemployment with their personal and moral deficits.

Neither were the discursive practices which individualised responsibility for success or failure in the labour market confined to the employment services system. Skye spoke of being betrayed by a psychologist who attributed her inability to secure ongoing employment to negative body self-image. It was a proposition she rejected, but one Skye also associated with the inaction of jobactive consultants to connect her to employment for which she was suitably qualified. Referencing Bourdieu's (2001) conceptualisation of how language, ideas and meanings create reality, Skye's marginalisation provides evidence of how symbolic violence centres and legitimises neoliberal governmentality to exercise and maintain asymmetrical power relations.

The subjectivity of Lucas as a jobseeker was shaped by WfD activity which he considered infantilising. 'Even when you were in, like, activities, it makes you feel like a kid,' Lucas derided. 'It kind of belittles you, the way that it's kind of worded or forced upon you ... like you're five.'

As a Bachelor of Psychology graduate with Honours, it is self-evident that Lucas would interrogate his jobactive provider's motives for referring him to WfD activity consisting exclusively of labouring and cleaning. It also seems incomprehensible that Lucas had to relinquish unpaid work as a volunteer counsellor with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre because this was not an approved annual activity requirement. The determination controverted the philosophical underpinnings of mutual obligation that income support recipients must give back to society. In a seemingly everyday act of resistance, Lucas successfully pushed back against his jobactive provider by insisting he be permitted to enrol in YouthNow's BizE Centre program which, as an approved annual activity requirement, specialised in teaching office administration skills.

Although this activity was preferable to cleaning, Lucas' participation was of no substantive benefit. He did not need to be taught 'how to write resumes'. As a volunteer youth mentor, Lucas had supported other young people to prepare resumes and covering letters for job applications. He found it inconceivable that WfD did not offer work experiences which more closely resembled actual work and aligned participants with activities which matched their competencies and interests. 'Why would you make me work as a cleaner?' Lucas questioned resentfully. 'I mean, it's still work, I understand, but it's nowhere near my field or skillset. So, for me, that was the big issue.'

Lucas' actions in defying his jobactive provider's directive affirmed the Foucauldian assertion that as power is relational, resistance to power can be 'diffused across social systems and incorporated into the everyday' (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 5). Similar questions were posed by Ruby, who was made to sort donated clothes to meet her mutual obligation requirements. Ally likewise could not reconcile how knitting clothing for the homeless would enhance her employability. Her reflections underscored the senselessness young people ascribed to the WfD activities assigned to them.

My friend did the knitting too. He was like 20 years old. It was just a waste for him. It felt like a waste of time. He did like a hat, and the rest of the day he's just on his phone.

Caitlin shared how it was commonplace for her WfD peers to be completely disengaged from activities they had been assigned. As she described: 'Like you go in there. Half of them are just on YouTube.' Ally posed the rhetorical question of how knitting was supposed to lead to meaningful employment. Unequivocally – according to the literature and validated by the experiences of young people who participated in the research – WfD was not intended for this purpose. Rather, according to Strathdee (2013), and as revealed by testimonials of Department of Employment employees (Senate Education and Employment Estimates Committee, 2017), mutual obligation requirements were deliberately designed to be punitive and unpleasant in order for benefits to be harder to access. It was not a coincidence that WfD was experienced as tedious, unproductive and dehumanising by young people such as Ruby. She ultimately chose to opt out of receiving income support because of the onerous

conditions imposed upon her. Ruby claimed these conditions had been 'crippling to my soul'. She elaborated:

Yeah. Um [pause], yeah. I actually um, cut off Centrelink as well. I didn't report because I just, yeah, I um ... I did tell my Mum. I said, 'Sorry, Mum. I can't handle Centrelink anymore.'

The actions of Ally's friend and many of Caitlin's WfD peers, in avoiding mandated Workfare by undertaking the bare minimum required of them (i.e. essentially being physically present at activities but otherwise disengaged), further revealed how nascent or micro acts of resistance reflected Foucault's notion of the 'care of the self' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85) and specific acts of performativity. Ruby's choice to withdraw from WfD in an attempt to retain her dignity likewise demonstrated the possibilities which existed to challenge institutions and normalisations at a proximate level (Watson, 2000), even if such resistance was not without consequences.

Caitlin was under no misapprehension that WfD activity was intentionally configured to be unpleasant and degrading for the participant. She cited her sister's WfD experience at a faith-based charity which accepted donated second-hand goods. Participants, according to Caitlin, went largely unsupervised and were made to stand for hours at a time sorting clothing items. Personal protective equipment was not supplied, and the door to the female toilet did not close. The fact WfD participants were not safeguarded by standard workplace laws reinforced the way neoliberal Workfare policies dispossessed people of legal protections and made basic rights an individual's responsibility rather than the state's (Harvey, 2005). The utility of Workfare to deploy force 'to achieve the end' (Mead, 1997, p. 210) of moving jobseekers off payments was visible in the response of Caitlin's sister to being subjected to demeaning WfD practices. 'She started looking for jobs faster,' explained Caitlin. Her sister found casual employment with a large retailer but remained despondent due to the insecure work arrangements and 'complete mean bitches there'. Ashleigh too understood that the employment services system was oriented for the express purpose 'to get you off the system. Like, you know. Not stay too long.'

Ashleigh had hoped jobactive workers would help her build the aptitude and confidence she sought to make a favourable impression in job interviews. Yet her

interactions with providers tended to produce the opposite effect and led to a realisation that the workers existed more to enforce mutual obligation compliance than to complement job search activity. Ashleigh described the standard exchange that would take place during an appointment with her provider.

Like, we walk in, we say, 'Hi, how are you,' with a nice way and that. They just look, they just tell me like, 'Find this (sic) much jobs (applications) in this much (sic) period.'

7.4 Unemployed young people reconfigured as jobseekers

Through the retelling by young people of their WfD experiences, a portrait emerged of how mandated Workfare was purposefully instituted to reconfigure them to think and act in ways which aligned with neoliberal governmentality. Accounts provided by young people were consistent with the findings of Helman (2021), who investigated how time regularity and punctuality were deployed to discipline the unemployed and prepare them for workplace temporality. Ally detailed her metamorphosis from having an aversion to a 'sterile-like' workplace prior to undertaking WfD to complying with a rigid corporate environment that demanded completion of tasks that had previously been anathema to her.

We were popping in at nine, we learnt to dress, and being at a computer and do [sic] x-amount of jobs. So, we learned a bit about like keeping KPIs ... People were all into their computers ... Um, yeah, so I learnt about the environment. Ah, skills based, about cold calling ... We learnt about having a script. Having, you know, calling x-amount of people, getting pushback.

Workfare activities have been deliberately configured to transform the unemployed by reorienting them towards accepting any job. This practice enabled the labour market to have access to 'a large pool of labour competing for any job, no matter how precarious' (Boland, 2016, p. 336). The efficacy of Workfare practices to produce such outcomes was embodied by the reconstruction of Ruby, who came to abandon her avoidance of nine-to-five employment and take on work that she did not particularly enjoy: 'I've got to do it 'cos you've got to pay the bills [laughs],' Ruby reflected.

Anecdotes such as these demonstrate how Foucauldian governmentality was ‘as much about what subjects do to themselves as what is done to them’ (Doherty, 2007, p. 197).

The ‘particular mentality’ that was actualised in habits, perceptions and subjectivity (Read, 2009, p. 34) was also identifiable in the way Lucas responsabilised his unemployment and adapted his thinking and behaviour to be ‘socially desirable’ (Kissová, 2021, p. 151). In accepting ‘lesser’ work as a jobactive consultant – not because it was ‘a fantastic role’, or that he could not ‘do better in my opinion’ – Lucas’ experience draws attention to the way Workfare discourse compelled the jobseeker to conform to neoliberal labour market rationality.

... but eventually I understood, like, if I’m still unemployed after a strong period, then I’m going to just take whatever. I mean, I’m not happy about it, but I have to. Like, at the end of the day I just want to work. Um, I can’t be too fussy.

As much as Lucas’ comments indicate a resignation to the forces of neoliberal governmentality which compelled him to follow the rules of Workfare, he was hardly a willing participant (i.e. ‘I’m not happy about it’). This admission can be viewed as resistance by his enacting of tactics or strategies (Watson, 2000) to comply as a means of survivance (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Lucas’ cognition still represented how the inherently exploitative nature of Workfare could be misrecognised by the controlled individual who viewed any opportunity ‘to escape constraint or increase their margin for freedom as a conquest or even privilege’ (Dick & Nadin, 2011, p. 297). It revealed an obedience to beliefs that were false and contrary to Lucas’ interests – a false consciousness – that contributed to his disadvantage (Jost, 1995). The group phenomenon of false consciousness as a conception that is ‘submissive and subordinate’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 327) to the power structures of hierarchical social dynamics was a repeated pattern identified across the stories of young people. For instance, Ruby’s transformation into a jobseeking citizen could be construed as complete through her affirmation of the neoliberal notion of employability, and of referencing the stereotype of selective, entitled young workers. Reflecting on her younger, aspirational self, Ruby derided her earlier expectations of

obtaining well-remunerated and personally rewarding employment. It is suggested that this type of self-blame that Ruby engaged in can often be preferable to acknowledging that some events are beyond a person's control (Jost, 1995).

I was picky in the beginning thinking that you know, I had to choose a job that you liked. So, now you know I'm working. Do I like it? Not so much. But I've got to do it 'cos you've got to pay the bills. [laughs] So, I think when you're a younger age, you kind of complain a lot.

The conversion Cassie underwent as jobseeker via the reproduction of power relations was comparable to that of Ruby and Lucas. In seeking a role in which she would 'excel', Cassie resented the 'pushing' by her jobactive provider: 'apply for anything, doesn't matter if you like it or not' was the directive repeatedly issued to her. Cassie wanted to avoid cycling in and out of temporary and insecure jobs, which were essentially the only type presented by her provider. Her preference was supported by research which showed that while coercion could 'stimulate job entry to unsustainable, low-quality, poorly paid jobs', sanctioned jobseekers 'often return to benefits' (Wright et al., 2020, p. 281). Yet under the paternalistic framework of Workfare, in which 'those who would be free must first be bound' (Mead, 1997, p. 23), Cassie was denied the agency to plot her own course to preferred employment. As she explained:

Like, in a household like mine, with the only income being my Mum's Centrelink and mine, we really need the money and it can be cut off if you don't do this. So, I have to do my job searches, I have to do my activities in order to get my Centrelink payments so I can live, basically.

Unable to defy the governmental techniques of Workfare, as a reconfigured jobseeker, Cassie reluctantly set about applying for any available job, including those she knowingly could not undertake if successful. Although aware of her plans to relocate interstate (which she did four days after being interviewed for this research), Cassie's jobactive provider insisted she continue to apply for jobs in Melbourne in order to fulfil her mutual obligations. 'So, my provider's just like, "Apply for anything, everything. Just get your points up." They want points. And I'm like, "This is anxiety-inducing. Stress-inducing." 'Cos I'm worried that I'm wasting the employers' time.'

Cassie's disquiet at being compelled to apply for jobs she had no intention of accepting was well-founded, and reflected a criticism raised by businesses that intransigent mutual obligation requirements caused inconvenience for employers tasked with reviewing and responding to unsuitable applications (Davidson, 2018). Her remarks reflected a pushback against Workfare discourse by articulating the absurdity of mutual obligation requirements. Cassie might not have been aware of her positioning as a participant in the process of resistance (Foucault, 1982). Yet in criticising the instances of power which were experienced closest to her, Cassie's outlook was consistent with how Foucault envisaged resistance which focused on subjectivity rather than 'the mobilisation of grand narratives, or simple normativities' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 94).

7.5 Individualising and citizenship discourses internalised

In depictions of their shifting attitudes to job search approaches, a portrait emerged of the ways individualising discourses were internalised by young people in order to navigate labour market uncertainty and demands for flexibility. This transformation was contingent on the internalisation primarily of 'the discourses of the entrepreneurial self, employability and self-responsibilisation' (Sofritti et. al, 2020, p. 1054). Adapting to increasingly precarious employment conditions required the young people to follow the market rules of conduct by being competitive and self-directed. The discursive practices of neoliberal governmentality normalised competition amongst individuals. To be a responsabilised manager of oneself, the neoliberal citizen was obliged to compete 'at all levels and at various scales of human activity' to secure 'freedom and happiness' (Oksala, 2013, p. 333). Hence, competitiveness for Ally was personified by her attempts to stand out from the hundreds of rival job applicants. To distinguish herself, she had cold-called prospective employers, including those who had not advertised for staff. Ally outlined her reasons for doing so:

It takes more than a resume to get a job. After endless Seek applications, nothing's going to happen, 'cos I realised everybody's doing that. And no-one's going to know your personality. So, you've just got to get out there ... you've got to stand out. It's part of the job.

In likening job search to an actual 'job', Ally offered insight into how the neoliberal jobseeker oriented themselves to be an incomplete work in progress. Her expectation of herself was that she would constantly offer her skills (Boland & Griffin, 2015) in ways which deemed her employable (Vesterberg, 2015). This competitive mentality was similarly observable in Lucas, who adopted a self-directed approach to job search. This took the form of his research of the local job market and wider labour market trends. He did note that 'as someone who is unemployed, [I] should be doing [that] anyway'. Lucas was over-qualified for the role he accepted, but it did enable him to move off income support. The fact he reconciled with having made what was a retrograde step in his career progression typified the mindset of 'the model neoliberal citizen who strategises for her or himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organise these options' (Brown, 2005, p. 43). As Lucas observed:

It was better than not working. I wanted to do something. That role was available. I mean it wasn't a fantastic role ... but I was grateful that I landed the role and for me, just proving to myself that I could still work ...

Having secured employment, Lucas was then able 'to leverage that and actually go into a better role ... that was my end game'. The enterprising tactics deployed by Ally and Lucas replicated activity that Bourdieu (1998) wrote was once the exclusive domain of competitive relations between businesses and corporations. Under neoliberal governmentality, however, the rules of competitive conduct now applied to all labour market participants in their constructions as self-enterprises (Hamann, 2009). Equally, a counter-narrative is provided in the way Lucas, in his own words, strategised to play the 'game' to preserve his self-perception as a qualified tertiary graduate, by accepting 'lesser' employment in the interim. His response offers further evidence of how young people were able to subvert established knowledge of an acceptance of employment flexibility and precarity, and implement techniques to prevent their total subjugation.

Here it is necessary to introduce to the analysis Gramsci's theory of hegemony, to further appreciate the way unemployed young people are reconfigured into jobseekers. The basic premise of the concept of hegemony is the 'popularisation of the world view of the ruling class' through the 'consent of the led' (Bates, 1975, p. 352).

In this research, hegemony is discernible through the actions of governed young people who assume the jobseeking behaviours which serve the interests of a neoliberal system exerting domination over them (Lears, 1985). Consent, also referred to as the 'consensus of the masses' (Daldal, 2014, p. 157), is consequently less contingent on the apparatus of the state and the threat of the deployment of force as it is on the function of civil society – 'the marketplace of ideas' (Bates, 1975, p. 353). Hegemony, as achieved through the propagation by various civil society groups of 'a unison of economic and political aims' and 'intellectual and moral unity on a "universal plane"' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 180–182) was perceptible in the way young people mediated neoliberal ideology through their endorsement of Workfare practices.

To attain a degree of autonomy that would enable them to better chart the course of their precarious existence (Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2012), the neoliberal jobseeker understood that a career trajectory was non-linear. The journey was one of constant reinvention, and the risks of pursuing one's interests were always individualised (Vesterberg, 2015). According to Ruby, unlike what she believed in secondary school and during her tertiary studies, she resolved that there was no prescriptive way of negotiating labour market uncertainty. What was necessary, she asserted, was resilience to adjust to externally imposed change through the reflexivity of adaptive behaviour (Joseph, 2013).

There has to be levels of uncertainty. You have to, like, reach out, open doors, ask, and if you're going into the unknown, then try things and not [long pause] expect too much. So, I'm completely different to my 18-year-old self.

One way Ruby managed this uncertainty was through her pursuit of education. Like other young people interviewed for this research, Ruby internalised the discourse of lifelong learning as a means of maintaining competitiveness through constant adaptability. Ruby's adherence to lifelong learning was manifest in her insistence that prior learning and qualifications did not ensure ongoing employment. A graduate of a Bachelor of Design (Architecture) with Honours, Ruby pivoted as a result of changed personal circumstances by enrolling in study that enabled her to be employed as a disability support worker. Subsequent to this, and at the time she was interviewed for this research, Ruby had nearly completed graduate study in mental health counselling

and was undertaking a field placement. The discourse of lifelong learning, reflective of the hegemonic neoliberal world view, is underpinned by the policies of intergovernmental bodies such as the OECD and European Commission, which advanced lifelong learning as a primary source of a citizen's competitive advantage (Field, 2000). Lifelong learning discourse compelled individuals to assume personal responsibility for the acquisition of human capital that was considered necessary to thrive under the social conditions established by the market (Cotoi, 2011). The discourse reinforced the divergence between what was understood to be the state's obligation, and that of the neoliberal citizen. Unlike the schooling of children or even conventional higher education, which was once acknowledged as the remit of the state, adult lifelong learning was deemed by neoliberal logic to be a matter of private consumption (Field, 2000). Particularly informative in the framing of her outlook as a transformed jobseeker was Ruby's belief that the development of human capital through lifelong learning was entirely an individual responsibility. Her approach to the navigation of the labour market revealed an outlook which had been attuned to a 'life-long' project of honing one's competencies (Sofritti et al., 2020, p. 1061).

The education system also isn't really reflecting on the needs. It's again, like there's so many young people now and to expect that you can finish a degree and get a job. Now, it's we're competing against each other.

To build human capital and boost her labour market competitiveness, Ashleigh planned to undertake a Certificate IV in Business through a local vocational training provider. Her enrolment was conditional on the satisfactory completion of a literacy and numeracy screening. A daughter of migrants living in a non-English-speaking household, Ashleigh had a parent receiving income support and siblings who had also been subjected to Workfare. Having previously shown no interest in pursuing higher education, the barriers Ashleigh confronted to acquire the skills she hoped would enhance her employability were consequential. To this extent, the advancement of lifelong learning by the neoliberal world view acted to foster marginalisation and inequality when access to economic and cultural accumulation was not universal (Charlesworth, 2005). This disadvantage was acutely felt by entry-level jobseekers, as the 'hollowing out of the labour market' meant there were 'fewer jobs for the low- and mid-qualified (O'Reilly et al., 2015, p. 4). By most objective measures Ashleigh

could not be accused of lacking commitment to her job search or of not following the prescriptive narrative of how the jobseeker should conduct oneself. She had just wanted to 'find' that job, wherever it was 'hiding'. The discordant reality was that the neoliberal governmentality practices she adhered to acted to segregate jobseekers with limited social capital, including those of low SES and/or migrant background (Lovat et al., 2013).

7.6 Resilience, adaptation, transformation and engagement with the narrative

Neoliberal rationality as diffused through the popularised world view or 'collective will' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 125) was further represented by the jobseekers' acceptance that participation in the labour market required them to endure a personal trial of ongoing 'self-transformation' (Boland, 2021, p. 7). Psychological resilience 'referred to how an individual's positive adaptation potentiates success rather than how a change in the environment surrounding the individual could contribute to personal transformation' (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021, p. 148). As Ally enunciated, it was the responsibility of the young person to fortify themselves for setbacks and disappointments when engaged in job search, and to plan for contingencies and adjust responses accordingly.

I mean, not anyone can get a job, just by [laughs], not by just applying once.
It's always a tedious process. You have to fix your resume. Apply for a job.
Maybe that job didn't work. Apply for another one. Fix the resume again.
So, it's an endless cycle of fixing and tailoring.

Cassie similarly exhibited the resilience required of the jobseeker by casting a positive spin on her 'saddening' experiences of 'so many people declining me'. She insisted that these disappointments had not dissuaded her from continuing to put herself forward to prospective employers.

Honestly, I just feel like, I'm just not what they're looking for at the moment.
There's going to be other opportunities for me. There'll be someone out there that needs a person like me. I feel like I have a really positive outgoing attitude.

These reflections illustrate how the collective will, made possible only by the consent of the led, produced 'conformist' jobseekers 'who internalised the most restrictive aspects of 'civil life' and accepted them as their natural 'duties' without 'resentment' (Daldal, 2014, p. 156). Cassie responded to repeated unsuccessful job applications by maintaining perseverance and willpower (Bénabou & Tirole, 2015). As a consequence of this ideological coerciveness, Ruby rationalised her exposure to precarity as a rite of passage. Had it not been for the hardships endured on her 'life journey', Ruby doubted whether she would have happened upon a vocation in mental health practice.

Like I had to go through all that to learn other things about myself and people, and um, here I am so, studying mental health. I think without doing that I wouldn't be here. So, I just had to go through all of that. It was pretty tough. It was pretty painful, but ... [voice trails off]

Resilience helped pacify the jobseeker to accept existing social relations and their status in life and encouraged them to practice patience and persistence (Diprose, 2015). By invoking compensating differentials (Bénabou & Tirole, 2015) to identify a metaphorical silver lining from her unpleasant situation, Ruby's false consciousness can be viewed within the framework of BJW theory (Lerner, 1980) and the failure to perceive injustice. The theory, which describes how 'individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve' (Lerner & Miller, 1978, p. 1031), will be applied later in this chapter in the analysis of young peoples' attitudes to Workfare practices, unemployed others, and the framing and maintenance of citizenship identities. Essentially though, young people like Cassie and Ruby adhered to the belief that the attainment of goals and purpose remained possible provided they continued to work on themselves and persist through adversity. The consciousness of young people who took part in the research, that they retained agency over their destiny (Furnham, 2003), and of how their efforts would eventually be recognised and rewarded (Hafer & Begue, 2005), revealed how they regulated their behaviour to psychologically buffer against the harsh realities of their world (Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Resilience as an adaptation to survive neoliberalism was a shared competency of the young people interviewed. Each expressed the view that as their unemployment had

been the result of personal shortcomings, the burden of risk assigned for managing these crises was ultimately theirs (Diprose, 2015). The acceptance of responsibility for circumstances which objectively could be shown as beyond an individual's control was enunciated by Ruby, who attributed the blame for her unemployment as being 'all on me'. It was Ruby's belief that the self-reliant, responsibilised citizen was expected to 'own your decisions', which ultimately led to success or failure. While Lucas recognised that unemployment was an outcome of multiple factors, he also was self-critical of his preparation for entering the labour market. 'It starts off with me,' he lamented. 'There's many things I could've done better in terms of like, I could've studied harder. I could've got more experience earlier on ...'

Xavier's comprehension of the cause of unemployment reflected a deficit perspective informed by neoliberal ideology where acceptance of the market-as-truth explained why an acquaintance's job search efforts were fruitless.

I know a guy that applied, would apply to [sic] 60 jobs a month. Maybe hear [sic] from one. Maybe two a month. And, when he applies, when he goes in and has a face-to-face meeting, kind of like what we're doing now, [he] probably wouldn't get through to 'em 'cos, maybe, ah, get the job 'cos maybe he's, um, his attitude, ah, maybe he didn't match with the people, or maybe they didn't, he didn't have the qualifications or something?

Xavier's assumption that his acquaintance was to blame for his long-term unemployment substantiates an underpinning of BJW theory that when confronted with a person's suffering they cannot alleviate, people will find reasons to account for how that person brought the suffering on themselves (Bénabou & Tirole, 2015).

Caitlin's false consciousness in responsibilising blame was conveyed by her ascribing her unemployment to having 'been kind of slack, honestly'. This summation demonstrated how taken-for-granted, uncritical analysis of power relations produced common sense as normative (Thompson, 2015). In not accounting for her history of trauma, material hardship and social isolation, Caitlin's explanation for her unemployment – even if made off the cuff or intended as self-deprecating – was misleading and lacked context. Not long after the death of her father, the restaurant where Caitlin had been employed for close to two years ceased operating. The

resultant deterioration of her mother's physical and mental health after the loss of her husband then saw Caitlin withdraw from the labour market to be a full-time, unpaid carer. Despite these impediments, Caitlin's inability to acknowledge or articulate the social and historical causality of her personal struggle and disadvantage, and her acceptance of these circumstances, reflected a hegemonic world view based on external schemas and concepts (Gramsci, 1971). That Caitlin was still subjected to mandated Workfare following the death of her mother was further symptomatic of the corrosive hallmark of neoliberalism, which 'conceptualises discipline and responsabilisation as divorced from one's historical and social context' (Costas Batlle, 2019, p. 428). Suffering induced by the premature loss of both parents had been prolonged by Caitlin's inability to continually work on herself to acquire new skills and build social capital, as was expected of the neoliberal jobseeker. Due to circumstances beyond her control, Caitlin was disconnected from networks required to access employment pathways. In identifying the negative impact her role as carer had on her employability, Caitlin reflected:

Honestly, it's just not having the skills and experience really. Just [pause], yeah. It's annoying 'cos there was so long where I couldn't do anything 'cos I was looking after my Mum and I feel like [changed inflection in voice] I wish I could go back and use that time differently but obviously, I had to, you know, do certain things to look after her.

The isolation caused by Caitlin's separation from possibilities of employment – magnified by lockdowns – was profound. 'It was just me, my sister and my Mum, pretty much. They were the only ones I spoke to for years [laughs]. [whispers] It was crazy.'

However, what these reflections do reveal is that Caitlin was able to reach a point of where she had acquired the 'good sense' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 326) needed to dispute neoliberal tropes of the unemployed. She could perceive her environment and place in it (Augoustinos, 1999) to identify causes of her unemployment that were outside of her control. By being able to critically engage with and interpret her social world, Caitlin had attained the first precondition required for counter-hegemony to be possible. This was resistance in the form of critical consciousness. (Bieler & Morton, 2016; Robinson, 2005).

Fine et al. (2016) established that low SES youth of minority backgrounds and their families were subjected to precarity that is 'deeply regionalised, raced and classed,' and which dramatically increased challenges in their home life which disrupted their educational attainment and employment trajectories (Fine et al., 2016, p. 500). Their study of how neoliberal educational policies accelerated the precarity of highly marginalised young people attending deeply disinvested schools found that 50 per cent of survey respondents had been absent from school because of family responsibilities. A further 8 per cent responded that they had to care for family members 'once a week, once a day or all the time' (Fine et al., 2016, p. 503). Caitlin's response to family tragedy and upheaval, in the form of the forced foregoing of job search activity, created what was referred to as a 'double suffering' (Frost & Hoggett, 2008, p. 449). Specifically, experiences of loss and social isolation, as endured by Caitlin, when not recognised or acknowledged within the broader neoliberal narrative, invariably exacerbated suffering through the compounding of hurt upon hurt (Butler, 1997).

7.7 Becoming entrepreneurial in their quest for freedom

Of the young people interviewed who were mostly spared doubled suffering or encountered fewer cultural barriers, those who fared best in navigating precarious employment conditions had learned to adapt their behaviours to acquire the entrepreneurial skills and social capital required for self-governing. By being innovative, flexible and self-reliant, Ally and Ruby had optimised their brand management as 'entrepreneurial subjects of choice in their quest for self-realisation' (Rose, 1999, p. 142). Central to their constructions as 'ongoing, never-ending enterprises' (Kelly, 2017, p. 65) was a commitment to networking. For these young women, the practice of marketing themselves to build connections to enhance their employability was described respectively as 'organic linking' and 'natural'. They were able to secure desired employment outcomes through connections with either friends of friends or friends of family members. Both young women were dismissive of conventional forms of job search. As far as Ally was concerned:

You can't find a job just if you're applying on [online job vacancy platforms] Seek or Indeed. I don't think I got ... I did get a few jobs from Indeed actually, but it's really just, it's much easier to meet people, because it

shows how confident you are, and you're interested in, you know, fast-tracking your way into the business.

Ally's remarks denote how transformed jobseekers accepted as conventional (Daldal, 2014) neoliberal values which self-responsibilised employment and life outcomes. Nor was the entrepreneurial self ever a completed product. The active neoliberal citizen had to continually work on themselves to manage their marketability and respond to threats posed by the vagaries of competition. This entrepreneurial attitude was imbued in how jobseekers sought to consolidate and advance their career, as Ally expanded upon:

Um, my friends work in the bank industry. They've literally had to talk their way up to get their names up there. To have coffee chats with different, um, you know, high-ups, in the bank. So, it's really just trying to meet people face to face and have that rapport.

For Xavier, sourcing labouring opportunities through word-of-mouth approaches with acquaintances proved the most effective form of job search. Even for those such as Skye, who struggled with social anxiety, there was an acknowledgment that entrepreneurialism was a prerequisite for ongoing labour market participation. Skye discussed the importance of moving beyond her comfort zone and engaging in activities that did not come naturally, in order to enhance her employability.

So just before the lockdown, I was trying to like push myself to get out there, meet new people, try to do different things. That's how I met [name redacted] is [sic] I did one of the volunteer projects that she was part of. I was kind of already forcing myself ...

Cassie was likewise extended beyond her ordinary proclivities to assume the routines, customs and expectations of the archetypal self-directed jobseeker. Just as Ally and Ruby had done, Cassie extolled the virtues of selling herself to employers through spontaneous and unsolicited approaches via emails, telephone calls and in-person presentations. Asked to confirm whether this approach included the targeting of employers who had not advertised for staff, Cassie responded emphatically:

Even if the job is not advertised? Yes! Especially, because you could be like, 'Oh, do you have any positions?', and they'd be like, 'No, sorry, it's just,' or they'll be like, 'Oh yes, we, we were going to put up an application thing ...'

Cassie's transformation from unassuming to assertive jobseeker was confirmed through an acceptance that her natural disposition did not conform with the competitive mentality required by the neoliberal labour market. As she explained: 'Um, before I wouldn't have done this at all. I'm very bad over the phone. I get tongue tied. Everything. But [pause] now I just feel like it's a necessity to do.'

A contemporary of Cassie insofar as she had been co-opted into the same WfD activity, Ashleigh replicated her peer's job search strategy. This approach consisted of going store to store at her local shopping precinct to introduce herself to retail managers and offer hard copies of her resume. Expectations of how the jobseeker must think and act according to the dominant neoliberal discourse ran in some ways counter to Ashleigh's cultural beliefs as a young woman of Muslim faith. The narrative of the jobseeker as competitive and self-directed did not necessarily accommodate Ashleigh's cultural norms and therefore placed her at a disadvantage when competing with non-Muslim jobseekers (Khattab et al., 2020). As an unmarried Muslim woman, the practice of approaching male employees when unaccompanied by a relative was discouraged by her religious teachings. Consequently, the capacity for Ashleigh to network and be configured as an entrepreneurial self was significantly constrained (Hällsten et al., 2017). Nor could it be discounted that Ashleigh's unemployment was not a consequence of labour market discrimination. Booth et al. (2011) produced evidence that Australians of Chinese and Middle Eastern background were required to submit at least 50 per cent more applications 'in order to receive the same number of call-backs [from employers] as Anglo candidates' (Booth et al., 2011, p. 566).

Ashleigh's backstory was not indicative of someone who was a reluctant jobseeker or work-shy. In fact, her loss of employment was emblematic of the way COVID-19 amplified the inequality experienced by young Australians working in insecure jobs, concentrated in service industries most impacted by lockdowns (O'Keeffe et al., 2022) and ineligible for the JobSeeker subsidy (Churchill, 2020). As a casual retail assistant working in a deli, Ashleigh utilised an application downloaded to her phone that

enabled her to pick up additional shifts at short notice. Prior to completing Year 12, she had undertaken work experience at both a major retailer and a pharmacy to enhance her employability. And despite an understanding that she would remain supported living with her parents until married, Ashleigh longed for the affirmative citizenship identity and associated psychological benefits that paid employment conferred. As she explained: 'I still want to be independent as well. Like, I'm still a good girl. I still pay for like my registration and my fuel and everything.'

Caitlin held a different view to the utility of networking and self-promotion. It was her experience that a person's employment prospects were largely determined by what she considered to be 'nepotism'. Certainly, it has been established that a direct influence on hiring exists when the 'decision is made in favour to some connected friend or acquaintance' (Hällsten et al., 2017, p. 235). Caitlin's experience within her immediate social realm had given her no reason to think otherwise:

Like, my sister only got her job from her friend. My partner only got a job from his friend. Like, all my friends who have a job have only got the jobs from their friends. It's just, like, it's crazy. They've never, like, gone and gotten the job just, like, randomly. Well, besides my sister at [large retailer], but she hated it.

Although sceptical of the entrepreneurialism espoused and populated by her peers, Caitlin's perspective remained consistent with neoliberal ideology which tied employability to one's self-reliance and resourcefulness. Where her outlook diverged from other young people concerned her repudiation of the just-world argument that effort and hard work ultimately delivered reward. In maintaining that employment outcomes were more a result of who rather than what one knew, Caitlin rejected the implicit just-world belief that held people to account for their unemployment and discounted the culpability of the exploitative economic system (Goodman & Carr, 2016; Mohiyeddini & Montada, 1998). Caitlin's social capital was limited. As detailed earlier, her period as a full-time, unpaid carer deprived her of connections that might have mediated against unemployment. Furthermore, in low-paid, insecure employment, where the concept of a psychological contract between employee and employer was tenuous at best and the productivity of inexperienced workers unknown, the effectiveness of networking was questionable (Hällsten et al., 2017).

Skye's internalisation of entrepreneurial-self discourse was borne out of a necessity to survive increasingly uncertain labour market conditions. While the neoliberal narrative that promoted lifelong learning was one she ascribed to, the financial costs of investing in higher education to pursue a career change and alleviate her precarity were prohibitive. The coercion exerted on Skye to reconfigure herself as a tradeable commodity was diffuse and indirect, and resulted from there being few viable alternatives accessible to her.

So, um [pause], I guess me trying to find other solutions to find work. The only way I think is if I get a business for myself, which I've heard is what a lot of youth workers are doing.

Embodying the subjectivity of the entrepreneurial self required Skye to familiarise herself with the needs of the fluid and uncertain market and to recalibrate her skills. She had identified opportunities to reinvent herself as a freelance workshop facilitator, encouraged by colleagues and acquaintances who had turned to teaching short courses to adults in arts and crafts, music, cooking and even DJ'ing, as a way of supplementing their incomes. Skye explained the trend of youth workers relying on unregulated and 'chaotic' (Sofritti et. al, 2020) gig-economy work as a consequence of the pandemic constituting what governments classified as 'essential' and 'non-essential' work. Her experience of the de-professionalisation of youth work as an outcome of the neoliberal agenda was a reduction in quality of services and the outsourcing of duties to less-qualified agency staff. The conception of the importance to be entrepreneurial was shared by Xavier, who presented as possessing less social capital than other young people interviewed and held fewer educational qualifications. When participating in YouthNow's WfD activity, Xavier attended weekly science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) seminars which introduced young people to interactive technologies, including virtual reality animation, robotics, 3D printing, and animation and film (YouthNow, 2020b). The following disclosure by Xavier shows how these seminars helped direct him to view himself as an autonomous and self-directed enterprise (Kelly, 2017).

And since doing that, I've been wanting to deal with 3D printers and I love 3D printing. I want to try and save money to get myself a 3D printer. I see it as pretty much the future of technology. Um, what, in gadgets, in gismos

that they can make with the 3D printer. Since seeing that I've been trying to read up as much, trying to absorb what information I can for 3D printing, to possibly open up a business around that industry.

This conviction again reinforced the efficiency of neoliberal governmentality as a technique of social control through the regulation of individuals by subtle persuasion rather than direct threat (Rose, 1999). Xavier's articulation of the appeal of self-employment could well be explicated as reflexive of his agency and aspiration. But what were his options? An ailing body had reduced Xavier's capacity to re-enter the workforce as a low-skilled manual labourer at a time when demand for such workers continued to decline. Neither could he resume casual work driving trucks due to a police investigation into a road accident that resulted in his hospitalisation and ongoing impairment. Xavier credited YouthNow's BizE Centre activity with enabling him to build some skills compatible with 'office work', including 'confidence ... on the phones' and improved computer literacy. Yet by his own admission, WfD had not providing him with the 'skillsets' for the entry-level, administrative-type positions he had coveted. The obstacles to employment Xavier had encountered, and would likely continue to encounter, reflected the ineffectiveness of WfD as a policy and ideological response to long-term unemployment (Borland & Tseng, 2004; Crisp & Fletcher, 2008; Kellard et al., 2015; Martyn, 2006).

7.8 False attribution of blame

That jobseeker subjectivities were not exhibited homogenously across the young people in this study was made clear by Xavier's attitude to the public health response to COVID-19. His employment with a construction firm ceased shortly after the introduction of Victoria's first lockdown. Having worked for his employer for less than 12 months, Xavier was ineligible for the JobKeeper payment. However, rather than take issue with the ideological application of relief measures which excluded certain groups of employees from income support (Andrew et al., 2021), Xavier directed his ire at the public health advice, which he blamed for 'derailing the economy'. That he sided with neoliberal governmentality to the detriment of his own self-interest reinforces the efficacy of Workfare policy and activation practices. This pervasiveness prevailed despite the extraordinary conditions produced by pandemic lockdowns, and when some theorists expressed optimism for the possibility of political and economic

reform (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020; Razavi et al., 2020; Weisstanner; 2022). Xavier took particular exception to government interventions which he perceived had recast notions of individual responsibility and arbitrarily denied his right to work.

I definitely would've been going, 'Come on, there's got to be something here more than shutting down for our own safety?' Then I find out getting both vaccinations [sic] that it doesn't fully protect you as well as [pause]. My partner and I, we have had COVID. Um, and we've been told then that even getting the COVID, ah, getting COVID itself, doesn't fully immunise yourself from it. That you can still get it. So, I think we're at the point where everyone's been silly over it, and it's just causing a lot of issues for us.

This false attribution of blame by Xavier is consistent with the tendency of people to incorrectly identify the source of their misfortune. False attribution frequently takes the form of low social status or exploited groups failing 'to analyse the real mechanisms of their exploitation' (Chatterjee, 2012, p. 794). Xavier's outlook was dismissive of the interests of the aged, the immunocompromised and others most threatened by COVID-19 infection, including insecure and frontline workers and those living in high-density households. His stance deferred to an individualistic neoliberal ideology which had afforded him little assistance in his own time of need. Xavier attended an Anzac Day anti-lockdown protest. He espoused conspiracy theories involving Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, the manufacture and procurement of vaccines, Black Lives Matter protests and the Antifa movement. He repeated disinformation promoted by extremist right-wing activists. Yet anti-lockdown or anti-vaccination stances cannot be singularly reduced to COVID-19 scepticism or denialism and far-right conspiracy theories. For decades, neoliberalist governmentality has advocated free will and the minimisation of constraints imposed on the individual by the state (Cardona, 2020). In fact, what responses to government-led COVID-19 interventions revealed was the incompatibility of the discourse of personal responsibility, self-reliance and choice, with pandemic management strategies necessary to protect the health and wellbeing of a population (Richards, 2022). It was foreseeable that the neoliberal citizen might come to view health 'as a private asset', and not 'a social good and fundamental right' (Cardona, 2020, p. 175). An expectation that all individuals would surrender their right to make informed decisions regarding their health and lifestyle considerations – even

during a time of unprecedented crisis – failed to acknowledge how internalised neoliberal discourse had steadily eroded collective responsibility and cooperation (Aly, 2021). Thus, the refusal of some to wear masks in public, abide by stay-at-home directives and social distancing measures, and receive the COVID-19 vaccine, reflected the neoliberal citizen's belief in their right to manage their own risk and exercise freedom (Kampmark, 2020). To this extent, the pivot by the Australian Government in adopting Keynesian-type interventions to respond to the pandemic emergency did not give rise to a popular reappraisal of individualising and self-responsibilisation discourses that act as pillars of neoliberalism. Xavier's own position accorded with the subjectivity of the neoliberal citizen whose market-laden judgements were made at 'the exclusion of all other ethical values and social interests' (Hamann, 2009, p. 37). As far as Xavier was concerned:

I don't mean to swear, but it was a shit-show. Everything happened fast, everything was now, now, now. A good analogy I've seen people use is, the economy was like a freight train going down the line and then someone slammed on the emergency brakes, or we hit a wall, or hit an obstruction, and everything's now derailed.

7.9 Complicit in their own control

The effectiveness of the mediation of neoliberal discourses which espoused 'the market as the organising principle of society' (Foucault, 2008, p. 30) was confirmed by research participants' endorsement – both tacit and overt – of Workfare. That they did so having been variously marginalised, materially and physically harmed, dehumanised and traumatised by Workfare practices could be conceptualised through an understanding of how the discursive techniques of governmentality created and reproduced power relations. Power, according to Foucauldian governmentality theory, was not a static entity that was imposed on the powerless. Rather, it was an outcome of how power relationships constituted the subjects involved in these relationships (Thomas, 2016). As identified through conversations with the young people interviewed, those who might ordinarily be considered powerless frequently contributed to the reinforcement of power relations through their thinking and actions (Kopecký, 2011).

In this respect, the reflections of Ally, in which she offered a rationalisation for the continuation of Workfare despite her own negative experiences with WfD, were particularly revealing. Ally had questioned how a WfD activity that required her to knit clothing for a charity provider would enhance her employment prospects. Simultaneously, she considered the practice of knitting to be the 'bare minimum' requirement for unemployed young people receiving income support.

I reckon it's so people on the dole are just not just sitting at home and using government money for nothing. So, it's really, just, moving the people on the dole to do something for society, which is knitting at least.

Ally justified this WfD activity, which held little utility in advancing transitions to paid employment, by restating the Workfare mantra that recipients of welfare were obliged to give back to society through a 'framework of reciprocity' (Reference Group on Welfare Reform [Australia] and McClure, 2000, p. 32). Ruby likewise approved of a Workfare approach which surveilled and punished welfare recipients, despite having been so tormented by her own WfD interactions that she disengaged from the employment services system and went without income support for eight months. Her following comments captured how Workfare discourse conflated the receipt of income support with criminality via the assumption that the taxpayer was being taken advantage of (Walsh, 2003):

I understand like Centrelink has to be quite rigid you know, because you need to [pause]. I don't know whether I should say this. Like some people are not, you know, abiding [sic] their regulations properly. So, I get that.

These remarks not only reinforced neoliberal stereotypes which portrayed the unemployed as lazy and undeserving of support (Boland, 2016), they also accounted for ways the subjectified citizen was complicit in their own control through the reproduction of power relations. On this point the position taken by Lucas, who strongly resented being made to undertake WfD, was particularly insightful. He too endorsed the principle of mandated Workfare for 'people out there who would probably benefit from those type [sic] of activities', due to their possessing fewer qualifications or being less motivated to enter the workforce. On face value, the attributions by Ally, Ruby and Lucas seem counter-normative considering their own adverse Workfare experiences.

A rational assumption is that young people would direct greater empathy towards others whose plights were similar to their own. To the contrary, BJW theory explains how such responses are predictable coping mechanisms that 'enable the individual to confront their physical and social environment as though they were stable and orderly' (Lerner & Miller, 1978, p. 1030). Critical to this understanding is 'the way people define themselves in relation to others' (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, pp. 1529) when just-world beliefs are threatened. That 'similar others are vulnerable to uncontrollable harm reminds' individuals 'of the unpredictability of their own fates' (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, pp. 1530). In order to maintain the belief that people usually get what they deserve – as is essential for investment in long-term goals (Hafer, 2000) – an individual is likely to resort to 'victim blaming' to 'defend their just-world beliefs' (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009, pp. 1528, 1530).

Equivalently, the way individuals construe what is just or unjust for themselves as differently for others (Lipkusa et al., 1996) is appreciable in how Skye distinguished herself from certain jobseekers also answerable to mutual obligation requirements. She was contemptible of her jobactive provider and its failure to support her efforts to secure work in the field in which she was qualified. However, in emphasising her own uniqueness and individual attributes, Skye was unequivocal that coercive measures directed at jobseekers who possessed limited skills and experience were warranted:

For clients who need a job ... find, like, they just need a job. Just send them to the supermarkets. Send them to the, um, the retailers and the, you know, hospitality stuff.

The research further corroborated BJW theory, which established that an innocent victim was less likely to be derogated when their suffering could seemingly be remedied (Mohiyeddini & Montada, 1998). In a softening of his views that WfD was warranted for jobseekers on a 'different trajectory' to him, Lucas – when employed as a jobactive provider consultant – was enthusiastically responsive to the needs of a client whose job search efforts he supported through the provision of material aid.

When I was working in, like, the actual field I understood. I was very, 'You know what? Dude, you know, buy this, buy that. Let me help you. Let me pay for it ... 'cos I understand your struggle.'

Inevitably though, so consumed is the neoliberal citizen by demands placed on them to adapt, continually work on themselves (Vesterberg, 2015) and assume the identity of the jobseeker (Boland, 2021) that a scenario in which young people can conceptualise resistance to the techniques of Workfare is difficult to contemplate. This was visible in the normalisation by Lucas of the injustices of Workfare through the cultural aphorism that 'It is what it is!' Tolerance of an injustice inflicted through no fault of the victim is rationalised through recognition that 'such things eventually happen to everyone' (Lerner, 1998, p. 249).

How subordinate groups were complicit in their own control (Foucault, 2008), and participated to maintain a hegemonic symbolic universe which exerted domination over them (Lears, 1985), was captured by the reasoning of Xavier, whose outlook on income redistribution was diametrically at odds with his own self-interest. Prior to the introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement, which initially doubled the rate of the JobSeeker payment during COVID-19 lockdowns, Xavier and his dependents were forced to reduce their grocery purchases. Paradoxically, Xavier supported the removal of this supplement, seemingly in deference to neoliberalist, supply-side macroeconomic theory. As far as Xavier was concerned:

I could sit here and say to you, 'Yeah, they should've kept [the supplement] going.' But then [pause], the money basically was, ah, it was making our currency worthless. They were printing, printing, printing money. Creating money from nothing, which was devaluing our currency. So, it would've been good if they had kept it going, but it would've been a detriment more so to our economy.

Mason (1971) advanced the theory of psychological dependence, in which subordinates identified with their oppressor to defend the powerful from 'internal and external threats to their supremacy' (p. 10). It is from this perspective that Xavier's support for the withdrawal of the Coronavirus Supplement can be appreciated. In conforming to beliefs that society requires certain rules which govern the ruled – in his case, endorsing lower taxing, lower public spending governments – people like Xavier can unknowingly defend systems which act against their interests (Jost, 1995). Again, Xavier's beliefs which absolve the state of any significant responsibility for his and his family's welfare during the pandemic crisis is reflective of his subjectification as a

neoliberal citizen 'who strategises for her or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organise these options' (Brown, 2005, p. 43).

Equally instructive were the attitudes of young people to the unprecedented financial support provided to eligible businesses as part of the Australian Government's COVID-19 response. These attitudes offered further insight into the ways discursive practices critical to the formation of governmental rationalities caused individuals to contribute to the reproduction of power relations. It could be reasonably assumed that, like many Australians, the young people interviewed were not familiar with all of the detail of the JobKeeper program. Nor was it anticipated that they would have known that the scheme paid billions of dollars to businesses whose turnover did not decline sufficiently enough during lockdowns to qualify for payments, or that these businesses were not obliged to refund overpayments (Murphy & Karp, 2021). What was noteworthy were young people's standpoints on a system which placed far more stringent conditions on individual recipients of taxpayer-funded income support than those applied to businesses. The commonality of the responses of young people, all of whom had been subjected to the targeting and surveillance practices of Workfare, was telling.

Lucas believed the JobKeeper scheme had performed a critical function in the nation's pandemic response by enabling businesses to continue to operate and therefore generate taxable income for the government. Skye, meanwhile, evoked the ideology of trickle-down economics to justify the preferential treatment given to the private business sector, which she viewed as critical for job creation both during COVID-19 lockdowns and after greater Melbourne had reopened. Ally differentiated between the rights of an individual income support recipient and an uncle restaurateur who, as 'an established business owner' and 'supporter' of his local community, had little difficulty accessing JobKeeper payments. She articulated her understanding of the need to hold the unemployed to a higher standard of scrutiny.

It's difficult for the sole person. The government doesn't know what the money is going to go for [sic]. They can just keep it, or they can spend it on, I don't know. Gambling, alcohol, booze. I don't know. It's always, like, a tricky thing. You don't know where the money's going to go, yeah, for, like,

individual [sic]. Whereas for businesses, they're going to use it for their own business, and help their community to get paid. That's the bottom line.

The comments of Ally and others demonstrate the way the market's 'ritual truth' (Foucault, 2000, p. 195), as the ideology of the dominant class, is broadly accepted and perpetuated by subordinated groups. Within the context of these selective government responses to the allocation of pandemic relief measures, the young people's consent of dominant narratives further illuminated the normalising gaze of activation policy. It is this internalisation of individual responsibility that made it extremely difficult to shift the dial on Welfare discourse, even during times of social, economic and political upheaval.

Viewed through the lens of cultural hegemony, it is 'common sense – the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any society' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 323) – which informs the world view of those who non-reflexively and uncritically perceive their environment (Smith, 2010). Conversely, the attainment of empirical knowledge, otherwise referred to as 'good sense' (Lears, 1985, p. 570), was only possible through coherent and critical thinking (Daldal, 2014). To resist the discursive practices which justified the binary of who was and wasn't deserving of state support, young people required an ability to engage critically with their social world. To this end Cassie was unaware of the JobKeeper subsidy or other COVID-19 policy responses which favoured the needs of certain groups of citizens. Neither did Ashleigh seem perturbed to learn that recipients of generous JobKeeper payments were not subjected to anywhere near the level of scrutiny that she was as a jobseeker. It would be convenient to assign some degree of personal responsibility to individuals who showed little interest in challenging the causation of their disadvantage and oppression. But as Gramsci conceived, good sense, as the philosophy of criticism and the most advanced form of thought (Gramsci, 1980), was obstructed by 'the multiple influences on human thought and action' via the 'intersection of various social relations' (Smith, 2010, p. 47). In other words, common sense was 'not the result of an individual's failure at cognising their world' but a 'group phenomenon instigated by the power structures of hierarchical social dynamics' (Thompson, 2015, p. 453) through which subordinate groups adopt a 'conception' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 327).

Ryan (2015) was prominent amongst researchers in exposing the ‘selective application of market-based logics’ (p. 94) – perceptible in the contradictions between the allocation of JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments – as an upwards redistribution of wealth. The neoliberal paradox, explained in practice as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 353), described the intervention of the state through the provision of ‘corporate welfare’, which was juxtaposed with the withdrawal of support for ‘social services’ (Ryan, 2015, p. 95). The incongruity of the self-regulated market was evident in the way corporations of all sizes operating under neoliberal conditions were reliant on some form of government intervention. The neoliberal citizen’s acquiescence to actually existing neoliberalism was discernible in how the older Ruby excused the mistreatment of her younger self as an entry-level employee due to an asymmetrical power dynamic:

It’s a learning curve. Like my mindset’s different, my views of people are different. Like, everyone’s trying hard. It was a small business. So, I understand like they didn’t pay properly.

Again, the interplay of BJW theory on Ruby’s cognition is evident by her normalising (Lerner, 1998) her wage theft as less of an injustice, as the experience was an everyday occurrence (Furnham, 2003) for young workers. Ruby’s false consciousness is expressed in her excusing the exploitative employer–employee relationship and her impression of the social role she occupied (Jost, 1995) relative to the small business operator. How Workfare discourse was internalised and disseminated as common sense by young jobseekers to rationalise and legitimate their own subaltern status was also apparent by Xavier making sense of his world by endorsing the merits of WfD. As detailed in earlier chapters, WfD did not replicate paid employment and was not recognised as an employment program, and participants were legally defined as non-workers. Yet in incorrectly and without contestation accepting certain ideas about the program as factual, the following comments of Xavier demonstrate how taken-for-granted concepts, schemas and ideas promoted by power structures come to pervade and shape consciousness (Thompson, 2015).

I’ve heard of people doing Work for the Dole and impressing the employer that well that the employer turns around and goes, ‘Hey. You want to work

here? There's a job for you after the program.' I believe that's what it was for.

Caitlin, by contrast, was much less enamoured with Workfare practices which reinforced unemployment from a deficit standpoint by prescribing, for instance, how the jobseeker should and should not communicate in a job interview. Caitlin's WfD activity host required her to partake in interview role-plays with a job trainer because, in her own words, she didn't know how to provide the 'perfect answers'. While she wanted to 'build confidence' to improve her employability, Caitlin questioned the emphasis placed on the expression of certain forms of cultural capital which, as Bourdieu et al. (1999) claimed, became symbolic capital with tangible exchange value when legitimised in a given society.

So, certain, questions like, 'Where do you want to be in three years?', and like, 'What's the correct thing to say there?' And I was like, 'Okay.' [rolls eyes] Well, now I know it's, you know, 'I want to be here and moving up the ladder.' But who knows what I want to be doing in that time? Stupid. 'Why do you want the job?' Um, for money. To work. Like, you want some deep answer? It's stupid. [exhales]

Through this account, Caitlin's resistance to Workfare discourse by challenging the dominant understanding of how jobseeking must be undertaken is unmistakable. The objection to present herself to potential employers in the manner as directed by her job coaches resonated with Foucault's notion of resistance as self-care (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) to buffer against the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism and its singular economic 'truth' (Foucault, 2000, p. 195). That Caitlin recognised that only 'correct' answers were permissible in a job interview if an applicant was to be successful was less a concession to the authority of Australia's employment services system as it was a self-protection strategy to mitigate against the most harmful effects of discursive Workfare practices.

Caitlin's conception of employment, which corresponded to the straightforward exchange of labour for payment, was in conflict with the model produced and sustained by neoliberalism rationalities. The role of the psychological contract in having 'individuals accept the structural conditions of their employment and the

unequal distribution of both power and resources that characterise it' was interrogated by Dick and Nadin (2011, p. 296). In referencing Bourdieu (2000), the authors described how the symbolic capital which had elevated the employment contract beyond a transactional relationship to one that was psychological led work to be 'misrecognised as a source of intrinsic gratification' by conferring 'symbolic profit, such as honour, prestige or status' (Dick & Nadin, 2011, p. 296). The authors argued that even in low-skilled and low-status work, employees still derived intrinsic satisfaction from work through the misrecognition of viewing any opportunity to escape constraint (i.e. unemployment, Workfare) 'as a conquest or even a privilege' (Dick & Nadin, 2011, p. 297).

Caitlin's cynicism towards Workfare discourse and practices which determined how the jobseeker should be constituted represented a self-exclusion of sorts from the symbolic capital her job trainer considered necessary to demonstrate employability. Given the entry-level, insecure work Caitlin had been applying for was likely to be repetitive, tedious and even socially demeaning, it is little wonder that the psychological contract held little resonance with her. As Charlesworth (2005) observed, the governmentality proposition of work as inherently satisfying and rewarding, through the infusion of market logic in all aspects of the social and institutional, repressed the labour market experiences of those disadvantaged by an unequal economic society and furthered inequality.

7.10 Did COVID-19 refute the narrative that responsibilised unemployment?

A view consistently shared by the young people was that COVID-19, by exposing millions of Australians to economic uncertainty, shifted the narrative of unemployment from being primarily the outcome of personal failings. Each of the interviewees recalled feeling less stigmatised as an unemployed young person during pandemic lockdowns. Some spoke of being treated with greater dignity and compassion by those who had previously viewed them with suspicion or scorn. Accounts were relayed of family members, friends and acquaintances who for the first time faced the prospect of becoming jobless or needed to apply for Centrelink support payments. Ruby described COVID-19 as 'a blessing in disguise', as she believed the pandemic had softened people's attitudes towards the unemployed. Ally observed that 'the spectre of unemployment' made the plight of the unemployed more relatable to those who

themselves had not previously stared down the possibility of financial hardship. Xavier recounted the 'hostility' before COVID-19 towards the unemployed by mainstream society which accused people like him of 'bludging'. He noted that these attitudes largely dissipated once lockdowns were introduced. Some in the community who Xavier knew had once been critical of his jobless status even came to 'sympathise' with his plight during this time, presumably out of a realisation that a similar fate quite possibly awaited them. Lucas' depiction of how the pandemic transformed friends' perceptions of the unemployed brought into focus the efficacy of Workfare discourse in producing citizenship identities. These narratives typically depicted those without employment as intrinsically different (Edwards, 2009) and of lesser standing (Dencker-Larsen & Lundberg, 2016). In a critique of the way neoliberal governmentality fragmented the concept of society, Lucas lamented how some friends would not concede that a person's unemployment could be the result of factors beyond their control until their own security was threatened.

I have a few friends who are [pause], I think they're in a great position financially, and one of them is a lawyer. Um, now, they didn't look poorly on me because they know me very personally. But they looked poorly on one of my other mates who was unemployed well before COVID, for a chunk. Like, they would really, um, I wouldn't say bully. Yeah, I would say maybe bully a little bit even, banter with him, just about his unemployment. But once COVID hit and their job [sic] became unstable it was like neutral ground.

These accounts collectively provided a commentary on a difference COVID-19 made to the subjectivities of the young people as long-term unemployed jobseekers. The young people's recollections demonstrated that although they remained governed by the neoliberal instrument of Workfare, the pandemic presented an opportunity to at least consider possible alternatives to dominant unemployment discourse. This is evidenced through the young people's descriptions of a broader conversation attached to a once-in-a-century pandemic that offered them momentary respite from being scapegoated and engaging in self-loathing.

However, even the Australian Government's Keynesian-modelled monetary interventions, which seemingly represented a denunciation of market-based logic,

acted as a continuation of neoliberal ideology with regard to the allocation of income support. The unambiguous inference from the Australian Government's policy response was that those receiving the JobSeeker payment before COVID-19 were 'responsible' for their unemployment, unlike those who found themselves unemployed through no 'fault of their own as a result of public-health interventions [e.g. shutdowns]' (Andrew et al., 2021, p. 1476). In his community interactions, Xavier might have felt less judged as an unemployed person during COVID lockdowns. Yet he could not access the JobKeeper payment, as this form of income support response had been designed in a way which deemed Xavier – whose labour market participation consisted entirely of insecure work – less deserving than those who had a longer period of continuous tenure with a single employer.

Ally, also previously engaged in precarious work, reconciled her unemployment during COVID lockdowns by acknowledging that the closure of the retail and hospitality sectors was 'not in our control'. Is it to be interpreted from her remark that she considered factors which rendered her unemployed before the pandemic were within her control? For most of the young people interviewed, the attribution went unchallenged, despite ample evidence which contradicted the fusion of individual responsibility with employment outcomes. Once more, these testimonies illustrate the formidable challenge under the conditions of neoliberalism for individuals to refute the dominant Workfare narrative that actively suppresses their own interests. Revealing also – especially in the context of this thesis' aim to contribute original knowledge – is the temporal dimension of this continuation of the internalisation of Workfare discourse. As detailed in Chapter 5, Gramsci's hegemony theory acknowledged the possibility for resistance and counter-hegemony if specific circumstances arose at a particular historic moment (Robinson, 2005). Yet while the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a once-in-a-century event, and the Australian Government's economic response to the crisis as unprecedented (The Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, 2022), the internalisation of discourse that responsibilised joblessness was observable in the young people interviewed for this study.

It was Lucas who expressed a contrary opinion on the causation of unemployment, which moved the focus away from individual attitudes and behaviours to scrutiny of structural, macroeconomic causes.

Unemployment, back then in my opinion, was looked more so at the individual. Like, 'Why can't you get a job?', instead of the actual system, as in, 'Why isn't the system built in a way where everyone is working?'

This questioning by Lucas is verification of Foucault's conceptualisation of the relationship between knowledge and power via the mediation of discourse. His comments illustrate the flexibility of governmentality theory that recognises the co-existence of dominant and resistant discourse that allows 'power relations' to be established, maintained, extended, resisted or mobilised onto action' (Doherty, 2007, p. 195). Viewed through the lens of Gramsci's hegemony, Lucas' framing of unemployment in structural terms to challenge individualising discourse reflects the attainment of good sense; that is, 'the philosophy of criticism and the superseding of common sense' (Gramsci, 1980, pp. 323-326).

Caitlin also rejected the representation of unemployment from a deficit perspective. Her comprehension of the underlying causes of unemployment was informed by the way she understood how the neoliberal state promoted and sustained unequal power relations (Doherty, 2007). Her impression of government and 'rich companies' was that they 'don't like poor people' and dismissed the unemployed as expendable. For Caitlin, overt or collective resistance was pointless, as it was the powerful that 'make the rules'. As she opined:

It's annoying, but it's like, 'I can't do anything,' so I'm like, 'whatever.'

In renouncing Workfare that consigned the poor to 'an afterthought', Caitlin begrudgingly accepted a political system immune from challenge by the subordinated, who could not envisage how change was possible. It was against this backdrop that Jost (1995) recognised that fatalism in the form of political apathy, as opposed to ignorance, could be greatest among social groups that were most severely disadvantaged.

7.11 Erosion of the collective

Whether examined through the conceptual framework of Foucauldian governmentality or Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the research identified ways the discursive techniques of Workfare acted to erode collectivism. The othering by research

participants of peers, as identified previously in this chapter, reinforced how the concentrated focus on the self as dictated by neoliberalism was incompatible with the collective agency necessary to mount any form of challenge to the market's 'ritual truth' (Foucault, 2000, p. 195). The absence of solidarity amongst oppressed jobseekers could also be explained by the way the collective will – the specific social-cultural conception of the world – transcended economic classes (Ives, 2005). The collective will in the form of neoliberal rationality represented a single economic class and manifested this single class interest, albeit as a composite of several distinct parts (Schulzke, 2015). Accounts provided by young people authenticated how the totality of neoliberalism was too pervasive to allow for a collectivism that contemplated any challenge to the dominant world view.

Ashleigh was asked whether she had compared her ordeals of unemployment and the employment services system with other young people she undertook WfD with. The thought had not occurred to her. Cassie also preferred to 'keep to myself, basically' when attending WfD activity. She limited conversations with other jobseekers to 'a simple, "Hello, how are you?"' and preferred 'working independently most of the time'. By these accounts, a camaraderie that might otherwise be thought to exist through the sharing of similar experiences had not materialised. This absence of solidarity amongst the disenfranchised was symptomatic of what Charlesworth (2005) referred to as the fracturing of 'the working class' by the neoliberal 'restructuring of the labour market' (p. 298). Identification with one's group had become particularly problematic by discursive individualising practices which mediated access to the labour market and blurred social classifications (Charlesworth, 2005). Accordingly, when a fellow jobseeker complained to her about 'every single part' of WfD, Caitlin avoided engaging in the discussion. As far as she was concerned, to do so was not only pointless but risked making her own predicament more intolerable.

She's like, 'It's so stupid [adopts a mocking tone]. We shouldn't have to do this.' Her complaining was just bringing me down. I was like, 'Dude. I don't want to be here as much as you but like, if you complain, you're just going to make it worse.'

Caitlin's reaction should not be interpreted as being outright dismissive of the grievances of her disgruntled peer. Rather, it was symptomatic of a false

consciousness that took the form of ‘fatalistic pessimism’ (Jost, 1995, p. 405) – that is, a resigned acceptance of the dominant socio-political system and a belief that change was impossible. Ruby similarly described the futility of ‘blaming’ and ‘complaining’ about ‘the system’, and also the detrimental psychological impact of questioning the actions and motives of the ‘higher-ups’, as these related to her place in the world as an unemployed young person during COVID-19 lockdowns. Income support recipients such as Ruby faced greater barriers in resisting neoliberal governmentality. Invariably, their agency was largely diminished by more intense and frequent governmentality in the form of moralising discourses which blamed them for their unemployment, and the imposition of punitive Workfare practices (Boland & Griffin, 2015). It was therefore foreseeable that, in the interests of self-preservation, Ruby chose to stop railing against the system. She outlined her reasons for doing so:

For myself to, like, mentally go through that each day, I felt like I needed to take it a bit down and just focus on myself and my family and my health. I feel like I’m not in a place to judge systems or people. I’m just going to focus on what I can do and people around who I have. I think that it’s to protect really my mental health and to safeguard that.

It is not implied that Ruby’s tolerance of unjust social conditions was primarily a result of apathy or learned hopelessness. Indeed, she maintained some agency. But this agency was consumed by ‘coping and surviving’ (Frost & Hoggett, 2008, p. 441) in an environment where the reduction of benefits and the requirement to constantly job-seek limited her resources, including those necessary for collective organisation (Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014). Further perspective on Ruby’s submission is provided by research which shows how disaffected members of a group are rendered incapable of collective organisation when their understanding of social reality is distorted. Through a form of false consciousness referred to as ‘pluralistic ignorance’:

People will tolerate unjust social conditions, acquiesce to flawed decisions, and desist from advocating needed reforms all because they assume the majority of their peers disagree with them and believe that nothing, other than embarrassment, could be gained by revealing their true beliefs.

(Miller & McFarland, 1991, pp. 304–305)

7.12 Conclusion

This chapter drew upon analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with young people to reveal how neoliberal Workfare techniques and discourse produced the transformed jobseeker. The sub-themes identified situated the research within a framework of the unequal power relations generated and maintained by the neoliberal state. To conceptualise how young people perceived and understood their experiences of long-term unemployment against the backdrop of COVID-19 lockdowns, data were analysed using Foucault's governmentality theoretical framework. Further perspective of the young people's experiences was achieved through the application of hegemony theory and BJW theory to complement Foucauldian governmentality. The same three theories were applied to constitute the second overarching theme, which forms the basis of the next chapter. Chapter 8 will build on the findings of this chapter to demonstrate how civil society institutions are just as effective as apparatuses of the state in maintaining the supremacy of the neoliberal logic of labour market uncertainty and Workfare.

CHAPTER 8: FINDINGS PART 2 – HOW CIVIL SOCIETY REINFORCED THE PRODUCTION OF THE TRANSFORMED JOBSEEKER

8.1 Introduction

The final sub-theme of the previous chapter, 'Erosion of the collective', provided an appropriate segue given Part 2 of the findings explores how the pillars of civil society function to solidify and embed individualism as an organising principle of neoliberal governmentality. As distinct from political society which, according to Gramsci's hegemony theory, is comprised of government, courts, the police and the military, civil society is the collection of 'private organisms', including schools, civic associations, social groups, political parties, religious orders and families, 'which contribute in molecular fashion to the formation of social and political consciousness' (Bates, 1975, p. 353). The sub-themes set out in this chapter establish that it is through civil society that the world view of the dominant class is legitimised through its acceptance by the led. The efficacy of civil society as a coercive apparatus is further evidenced by how infrequently the power structure is required to assert its authority through political institutions and force (Schulzke, 2015).

Consistent with the previous chapter, Part 2 of the findings is interspersed with demonstrations of the nuances and complexities of resistance that are inherent in a FDA of power relations. Throughout the sub-themes that follow are examples of tensions that exist between how power is experienced and acts of critical resistance which offer possibilities for de-subjectification (Hamann, 2009). These tensions are reflected in the contrasts presented by young people's interpretations of their experiences of long-term unemployment and Workfare during COVID-19 lockdowns, such as self-blame, as understood through the concept of 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 323). Despite the internalisation of neoliberal discursive practices that have young people acquiesce, conform and comply with Workfare, this chapter's findings surface the complexity of power relations as they reside within society through young people's expressions of resistance as 'good sense' made possible and advanced through coherent and critical thinking (Daldal, 2014, p. 153). Table 8.1 presents a

summary of the sub-themes which comprise Part 2 of the findings as set out in this chapter.

Table 8.1: Presentation of results – Theme 2

How civil society reinforced the transformation of young people into jobseekers

Sub-theme	Description
<i>Reduced dependence on the state</i>	The young people's expectations of a reciprocal relationship with the state and its public institutions were modest. During COVID-19 lockdowns they enacted self-reliance behaviours and uncritically accepted and normalised injustices.
<i>Young people as jobseekers failed by civil society</i>	The asymmetrical relationship of mutual obligation that defined Workfare extended to the young people's interactions with civil-sector actors, and further undermined the concept of a social contract and reinforced a fatalism of conformity.
<i>The pervasiveness of governmentality in all aspects of the social</i>	Young people's engagement with civil-society actors, including NFPs, revealed how the fusion into normative frameworks of market-informed practices often served against the interests of those they purported to support.
<i>How the education system and the family produce neoliberal jobseekers</i>	This sub-theme highlighted the roles of the education system and the family unit as civil-society apparatuses which exerted discipline over young people in order to reconfigure them as human capital and increase economic competitiveness.
<i>The social responsibility of family according to the neoliberal state</i>	The welfare state's retreat highlighted the importance of family resources (not available to all) as a safeguard not just for the cohort in times of crisis (i.e. COVID lockdowns) but as a prerequisite to effectively transition to adulthood.
<i>Shaping citizenship through domestic discourse</i>	Human capital formation was diffused through everyday aspects of the 'private realm' of family life to produce rational, self-governing young adults whose actions best served the interests of the state.
<i>Workfare discourse can be internalised differently depending on cultural identity and promote resistance to the dominant narrative</i>	In certain cultural contexts, prevalence of unemployment in one's social proximity could lead to Workfare discourse being internalised differently from the dominant narrative, and elicit resistance to depictions of othering stereotypes.
<i>Disenfranchised masculinities: neoliberalism and shifting gendered expectations</i>	A neoliberal society comprised of individual entrepreneurs and consumers disenfranchised low-skilled male workers through the feminisation of low-paid employment and meant they could not ensure the financial wellbeing of their families.

8.2 Reduced dependence on the state

It was down to every young person to fend for themselves during COVID.

(Ally)

This quote encapsulated the limited expectations young people had of the state as custodian of their welfare. It served to emphasise the absence of reciprocity in the young people's interactions with public institutions, including Australia's employment services system.

Xavier's experience was particularly revealing. He had no contact with his jobactive provider during Melbourne's first year of COVID-19 lockdowns. He therefore (incorrectly) assumed that he had been discharged as a client. When lockdowns were eased and mutual obligation appointments resumed, Xavier's job search efforts went largely unsupported. His provider did help him apply for a truck licence, although the training was sourced and mostly paid for by Xavier. The prescriptive jobactive funding model, which incentivised short-term job outcomes, ensured providers received a placement payment when a client moved off income support. That Xavier's provider would have received a taxpayer-funded bonus despite providing him with little, if any, job search assistance, highlighted how Australia's privatised employment services system prioritised the interests of providers over the long-term unemployed (Considine et al., 2018; EERC, 2019; Morris & Wilson, 2014). Communication between Ally and her provider also ceased during lockdowns. Not unlike Xavier, who did not express resentment towards his provider, Ally was pragmatic when excusing the provider's abandonment of her during a period of adversity. As she explained:

So, I imagine my provider was overwhelmed and extremely, ah, you know, at full capacity. So, I didn't really get any emails from them besides, 'We're closing our doors; do not come in.' So, maybe they could've reached out to check out how we're going, but it wasn't, they couldn't do that. I think thousands of people were going to them, to get a job, so. They can only do what they can.

Ally's assessment offers insight into the way the neoliberal instrument of Workfare has the jobseeker temper expectations of the support the state should provide. These reflections further illustrate how the pandemic crisis made little if any difference to her

subjectivity as an unemployed young person in relation to her deservedness of targeted state assistance. Her remarks reinforce BJW theory, in which unjust events are normalised by victims to safeguard themselves against feelings of loss or suffering (Lerner, 1998). In justifying the inaction of her provider – ‘They can only do what they can’ – Ally inferred that no injustice had occurred (Furnham, 2003), presumably given the limits imposed on an overburdened employment services system during a time of extreme crisis. Neither did Cassie wish to assign blame to her WfD activity host for her ongoing unemployment. In confirming that WfD had ‘helped me with applying for employment’ but ‘didn’t help me get employment’, Cassie continued to self-responsibilise her predicament on not possessing the skills and experience demanded by the labour market. In her words:

I was being declined [for jobs]. I don’t feel like it’s necessarily these guys’ [WfD activity host’s] fault. It’s just I wasn’t what the employer was looking for at the time. So, um, and the work that I’ve found recently, was by myself.

Having remained dependent on income support despite undertaking two cycles of WfD, Cassie might have questioned the practicality of the program and even the competencies of her job coaches. The fact she seemed to absolve them of responsibility for her joblessness also points to how influences outside of an individual’s immediate experience can generate knowledge about that individual’s world – that is, self-blame for unemployment – which come to be accepted uncritically (Thompson, 2015). Another plausible explanation for Cassie excusing the employment services system despite its obvious failings is the effectiveness of neoliberal governmentality in demanding people are resilient so they can positively adapt to adversity (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). Analysed from this perspective, Cassie’s outlook could be viewed as an act of self-care – and indeed a form of resistance – to buffer against the severity of neoliberal conditions which often perpetuated feelings of cynicism and fatalism.

This is not to say that the young people did not critically analyse their jobactive provider experiences. Lucas in particular was highly disparaging of Workfare. Formerly a jobactive client himself, it was not until Lucas had commenced working in employment services that he was able to reflexively comprehend how the system had failed him when he was seeking work. As a jobactive consultant, Lucas learned of the resources

available to the unemployed to aid their job search. That he was unaware that these material supports existed to expedite his own jobseeking efforts remained a sore point.

They get allocated a budget for me, but they never told me about this, so, I didn't know. But when I was working in like the actual field I understood all that. To know they had all these services available, but they never offered it to me, wasn't a good experience.

Lucas came to believe that support was intentionally withheld from him. As a jobseeker who was not 'heavily disadvantaged', the economic rationalities which guided Australia's employment services system meant his provider categorised him as having a small profit-margin yield. As Lucas explained:

The jobactive provider that I was with, they didn't care. They saw it as a business, unfortunately. It shouldn't be more so of a business of KPIs just spewing out. You know, 'Let's get the most disadvantaged person a job, we get more money,' whatever it may be.

The reflections of Lucas validated Gramsci's notion that good sense was attained through coherent and critical thought (Daldal, 2014). Caitlin and Cassie also lamented interactions with jobactive provider staff which were impersonal, mired in bureaucratic duplication and unresponsive to their jobseeking needs. Caitlin's provider assured her that she would be enrolled in a childcare course. Four months on from this assurance, she had still to be notified of a start date. For Caitlin's jobactive workers, which numbered many due to high staff turnover, ensuring she attended provider appointments and achieved monthly job-application and activity-points targets appeared the greater priority. Cassie, meanwhile, did commence an online course in child care during COVID-19 lockdowns. However, the lack of engagement by the program facilitator saw her withdraw and question her suitability to undertake other forms of study.

I decided to drop that, because I did not understand anything. They weren't helping me. I would message them over WhatsApp. So, they did communication over WhatsApp. Would not message me back. Um, they weren't very reliable. [My provider] said I should do another course. And I was like, 'Nah.'

Cassie's withdrawal from inadequate training that failed her, and her reticence to commit to other study options, revealed how resistance did not have to be conspicuous or even intentional to subvert or disrupt power structures. Her refusal to re-engage with vocational training was not going to result in an overhaul of mutual obligation. What Cassie's micro act of resistance did represent was a prefigurative action (Törnberg, 2021) that enabled young people like her to reimagine how society should function (Moreira Fians, 2022), including in relation to alternatives to Workfare.

The neglect of Cassie by her education provider illustrated the erroneousness of Workfare discourse that endorsed lifelong learning as the exemplar for achieving social mobility (Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2012; Cotoi, 2011; Field, 2000). The trend towards hybrid and distant models of content delivery was coherent with the neoliberalised schema that had commodified education with the aim to 'produce a maximum number of graduates in minimal time, while drawing on the least possible amount of resources' (Hölscher, 2018, p. 38). Far from making access to higher education more equitable, the move away from face-to-face instruction, assumptions about the availability of digital technologies and an inability to accommodate differing learning styles had in Cassie's case reinforced educational disadvantage (Johnson et al., 2008).

Frustrated at being unable to gain employment, Ashleigh twice initiated a change of jobactive providers, believing her workers were more of a hindrance when it came to providing practical assistance for her job search. Defenders of privatisation cite the effectiveness of the market to promote competition which, in regard to jobactive providers, was claimed to result in better consumer outcomes through increased flexibility, closer links to community networks and funding models tied to job placement (Mendes, 2019). But as Ashleigh's experience revealed, the marketisation of employment services produced the opposite effect, as state interventions redistributed wealth upwards to privately operated jobactive providers at the expense of the long-term unemployed (Morris & Wilson, 2014). Competition between providers was non-existent, as their primary function was to discipline a reserve pool of low-skilled labour and maximise profits (North, 2020).

‘Cos I just wanted to see what the difference was between the first one, the second one, and the third one. I’m just going to say they’re all the same. They want to get you off the system, like, you know, not stay too long.

8.3 Young people as jobseekers failed by civil society

The asymmetrical relationship that defined the concept of mutual obligation was further reinforced by young people’s exchanges with prospective employers. Ally bemoaned the incongruity of Workfare compliance, which demanded she apply for up to four jobs each day to receive income support but did not oblige employers to acknowledge receipt of her applications. ‘It was just depressing,’ she remembered. ‘I was like, “I’m not going to get anything back.”’ Lucas was critical of unresponsive employers who would send automated email replies to advise that his applications were unsuccessful:

But it would be good to get some feedback. Like, for example, I’ve worked before. So, now I face rejection but I need to know, ‘Okay, what did I do before that was good? What am I doing wrong now? What do I need to improve on?’ Things like that. For that particular role.

Lucas had assumed the subjectivities expected of the neoliberal jobseeker by embracing the need to continuously work on himself (Vesterberg, 2015). His disenchantment highlighted how market-laden values undermined any notion of there being a social contract. As Goodin (2002) contended, mutuality was not reciprocal when only one party, in this instance, the job applicant, upheld their obligation. Yet by continuing to responsibilise his unemployment by asking questions like ‘What am I doing wrong now? What do I need to improve on?’, Lucas engaged in the form of self-blame that is a distinguishing characteristic of ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1980, p. 323). Equally, Lucas had attained ‘good sense’ (Gramsci, 1980, p. 326) through his exposure to Workfare practices from the vantage point of a jobactive consultant. This insight enabled him to perceive the inherent unfairness of an employment services system that was indifferent to the need to offer practical supports and solutions to jobseekers. Thus, while Lucas still articulated some of the dominant views of individual responsibility and self-blame, his development of an advanced understanding of power is instructive as the resistance required for counter-hegemony is dependent

upon a comprehension of what actually needs to be resisted in the first instance (Bieler & Morton, 2016).

Caitlin too was critical of the mutual obligation framework which attached rigid conditionalities to the receipt of income support but contained no co-commitment for an individual's job search efforts to be acknowledged. Her comments echoed the disappointments expressed by other young people interviewed: 'Like you apply for so many [jobs] and just don't hear anything back.' Caitlin refuted outright the notion of any appetite by the state to provide genuine safeguards to those on society's margins. As she saw it, the principal objective of the government was to preserve the interests of 'rich companies'.

They don't like, you know, the unemployed people. They don't like poor people. It's the government. I think it's pretty obvious. [laughs] ... I just feel like, you know, government and businesses go hand in hand with each other. You know, the rich and the rich. The poor are sort of left out, and they're just an afterthought.

Caitlin's critical reading here reflects the notion that neoliberalism had dismantled the compact of concern for others on which a community's social order had once been predicated (Brown, 2019). It revealed how neoliberalism produced a fatalism by a 'conformity in the face of situations considered to be irreversible because of destiny' (Freire, 1998, p. 102). Whereas Lucas' false consciousness manifested as self-blame, Caitlin's outlook reflected a fatalism associated as being greatest among the most deprived social groups (Jost, 1995). Asked why she believed change was unimaginable with regard to practices which individualised the risks of unemployment and poverty, Caitlin answered: "cos they make the rules [laughs] pretty much'. Her response allied with Bourdieu's misrecognition theory, in which 'individuals can't conceive that the world, or their place within it, could be any different' (Dick & Nadin, 2011, p. 297), and Foucault's contention that only limited forms of resistance or protest were possible under the power relations produced and sustained by neoliberal governmentality (Boland & Griffin, 2015).

Caitlin had gaps in her resume arising from her time spent as a carer. Consequently, she found herself in the catch-22 situation where employers 'were often reluctant to

hire young workers because their productivity was unknown' (Hällsten et al., 2017, p. 234). 'They won't hire you 'til you have the experience, but you need the experience to get hired,' Caitlin lamented. Caitlin clearly did possess attributes and capabilities that were transferable to paid employment, given her WfD activity host assigned her duties which were beyond her remit, and for which she did not receive remuneration. As Caitlin bemusedly noted:

And like sometimes they expect me to like train people and I'm like, 'I've just started here myself!'

The retreat by the state from the provision of support to vulnerable citizens was evidenced in the way young people had internalised the discourse of self-responsibility to manage their health and wellbeing. The crisis of the pandemic further exposed societal inequalities established by the relationship between the neoliberal state, the market and citizens. Andrew et al. (2021) drew attention to the ubiquitous influence of discursive practices which emphasised the role of resilient communities to manage their own risks. For Ally, the inability of many young people to access mental health services during COVID-19 lockdowns necessitated the formation of peer support groups to assist friends and acquaintances who were experiencing distress. As reported by Biddle et al. (2020), the initial impacts of COVID-19 in Australia increased 'levels of psychological distress' (p. 19), particularly for young Australians. With mental health practitioners unable to meet increases in demand, and face-to-face consultations and therapies suspended due to social distancing requirements, Ally explained how she and her friends took matters into their own hands by establishing online support networks.

Some sets of health providers did their best ... but I think they had, like, too many young people seeking help. I knew my friends were having a hard time, so I called them to see how they are [sic] a bit more often than usual. We did Zoom calls instead to check up on each other. To see how we are [sic].

When also considered through the Foucauldian lens of how resistance to power is diffused through everyday aspects of the 'private realm' (Broomhill & Sharp, 2005, p. 116), Ally's response to the systems failure which made marginalised young people

more vulnerable during COVID-19 lockdowns, by intentionally supporting and caring for peers, is intuitive. Their prioritising of mutual aid and solidarity in a time of crisis offered a glimpse of how informal care (Bender et al., 2024, p. 1) acted to resist the dominant power structures that promoted individualism and produced exploitation and inequality.

The resilience approach placed responsibility on the individual to adapt and make the correct community connections and caring partnerships with private-sector stakeholders (Joseph, 2013). The motivations to volunteer one's time in such an informal support group, and additionally in Ruby's case, by preparing meals for the homeless and acting as a facilitator of a faith-based youth group, also reflected how BJW incentivised the view that 'effort, hard work, [and] good deeds will ultimately pay off' (Bénabou & Tirole, 2005, p. 4).

Yet for every Ally or Ruby there was a young person like Skye who didn't possess the level of social capital to have their psychosocial and mental health needs met through a world view of self-reliance and resourcefulness. Skye outlined her situation as such:

Well, I'm meant to be seeing someone on a regular basis but I haven't found anyone yet 'cos I need to do it within a bulk-billing situation and that's [sic] close to travel to. I tried to find something close that still fits in the description and I haven't found anyone quite yet, unfortunately. And no-one has offered a referral just yet.

In accordance with neoliberal governmentality, Skye's inability to access a treating practitioner was not represented as a market failure or an abdication by the state of its duty to citizens. Rather, her plight, and the plight of those marginalised by limited, top-down approaches to social welfare, was responsibilised as the outcome of a failure to activate one's capacity within their community (Dean, 2002). However, as Skye's observations showed, the doctrine of self-responsibilisation was defective during times of crisis, including when the Victorian Government locked down public housing towers in the inner-city suburbs of North Melbourne and Flemington during COVID-19 outbreaks in July 2020. Her observations were consistent with declarations that the pandemic emergency did not produce a raft of new social inequalities, but simply intensified long-standing ones (Andrew et al., 2021; Matthewman & Huppertz, 2020;

O'Keeffe et al., 2021). An investigation by the Victorian Ombudsman later found that the timing of the lockdowns was not based on direct health advice and had violated Victorian human rights laws (Victorian Ombudsman, 2020). Skye recalled the trauma experienced by a friend's grandmother, a resident of one of the towers, whose physical health was jeopardised by the arbitrary measures imposed without warning by government officials. Skye told of meals prepared by Food Bank volunteers which did not meet the diabetic women's dietary requirements. The elderly woman's distress was compounded by her lack of English-language proficiency, and the refusal by authorities to admit family members to the housing estate to deliver food and medicines. In her following remarks, Skye summarises the breakdown of the divisions of public and private-sector responsibilities which devolved risk onto individuals, families and communities (Dean, 2002) and resulted in susceptible people, as she described, 'slipping through the cracks'. In condemning the Victorian Government's inaction, Skye's perspective signals a shift away from the normalisation of dominant individualising discourses. This is conveyed through her common-sense articulation – acquired through a process of coherent and critical thinking (Daldal, 2014) – in disavowing New Public Management principles such as 'positive ageing', which responsabilise life choices and outcomes (Asquith, 2009, p. 260).

I don't think the government had a system in place, you know, to support the ... [voice trails off]. There was no effort to try and find a solution or of [sic] alternatives that they could use. It's just like, 'We don't know. Can you just move along?'

Fine et al. (2010) identified the correlation between community connectivity and better health. Societal inequalities the authors attributed to poor health outcomes in their research were observable in Cassie's mental health also going untreated due to her limited social and financial capacity. She detailed how her anxiety levels, heightened by pandemic lockdowns, did not alleviate when social distancing measures eased. Unable to fulfill mutual obligation requirements due to an undiagnosed psychological condition, Cassie's mother encouraged her to apply for a Centrelink medical certificate exemption. The general practitioner she consulted declined to provide her with one. Instead, Cassie was instructed to seek the opinion of a specialist mental health practitioner to establish whether an actual impairment existed. When Cassie was

interviewed for this research, nearly two-thirds of patients without private health insurance had to wait more than 12 weeks to receive an appointment with a psychologist, and one in three practitioners had closed their books to new patients (Australian Psychological Society, 2023). Barriers to accessible mental health care exposed the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism which, for the marginalised, produced ‘conformity in the face of situations considered to be irreversible because of destiny’ (Freire, 1998, p. 102). Cassie’s thoughts – not dissimilar to the internalisation of Workfare discourse designed to move individuals off income support regardless of whether they gained employment – reflected as much:

Like, they’d have to, they’d have to get me to talk to someone about my anxiety and my stress and all that before they even do it, and I’m like, ‘Nup [sic]. I can’t be bothered. I’m just going to try and do my job searches and stuff.’ [laughs]

8.4 The pervasiveness of governmentality in all aspects of the social

Institutions which comprise civil society perform an essential function in preserving the pre-eminence of individualism in the social and political consciousness of the neoliberal state and its citizens. In this respect, Skye’s labour market ordeals demonstrated how the NFP sector was as effective as any component of civil society in entrenching the rules of neoliberal logic. It must be acknowledged that a multitude of factors were likely to have contributed to the frequent periods of joblessness and underemployment Skye experienced. Nonetheless, what could be discerned was that her inability to secure ongoing employment as a youth worker was the corollary of not having assumed the subjectivity of Foucault’s *homo economicus* (economic man) (Foucault, 2008, pp. 225–226). By encoding all aspects of the social as an economic domain (Hofmeyr, 2011), neoliberalism had commodified the provision of all care services. In resisting the status quo, Skye was derisive of her most recent employer, a national faith-based organisation contracted by various tiers of government to deliver youth programs across multiple municipalities. Skye’s discontent revealed a conflict between her personal values of how to best engage with and support clients and the market-informed practices management demanded. Skye reached a tipping point during one of Melbourne’s earliest COVID-19 lockdowns, when her superiors would

not make allowances for pandemic disruptions to revise program targets. She takes up the story:

[Management] weren't happy with my team's progress. I'm like, 'Hello!' Half of us were in lockdown. I'm chasing half of my clients just to have a meeting for things. Half of them would not show up. Other half don't, they don't really want to be there, and then, like, these are volunteers. I was put in a really uncomfortable position, because it was like I've got to follow the company's policy, but then I have my own ethical ... [voice trails off]

Skye's supervisors, working from Sydney and Adelaide, and therefore not subject to the strict lockdowns imposed on greater Melbourne residents at that particular time, asserted that program objectives could still be met by her hosting activities virtually. Yet, as Skye pointed out, these assumptions failed to account for disengagement by many young people due to a deterioration of their mental health during lockdowns, fatigue from the necessity to conduct all learning and most social interactions remotely, and even barriers to accessing the technology required to participate in online meetings. This application of private-sector management policies to the delivery of youth services – even during a period of unparalleled health, economic and social challenges – demonstrated how the mainstream neoliberal perspective was privileged over those with particular perspectives or needs (Edwards, 2009), and relegated approaches that were therapeutic and committed to social justice (Rogowski, 2011).

Despite her aptitude for case work, Skye had been unable to establish a career beyond zero-hours and fixed-term contract positions. Her reticence to incorporate market criteria and cost-benefit analysis into all of her work practices (Hofmeyr, 2011), as is the conduct required of the neoliberal worker, had seen her overlooked for promotion, and later on, replaced in a role by a less-experienced colleague. Skye expressed disenchantment with the New Public Management (Connell et al., 2009) model of social work practice, which required workers to navigate a raft of bureaucracy and adhere to rigid deadlines and targets to achieve performance indicators (Rogowski, 2011). Reproaches of the market-logic orientation of social work for obstructing the provision of care and targeted interventions are hardly novel (Allen & Stanley, 2011). Yet in having voiced criticisms to managers, Skye believed she had developed a reputation for being 'one of those hard-to-control workers', which limited her long-term

employment prospects in the sector. 'I understand about having the academic side for report writing and skillsets,' Skye said of the need for case management compliance and accountability. She continued:

Um, I'm sorry. That shouldn't be the key issue, 'cos that stuff can be learned. It can be taught. What you can't teach is for people to care. And especially when you're working with sensitive clients. They need to feel that you care. But then there are people who are getting sent to different jobs, but they don't really connect with the kids or clients. They kind of see it like it's a nine-to-five-job-kind-of-thing. They just, they write their little reports and they suck up and kiss arse to the bosses and then, you know, they get promoted and get everything.

Skye also held reservations over program content and questioned whether the organisation's philosophies and mission were aligned with the interests of the young people it purported to assist. Skye's concerns resonated with a theory that an emergent goal of youth development and mentorship programming was to 'enclose people in a normative framework infused with state-supported ideals' to 'promote the values and characteristics' of the individualised, neoliberal citizen (Hillman, 2016, p. 365).

At face value, Skye's protestations appeared futile. As disclosed in the previous chapter, her inability to secure ongoing employment as a youth worker had prompted her to pursue gig-economy opportunities. Yet in accordance with Foucault's conceptualisation of power relations, 'there are innumerable points of confrontation and instability and numerous possibilities for tactics and strategies of resistance' which offer agency to those 'who are often constructed as powerless and as victims' (Watson, 2000, pp. 68, 75). In Skye's case, she enacted power by refusing to abide by, participate in and be silenced by organisational processes which inflicted and perpetuated structural violence under the guise of the provision of care. Her refusal aligned with what Beck (1997) recognised was how young people were able to use withdrawal and rejection as a powerful form of action.

8.5 How the education system and the family produce neoliberal jobseekers

According to Daldal (2014), two of the most important ideological apparatuses of the neoliberal state are the education system and the family. This theory was supported by the research, which depicted the effectiveness of these civil society institutions in exerting internal discipline to reconfigure labour from an abstract entity to one in which the worker was represented as human capital (Foucault, 2008). Young people spoke of the economic rationality exercised by parents with regard to the schools they attended and their choice of curriculum. Their accounts aligned with literature which designated parents of school children as consumers of a commodified education intended to produce the 'cognitive and human resources demanded by the labour markets' (Moutsios, 2010, p. 127). In reflecting on her secondary schooling, Ally offered insight into the discourses that form 'the neoliberal imaginary' which directed parents to make informed choices about 'good' and 'bad' schools (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. viii). 'Yeah. So, I wanted to go to [redacted],' Ally recalled. 'That's where all my friends went [laughs], but I was sent to [redacted] College by my parents, to do my VCE, um, yeah'.

Despite the mostly positive memories of her secondary school experiences, Ally described being dissuaded by family members from pursuing her creative interests academically and professionally, seemingly due to the belief that education should be about maintaining and increasing 'economic competitiveness' (Moutsios, 2010, p. 121).

Oh, school was pretty good. Um, I think I actually spent most of my time in the art room, with my teacher, like painting, and yeah. I was really into like, drawing canvases, and having all the materials there, 'cos at home I wasn't really allowed to paint and all that 'cos, you know ...

The effects of parental influence in educational choices buttressed by a neoliberal world view were surfaced by Ruby, whose lack of agency in determining her own higher education and career trajectories can be viewed as a form of symbolic violence. How symbolic violence was produced, reproduced and deemed legitimate in the subordination, domination and exploitation of the young people in this study as jobseekers (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016) was examined in the previous chapter. For

Ruby, the coercion applied by her parents, educators and peers to conform to educational choices which aligned with capital accumulation strategies (Angus, 2013) remained vivid.

Yeah. Yeah, it was strong. I remember during VCE it was strong on like, yeah, 'What subjects do you like? Okay, do this, do that.' I had no idea what I was doing. And I remembered I wanted to do visual arts [laughs], but my Mum said, 'You can't get a job with it.' That's why I studied architecture. So, for me, it was like a waste of four years. And it was just like money I had to give back [laughs] basically.

Through Ruby's reflections, the symbolic violence perpetuated by neoliberalism was visible in the ways concepts of education and imagined educational futures had been redefined as transactional commodities of market rationality. Ruby remembered the pressure to abide by what she referred to as 'the common crowd voice' and fulfil her parents' desire for her 'to make lots of money'. Here, the avoidance of poor student performance is delineated as an individual parental responsibility and differentiated educational outcomes the consequence of parenting failures (Exley, 2012), not structural economic and socio-political antecedents. For Skye, an inability to meet the expectations of her parents through her expression as a competitive, market-driven citizen exacerbated existing mental health challenges and led to family estrangement. As she related:

My parents, um, they just, they don't do it intentionally, but they grew up in a very, I guess, um. We believe in negative reinforcement in a way. They were taught you don't give your kids compliments because that person will get a big head. You're meant to motivate them by giving them negative comments to push them hard, push them hard, so they will work harder. So, for me [it] was constantly being told you weren't good enough and you need to try harder kind of thing. That's not for something [sic] that I, especially when I'm not the, I guess emotionally I'm not 100 per cent. It's probably not the safest area for me. Especially like, I know my parents worked really hard so, especially in the culture. There's a whole high expectation on a kid.

Ruby came to contest the dominant discourse that successful educational attainment was a precondition for stable employment conditions and economic prosperity. After completing her tertiary studies, Ruby's attempts to join the labour force were hindered by an over-supply of graduates in her profession. Accordingly, she joined the growing cohort of young people identified as 'underemployed' and 'over-educated' (Wyn, 2015, p. 50), and consequently, consigned to a hyper-competitive bottom end of the labour market (Nixon, 2018). This cohort's investment in their own education, training and insecure work has been depicted as a 'mortgaging of an uncertain future' which conferred to them few, if any, material benefits (Kelly, 2017, p. 57). Ruby offered the following advice when asked how a sibling should best prepare for the post-industrial knowledge economy:

I would actually tell, give tips for my younger sister who is 11 years younger, to actually consider doing, like, TAFE. I reckon it's even more beneficial than a four-year degree. You've got to find work through those cycles, I guess. Probably short courses, diploma, TAFE, vocational VET. I would strongly suggest doing that.

Having accumulated significant student debt for a qualification that she could not put to use, it is unsurprising that Ruby would caution her sister against overcapitalising in an education that was not guaranteed to provide the desired outcome. Indeed, by June 2023, current and former Australian university students owed a total of \$80 billion in student loans, with 72 per cent of these debts amounting to more than \$10,000 in the previous financial year (Morton, 2023). Though tellingly, in her imagined conversation with her sister, Ruby's own negative encounters with employment precarity had seemingly impressed on her the need to adopt the self-governing rationalities required to insure oneself against 'those cycles' of an arbitrary labour market. Thus, in rejecting and then affirming lifelong learning discourse, Ruby's perspective continued to reproduce the common-sense perspective of how the jobseeker must think, act and conceive of their world as a subjectified jobseeker.

8.6 The social responsibility of family according to the neoliberal state

In returning to the earlier sub-theme of how the neoliberal citizen's dependence on the state was lessened, young people's encounters with unemployment and precarity

highlighted the critical role of safety net performed by the family. Neoliberal discourses which frame societies as market oriented and individualistic promote a reliance on family structures and resources as a substitute for the traditional welfare state (Forrest & Hirayama, 2009). Much attention has been given to the incongruity of neoliberal thinking, which places the onus of social responsibility on the family (Foucault, 1967), and how this perspective was contrary to the individual rationality of the free market (Brecher, 2012). The ambiguity of the family and its function in underpinning the neoliberal conviction ‘that, on the one hand ... argues that there is nothing but individuals and, on the other, affirms the family as the social site that needs to take over the welfare of individuals from the state’ (Stratton, 2016, p. 172) underscored the paradox of free market logic. Young people able to remain in or return to the family home during their period of unemployment expressed gratitude for the financial and emotional support provided by parents. This practice of ‘hedging as a way to deal with future uncertainty in the present’ (Worth, 2018, p. 441) was not only activated to manage immediate economic challenges but was necessary for many young people to continue with tertiary education, navigate insecure employment or accumulate savings in order to live independently. Those who received parental support dared not contemplate what their standard of living would have been in the absence of such assistance. Ruby, who relinquished income support for eight months after withdrawing from mandated WfD activity, made clear how dependent she was on her parents:

Ah, I don’t know where I’d be if I did not live at home with parents. I think that would be very hard. I think I would be getting my second episode of my mental health.

Lucas echoed these sentiments.

I was lucky that I moved back in with my parents before everything went down [with COVID-19 lockdowns], or else it would’ve been like a massive issue. But, aside from that, if I didn’t, I don’t know. I guess I’m one of the fortunate ones. I had a great support system in my family.

This description infers an admission that under neoliberal conditions, the family (at least for those who can access family support) assumed the form of safety net as the state could not be relied upon to sufficiently sustain those who encountered material

hardship. This insight again provides evidence that any difference the pandemic caused to the subjectivities of unemployed young people in relation to their views on Workfare were negligible.

In acknowledging his good providence, Lucas' perspective also offered insight into how BJW acted as a coping mechanism by channelling downward comparison. In describing himself as 'one of the fortunate ones', despite the injustices perpetuated upon him by neoliberal governmentality and Workfare, Lucas was able to minimise his anguish by comparing his fate with those 'worse off' (Taylor, 1983, p. 1165).

The mitigation strategy of living with parents to survive the uncertainty of the labour market and prohibitive living costs was not available to everyone. Lucas understood the deprivations suffered by unemployed young people who did not have a family network to call upon. He spoke of a friend whose 'quality of life' was 'diminished' by having to purchase cheap food of poor nutritional value and skip meals to ensure rent was paid. Ally questioned how unemployed friends were expected to subsist on a weekly budget of \$40 dollars after all essential expenses had been met. In her mind, the inadequate rate of the JobSeeker payment – which ACOSS (2022) quantified as \$175 per week less than what a single person needed to cover basic living costs – reflected an income support payment sufficient only for young adults who remained in the family home.

It was poignant that Skye, who was unable to live with her parents due to complex family dynamics, invoked the notion of art as an imitation of life to draw attention to the precarity that was the everyday experience for many of her contemporaries. To support her contention, she referenced the US television comedy-drama series *Gilmore Girls*. Skye explained how some of the program's main characters had left home to attend colleges and obtain degrees, only to later return when aged in their 30s due to being unable to secure work to support themselves.

Because they couldn't find work they all moved back home and they started a little club. They call it the Thirtysomething Gang. TV shows are making jokes about it. I'm like, 'Laugh?' It is quite laughable, but it is realistic at the same time.

Family support can take different forms. Caitlin's exposure to precarity was offset by sharing accommodation with her employed sister and the benevolence of an intimate partner who, while not a cohabitant, provided money to ensure she did not go without essentials. Existing as an unemployed jobseeker without the financial backing of loved ones, and particularly her sibling, was simply incomprehensible for Caitlin:

Oh, my God! I don't know how we manage. How we do it. I can't imagine not living with her. That's weird. I feel like I'm going to be with her forever. We totally have, um – what's it called? – co-dependency issues.

These supports did not buffer Caitlin from being subjected to Workfare practices which produced and repeated unequal power relations that advanced the rational market agenda. Within weeks of commencing her WfD activity, Caitlin was witness to how, under neoliberal conditions in which freedom was socially produced and managed, the severity attached to long-term unemployment could vary according to one's family circumstances. The contentious idea that under governmentality, individuals had autonomy to chart their own life's journey (Baumgarten & Ulrich, 2012) by ascribing to the rules of competitive conduct (Joseph, 2013) did not apply universally. Given the option, Caitlin would not have undertaken WfD. Yet the consequence of refusing to participate was the loss of income support, which effectively left Caitlin and those like her without choice. By contrast, a contemporary of hers, who frequently voiced her disapproval of WfD to activity staff, and ultimately withdrew from the program, highlighted a distinction between young people whose opportunities were largely determined by their family circumstances. In accounting for the woman's actions, Caitlin remarked:

I think she still lives with her parents and stuff, though. So, I don't think she [emphasis] really needs [JobSeeker]. Whereas some people, you know, need it [laughs] more than others.

As this anecdote demonstrated, the influence of family, through access to direct financial transfers and practical assistance, was significant in the way it affected 'the routes and resources young people can avail of, or are penalised by, in relation to transitions into economically independent adulthood' (O'Reilly et al., 2015, p. 8). It revealed how in highly unequal societies, social suffering afflicted certain people more

than others (Frost & Hoggett, 2008). For Xavier, it was not possible for himself and his young family to move in with older relatives. Border closures prevented their return interstate, where a support network of family and friends existed. Xavier believed his situation would likely have been dire if not been for a sister-in-law who, while living with his family during COVID-19 lockdowns, remained employed as an essential worker and could therefore contribute to household expenses. He reflected: 'If we didn't have that for the income, we probably would've been out on the street.'

Rather than question and speak out against this injustice, Xavier's resignation to his precarious circumstances supported the contention that neoliberalism promoted a fatalism that took the form of political apathy, and had subordinates accept unfairness as they could not conceive of alternatives to refute the dominant narrative (Freire, 1998; Jost, 1995).

8.7 Shaping citizenship through domestic discourse

The family as a highly pervasive instrument in the construction of the neoliberal citizen was a common frame of reference in the accounts young people provided. Discursive practices and assumptions identified in this research revealed how human capital formation was diffused through everyday aspects of the supposed 'private realm' (Broomhill & Sharp, 2005, p. 116) of family life to produce rational, self-governing young adults whose judgements and actions best served the interests or 'political will' (Popkewitz, 2003, p. 36) of the state. A means by which neoliberal citizenship identities were reinforced in the home environment was through Workfare discourse which derided recipients of income support. Caitlin recalled the negative attitudes her late parents expressed towards the unemployed and reflected on how her own experiences had demonstrated that stereotypes associated with long-term unemployment were largely unwarranted.

Oh, like my parents used to go on about people on Centrelink. How they're so slack [adopts mocking tone], lazy, and they just don't want to work. But it's like, it's not the truth. Sometimes it is the truth, yes. But like a lot of times it's not. All this time people think just 'cos you're on [Centrelink] you're not trying, but like you are trying. It's hard.

Caitlin's experiences of long-term unemployment, precarity and Workfare allowed her to reflexively reach a more advanced level of thought which, in turn, enabled her to challenge her late parents' pejorative depictions of income-support recipients. It was this attainment of 'good sense' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 326), through a process of coherent and critical thinking (Daldal, 2014), that Gramsci regarded as an essential precursor to resist the dominant world view and make counter-hegemony possible by comprehending what needed to be resisted in the first instance (Bieler & Morton, 2016).

Caitlin's parents had not been materially well off. They resided in Melbourne's second-most disadvantaged municipality (Brimbank City Council, 2019), had not been home owners, and neither of their daughters were tertiary educated. Given their experience of having lived on the margins, one might expect that Caitlin's parents would have been less inclined to derogate the unemployed as much as those unfamiliar with hardship. Again, BJW theory provides a useful lens through which to help explain the dissemination of attitudes which are contrary to people's own interests. Literature has established that subordinated groups will falsely blame each other for phenomena to defend their just-world beliefs, instead of turning attention to the dominant group whose culpability goes unchallenged (Jost, 1995).

For Skye, the performative role of the family as a harbinger of governmentality to uphold neoliberal values was evident in the suffering she experienced by not attaining the educational standards expected of her. The child of Vietnamese migrants, Skye's suffering was compounded by racialised stereotypes of Asian exceptionalism in work ethic, ambition and educational success. The phenomenon of the model minority Asian family as 'exemplary neoliberal subjects defined by flexibility, high human capital and opportunistic mobility' was examined in detail by Koshy (2013, p. 346). Similarly, Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) has been celebrated for lauding the disciplinary methods of parenting required to accumulate and reproduce the human capital demanded by neoliberal conditions (Watkins et al., 2019). Children of Asian migrants who fell outside the 'success frame' norm were likely to perceive themselves as outliers, and even seek distance from their ethnic communities and identities (Lee & Zhou, 2019, p. 2321). Relatedly, Skye's decision to remove herself from the family home and friendship networks would seem consistent with the

pressured expectations imposed on children of Asian immigrants. Ruby, also the daughter of Vietnamese migrants, similarly told of being othered by members of her extended family who disapproved of her unemployment and engagement with insecure work.

... all the time when we went to our family gatherings, that was the talk of the town. It's like, okay, you know, you compare your cousins and all that. Oh, you know, they're 'Ruby, have you found a job yet?' I wouldn't be able to share them [sic] about, you know, my side gigs, and the work that I actually do to like help people in the community.

The contradictions of Workfare and active citizenship discourses were surfaced through the judgements of Ruby's relatives. They were critical of her not maximising the 'privilege' of attending university and for undertaking gig-economy and voluntary work. The justification for mandated Workfare draws heavily upon active citizenship discourses which champion volunteerism through the provision of service to the community (Cash, 2017). Yet despite volunteering with a youth NFP to provide meals for the homeless and having assumed the actualised habits of the entrepreneurial self to traverse a precarious labour market, Ruby's efforts were diminished. Family members critiqued her citizenship bona fides against market criteria which established that the wage a person commanded represented the true indicator of their worth (Boland, 2021). Asked if she felt less valued because of her career 'choices', Ruby conveyed the attitudes of those who judged her:

It's not real work, it's not stable. It's not like [sic] proper job, you know. There's no, you know, everyone's either nurse, doctor or accountant [sic], or that kind of stuff. There's no, and explaining in Vietnamese, can you imagine? So yeah, the pressure's definitely on to make lots of money and also ... the whole expectation of family and stuff. Very, very high. Very high.

It was these performative, prefigurative acts of resistance by Skye and Ruby that provided evidence of how some young people were unwilling to consciously accept being governed according to neoliberal narratives perpetuated by family as an apparatus of civil society. Skye was resigned to abandoning a career in youth work due to a values misalignment with New Public Management philosophies. However,

she was not prepared to compromise her principles by conforming with her parents' conception of educational, professional and financial success, even if acquiescing in returning to the family home offered relief from the material deprivations she endured. Similarly, in resisting the pressures imposed by extended family members to embrace 'real work', Ruby refused to subscribe to dominant discursive discourse which differentiated between valued and undervalued employment.

Skye embraced the utility of volunteerism as a responsibilised jobseeker who was wanting to solidify herself as 'job ready'. This appellation, synonymous with Workfare discourse, denoted a specific conception of the world associated with the 'spontaneous philosophy' which allowed individuals to make sense of their world (Gramsci, 1971, p. 323). However, as Skye's experiences revealed, neoliberal notions of personal responsibility were easily manipulated to create self-doubt and confusion in the jobseeker's mind. Skye had followed the neoliberal rules of competitive conduct by undertaking unpaid work, which Workfare discourse upheld as being obligatory if the unemployed young person was to remedy their moral inadequacies and build human capital (Wyn, 2015). Though ultimately, Skye was forced to question her own choices, as both her parents and a former employer were sceptical of the utility of her volunteering.

He [the employer] reckoned I stayed as a volunteer for too long because I should only do it for two months and then start asking for a paid position, Skye stated. [Employers] probably look at your resume and they see more volunteering. What they're questioning ... would be, 'Why hasn't she been able to get a stable job?'

The response of Skye's former employer again highlighted how, when confronted with clear evidence of an injustice perpetuated on a victim, a common reaction was to victim-blame to reduce the level of perceived injustice (Lerner, 1998). Lucas, who had volunteered with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, as well as with services providing mental health support to young people, likewise recalled encounters with 'distant relatives that would judge you'. They did not regard his volunteering to be 'real work'. Cassie similarly had her job search efforts and motivation to work interrogated by cousins:

They're like, 'Have you found a job yet? Are you looking?' I'm like, 'Yes, I'm trying!'

Watkins et al. (2019) criticised cultural essentialist explanations of parental approaches and educational outcomes for being 'simplistic', lacking social context and not accounting for 'enormous variation within this cohort' (Watkins et al., 2019, p. 2284). Regardless, the anxiety created by an aspirational outlook of Asian migrants that is interwoven with academic and financial success (Ho, 2020) was keenly felt by Ally, who like Ruby and Skye, was also a first-generation Australian of Vietnamese heritage. To this extent, Ally's unemployment not only weakened her citizenship identity, but it also challenged her self-conception as an adult daughter of immigrant parents.

Um, so I couldn't support my parents and they were paying a lot of, you know, because I was living with them, they were paying for my food, they were paying for my electricity, my Wi-Fi, so like, basically everything. I was around like 20, I don't know, around my 20s, and yeah, I just felt like, 'My God, I should be helping them,' 'cos they're not really working, and I'm like, young and fit, so I should be out there doing stuff, so.

The erosion of cultural identity as illustrated by Ally can be appreciated through the value many migrant families place on education as a 'means for achieving social mobility', and in also 'ensuring the family's future' (Watkins et al., 2019, pp. 2285, 2289). Through an acceptance that she was duty-bound to ensure the security and wellbeing of family members, Ally assumed the subjective mentality of the responsibilised neoliberal citizen. Her perspective also demonstrated the effectiveness of neoliberal discourses which have situated ageing 'as a deficit that must be managed primarily by individuals and their families' (Asquith, 2009, p. 256). The policy response of neoliberal governments to the perceived impact of an ageing population on public health and aged-care expenditure has been the promotion of personal responsibility. The discourse of positive ageing adopted by Australian governments since the 1990s requires:

individuals to be responsible for the outcomes of their life choices [particularly in relation to health and income]; communities to provide the

social support required for individuals to make better choices over their life-course; and governments to provide the infrastructure for both individuals and communities to give 'life' to these better choices.

(Asquith, 2009, p. 260)

Through such public policy discourse, the term 'communities' and 'family' become interchangeable. The self-responsibilised ideology famously advanced by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of there being no such thing as societies, only individual men and women, and then families (Harvey, 2005), inscribed the role performed by the family in maintaining and reproducing the neoliberal socio-economic order (Stratton, 2016). For Cooper (2020), the enforcement through neoliberal discourse of kinship obligations as the alternative to the mid-20th-century welfare state – and as understood by Ally – reflected a resumption of British and North American poor laws traditions and the guiding principle of family responsibility. To support this position, Cooper referenced the writings of Richard A. Epstein, the influential Chicago School legal scholar. Epstein argued that the rules of social welfare should 'follow the basic pattern of natural obligation as it is perceived to arise within families' (Epstein & Epstein, 1999, p. 23), and that fundamental to the task of neoliberal welfare reform was a 'precise translation of the poor law philosophy within the family' (Cooper, 2020, p. 111).

8.8 Workfare discourse can be internalised differently depending on cultural identity and promote resistance to the dominant narrative

Ashleigh's self-image as a jobless young person diverged from other research participants by her insistence that she had not felt diminished by family members for being unemployed. After completing her education, Ashleigh had not maintained contact with friends from secondary school, preferring instead to associate mostly with immediate family. Hällsten et al. (2017) identified how segregated networks reduced social capital by denying potential personal contact with labour market actors. Yet it had equally been established that the psychological stresses of unemployment could be cushioned by the prevalence of unemployment in one's proximate social context (Clark, 2003). In Ashleigh's case, an older sister had undertaken WfD activity, while her mother was currently unemployed and subjected to mutual obligation

requirements. It was common for Australian Muslim mothers to prioritise home duties over paid employment. In Kabir's 2008 study of the family values and responsibilities assigned to Australian Muslim schoolgirls, the researcher interviewed 39 females aged between 15 and 18 years. The mothers of just three of the research participants were in the workforce. Kabir acknowledged that discrimination, due to visibility (Islamic clothing) or Arabic names, was also a barrier to employment and could potentially account for this disparity in workforce participation.

Before becoming pregnant and withdrawing from the labour market, Ashleigh's elder female sibling had been a casual childcare worker. An older brother's income was also dependent on insecure gig-economy work sourced through an online marketplace which connected home owners and property managers with tradespersons. It was this proximate social context of Ashleigh's family's experience with labour market uncertainty that helped mitigate against the deterioration of her subjective wellbeing (Clark, 2003). Asked to describe how being unemployed had adversely affected her in non-monetary ways, Ashleigh paused to ponder the question before responding: 'I can't really explain that. There's no ... any other way.' Consequently, it was Ashleigh's cultural identity which helped buffer against the harmful effects of having jobseekers internalise responsibility for their unemployment and thus reject Workfare characterisations of unemployed young people which positioned them as lazy and deficient. Furthermore, unlike other young interviewees whose transitions to independent adulthood were delayed by unemployment which necessitated they remained in or returned to the family home, Ashleigh did not have to grapple with such tensions. As a first-generation Australian-born Muslim woman, she was expected to remain living at home until married. Her family's cultural beliefs also sustained an explicit understanding of gendered roles and the division of labour within the family unit. As Ashleigh explained:

In my religion, like the man supports the woman. Um, my other sister, she's married with her husband. So, she done [sic] a hairdressing course, yeah. But now she's just at home, at home more, and he just supports her.

Just as the young people in this research were not a homogenous grouping despite their common age, geographic location and unemployment status, unemployed Australian Muslim women cannot be reduced to a single unique identity (Ali, 2019).

Their selfhoods were constituted by a 'diverse range of complex and intersecting identify relations' (Keddie et al., 2019, p. 4). For instance, Ashleigh did not wear a hijab when interviewed for the research or during WfD activity. A study which examined the representation of second-generation Australian Lebanese women as being 'lost between cultures' (Poynting, 2009, p. 373) pointed to the exaggeration of gender relations within Muslim communities by the dominant cultural discourse. Routine narratives that Muslim women experienced gender discrimination in their families and communities (Keddie et al., 2019) produced beliefs amongst non-Muslims that cultural differences contributed to the disadvantage of Australian Muslim jobseekers (Nilan, 2012). For first-generation Australian Muslim females like Ashleigh, who identified foremost as Lebanese, negotiating a bi-cultural identity was complex, especially when mainstream attitudes suggested Islam was incompatible with Australian values such as gender equality (Kabir, 2008). By questioning or resisting the authority of patriarchy and religion, these young women not only risked undermining familial relationships but were rendered vulnerable if such supports were removed in a society where they faced both sexism and racism (Khan, 2002). Hence, although Ashleigh desired a level of financial independence that paid employment conferred, family and cultural expectations to conform with her 'private domain' (Kabir, 2008, p. 53) somewhat moderated the harmful effects of internalised Workfare discourse.

8.9 Disenfranchised masculinities: neoliberalism and shifting gendered expectations

As a married father of two young children, Xavier's personal circumstances were distinct from other young interviewees. Yet the spectre of the family in informing his neoliberal subjectivity was equally pronounced. Notable in Xavier's chronicle was the disconnect between the discursive ideology which positioned the family at the centre of capitalist reproduction and expansion, gendered expectations of a male breadwinner (McDowell, 2018) and his decreased opportunities for economic participation. Xavier did not complete secondary school, held only modest vocational qualifications and his employment history consisted exclusively of manual labouring jobs. He was representative of a disenfranchised male cohort of young, semi-skilled and unskilled workers to have experienced downward economic mobility due to the global economic reorganisation and deindustrialisation that have been hallmarks of

neoliberalism (Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015). This cohort's exchanges with the labour market have typically become a repetitious 'low-pay/no-pay cycle' (Shildrick et al., 2012, p. 79). This cycle had coincided with the emergence of a 'reverse gender order' (Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015, p. 784) established through the feminisation (McDowell, 2018) of the post-industrial knowledge economy and rapid growth of flexible 'servicing' occupations (Nixon, 2018, p. 55). When interviewed, Xavier was undertaking homemaker duties as his wife, a beauty therapist, had assumed the role of the family's primary income earner following the easing of Victoria's COVID-19 restrictions. Xavier gave the impression of having embraced the role of stay-at-home parent. It was equally apparent that the material conditions of Xavier's unemployment were not the only cause of his dissonance with his masculine self-identity as worker/provider.

And so, going from, going out every day, um. Regular routine would be get up, get my son ready for kindergarten or childcare. Take him out there. Go to work, grab myself some breakfast or a coffee on the way to work. Get at the worksite, work until um, 'bout [sic] 5 o'clock, then go pick my son up at 6 at child care and go home. So, from going out for eight, 10 hours a day, to maybe, ah, to doing nothing, sitting at home. That really, kind of, messed with me mentally. I was really frustrated at not being able to do anything productive, other than sit at home all day.

Xavier's portrayal of his unemployment accords with a seminal body of sociological literature which has associated psychological distress with the deprivation of latent functions provided by employment, including 'time structure, regular shared experiences, participation in a collective purpose and effort, and enforced regular activity' (Jahoda, 1982, p. 188). With regard to assigned status and identity, the deprivation of these latent functions as a result of unemployment is said to have generated a 'crisis of masculinity', principally for working-class males unable to fulfil the expectations of being responsible for the financial wellbeing of their families (Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015, p. 784). Connell et al. (1998) proposed that the neoliberal agenda had produced a hegemonic masculinity which controlled society's dominant institutions and drew attention to how masculinity existed and was practised in multiple forms. This 'plurality and hierarchy of masculinities' (Connell et al., 1998,

p. 3) was arranged across intersecting lines of class, ethnicity, age, region and sexuality, with the type of work performed by males acting to separate vying forms of masculinity (Nixon, 2018). For Xavier and those whose economic and social circumstances mirrored his, a body politic in which they could identify and seek a solidarity of common purpose was said to not exist. In its place was an ideological world view perceived to serve the interests of a wide range of societal groups (Lears, 1985).

In practice, it was the dominant group's interests that were ultimately best served. A society comprised of 'individual entrepreneurs and consumers' was essentially preoccupied with strategising for their own survival. Under these conditions, it has been argued that subjugated individuals like Xavier had neither the means nor will to organise with others to recognise the domination exerted over them, let alone mount collective resistance to these conditions (Brown, 2005, p. 43). A contrary perspective to this claim is that the disenfranchisement of white working-class males has been fundamental to the rise of right-wing nationalist populism. Data collected from young males primarily of 'blue collar' sectors of the Australian labour force found many expressed 'anti-government sentiments and the discourse of white-male victimhood' and 'were nostalgic for stereotypical masculinity' (Nolan et al., 2023, p. 1).

The hegemonic masculinity of those at the uppermost end of the labour market was displayed by their 'independence, economic and symbolic power, and status' (Nixon, 2018, p. 56). Conversely, males at the bottom rung saw their jobs vanish through the feminisation of low-paid employment. Working-class masculinity was further challenged by employment options largely limited to low-level, female-dominated, service-sector jobs requiring vastly different skills and attributes to those associated with men's 'usual' or desired work (Nixon, 2018, p. 55). For Xavier, dissatisfaction 'at not being able to do anything productive' revealed his understanding of child-rearing as non-work and presented a highly gendered conceptualisation which demarcated domestic care duties from that of paid work performed outside the home (Craig & Churchill, 2020).

A broader impact of governmental rationalities on Xavier's sense concerned his dislocation from the function of primary family provider, as captured by his despondency at being unable to realise the aspiration of home ownership. Neoliberal

assumptions of home ownership reinforced responsibilised discourses ‘about the individual and social benefits of owning a home ... in which to raise children’ and in promoting ‘more committed active citizenship’ (Saegert et al., 2009, p. 300). Home ownership formed a central pillar for shaping citizenship identities in neoliberal society via ‘family formation, mobility and asset accumulation’ (Forrest & Hirayama, 2009, p. 999) and was upheld as a marker of the active citizen’s successful transition to adulthood (McDowell, 2018). These assumptions controverted the realities of a housing market where less than half of Melbourne properties were affordable to the highest earning 20 per cent of first-home buyers (Fitzsimmons, 2021). One young person interviewed highlighted the extreme measures a peer had taken to become a home owner. In addition to her full-time employment with a bank, this young person was ‘sacrificing their sleep’ by working two part-time hospitality jobs on weekends. Spiralling cost-of-living pressures have been attributed to a marked increase in the numbers of young people in full-time employment taking on a second job to manage sharp increases in rent, utilities, groceries and fuel (Aubrey, 2022). This reporting paralleled *Labour Account Australia* figures from the June 2022 quarter which showed that the number of Australians working more than one job was the highest on record (ABS, 2022a).

Discourses that imposed stigma on individuals who did not attain home ownership through their supposed lack of industriousness, knowledge and financial literacy did not countenance the effects of neoliberal policies which individualised risks in all spheres of life (Saegert et al., 2009). For Xavier, the savings he and his partner had accumulated for a home loan deposit ‘basically went to the gutter’ as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns and his subsequent loss of employment. Xavier had been hopeful of reviving the goal of home ownership after gaining contract hours with a transport company. That was until a serious injury sustained when the truck he was driving rolled in a traffic accident exposed Xavier’s vulnerability as a ‘disposable’ worker (Wyn & Woodman, 2006, p. 506) and further entrenched him and his family in the ‘precariat’ (Woodman, 2012, p. 14). Still, Xavier chose to blame his predicament on COVID-19 lockdowns. Despite having experienced unemployment prior to the pandemic, and being ineligible for the JobKeeper payment, Xavier did not critique the prevailing structural sources of inequality that had limited his employment options to a capricious cycle of low-paid, insecure work. His grievance was with health experts

whose ‘silly’ advice resulted in lockdowns. In downplaying the seriousness of COVID-19, doubting the efficacy of vaccines and repeating talking points of conspiracy theorists, Xavier provided additional evidence of how factually false beliefs are motivationally defended by victims of injustice to enable them to psychologically cope with threats to their security (Lerner, 1998).

8.10 Conclusion

This chapter confirmed the critical role performed by civil society in reproducing the unequal power relations that sustained neoliberal ideology. As a consequence of the dominance of free market logic which had outsourced essential welfare services, commodified education and corporatised the NFP sector, the social contract was an exotic notion for young people. They had been conditioned by the dominant discourse to be self-reliant and responsibilise through personal choices their unemployment and any other hardships experienced. Manifest in the subjectivities produced by individualising Workfare discourses was the false consciousness and defence of false beliefs conveyed by young people. These beliefs invariably acted against their best interests. Alongside the education system, the family was shown as the most effective disciplinary mechanism of civil society to reconfigure the individual into a jobseeker, in the form of human capital ‘morally responsible for navigating the social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculations’ (Hamman, 2009, p. 37). Family influence highlighted how neoliberal values were diffused through the subtle means of consensus rather than the overt use of state force. Notwithstanding this, depending on cultural background and identity, the research revealed that family beliefs could reinforce neoliberal attitudes and mitigate against harmful Workfare discourse. And again, small acts of refusal and moments of micro resistance enacted by the young people revealed how they strategised for immediate wellbeing and survivance as they navigated everyday actions, discourse and social practices.

The following chapter will describe and interpret the significance of the findings. To move the analysis beyond particular specifics, provide a broader perspective to the findings and explain the implications of any novel insights or unexpected findings, the discussion will reconnect with the research aims, overarching research question and research sub-questions.

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

9.1 Introduction

Before interpreting and elaborating on the research findings, it is necessary to revisit the overarching research question upon which the study was predicated. That is:

How did young people residing in Melbourne's western suburbs, who had participated in mandated Work for the Dole activity, understand their experiences of long-term unemployment during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

The research aimed to:

- mobilise Foucault's theory of governmentality, as well as Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's BJW theory, to critically examine young people's experiences of long-term unemployment and precarity amidst the economic, social and political disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic
- surface the voice of low social status, highly controlled and largely silenced young people who are marginalised by neoliberal Workfare policies which perpetuate insecure employment, precarity and wealth inequality.

Three research sub-questions underpinned the overarching research problem and provided the basis upon which findings were organised and interpreted. These were:

- How was neoliberal ideology, which positions joblessness as an individual responsibility, internalised by young people as they experienced unemployment during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns?
- What effect did the implementation of Keynesian-type monetary interventions by the neoliberal Australian Government, as a response to the COVID-19 crisis, have on the subjectivity of young people as jobseekers and citizens?
- In what ways did these young people resist the discursive practices of neoliberalism which ascribe long-term unemployment to psychological and moral deficiencies?

The research rationale identified a critical moment during the COVID-19 emergency, when the Australian Government temporarily retreated from key neoliberal principles.

Within this context, sub-questions one and two were designed to interrogate dominant discourses of individualism, self-responsibilisation and Workfare, and to contribute original insights into how such discourses may be disrupted or reconfigured in times of crisis. To contextualise the findings, I shall briefly restate the methodology applied to investigate and critically analyse the research problem. The project was situated in the critical paradigm and placed central importance on the experiences of the young people studied. Adopting a qualitative methodological approach enabled the young people to ascribe meaning to their experiences of long-term unemployment, Workfare and precarity during COVID-19 lockdowns. The research design took the form of FDA. Young people were selected by using a purposive, convenience method of sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis.

9.2 Key findings

This section highlights and briefly summarises the overall key findings in relation to the three research sub-questions.

9.2.1 Unemployed young people continued to internalise individual responsibility during COVID-19 lockdowns

Although the pandemic offered some respite from stigma associated with joblessness, for the young people interviewed, the relaxing of societal attitudes that responsabilised their unemployment was experienced as short-lived. Despite recognising that job search was made more problematic by the pandemic, and from accounts which identified how lockdowns disadvantaged the most marginalised jobseekers, young people continued to ascribe their unemployment and precarity to personal choices and deficits. In doing so, the young people's thoughts and actions reinforced the efficacy of Workfare activation in having individuals approve of government policy that acted against their best interests.

Data were consistent with existing research which established how Workfare interventions and discourse induced feelings amongst young people of shame and self-loathing. Findings which revealed the various ways young people assumed responsibility for managing their own risks further supported the theory that the techniques and discursive practices of neoliberal governmentality had reduced young

people's dependency on the state and limited their faith in the existence or efficacy of a social contract.

9.2.2 The effect of the once-in-a-century pandemic, and the unprecedented monetary interventions implemented in response, had negligible effect on the subjectivities of unemployed young people

Young people's narratives revealed how the Australian Government's response to the crisis created by COVID-19 led to – for a period of time at least – certain improvements to their subjective wellbeing. Essentially, however, young people remained complicit in their own control and oppression by both tacitly and overtly justifying the neoliberal narrative of active and passive citizenship which determined the deservedness of state support. The unprecedented economic measures implemented by the Australian Government would have seemingly validated the assertion that unemployment could be a consequence of factors beyond an individual's control. Yet data provided limited evidence to suggest that the internalised subjectivities of young people as jobseekers and citizens were discernibly different from those who were the focus of Australian Workfare studies conducted prior to the pandemic.

9.2.3 Young people exhibited resistance at interpersonal levels to the discursive practices of neoliberalism and Workfare

The research identified instances in which young people sought to resist Workfare practices. These acts were invariably shown to be at a lower or proximal level, directed at a perceived 'immediate enemy' (Foucault, 1982, p. 211) and not at the true cause of their oppression. At times these acts produced adverse consequences for the resister. Findings supported literature which contended that only limited forms of resistance or protest were possible under the power relations produced and sustained by neoliberal governmentality. Yet nascent, individual acts of resistance could still transform ways of thinking and behaving outside of institutionalised, representative politics (Moreira Fians, 2022) and were a micro-level form of political strategy that Törnberg (2011) predicated on a reimagining of society. In this way, these acts cannot be minimised as they occurred in the environments the young people occupied. These acts also substantiated Foucault's conceptualisation of the mediation of discourse within the constitution of power relations, by exhibiting the co-existence of dominant

and resistant discourses or, according to Gramsci's hegemony theory, common sense versus good sense.

Resistance was evidenced by how each of the young people strategised to negotiate and survive as best they could the harsh conditions of Workfare, stigma and material deprivation. Although at times they were resigned to the coercion and control exercised over them by the state, they were not entirely willing participants in the neoliberal system either. Skye, for example, deployed discursive resistance to call out exploitative work practices and by refusing to be paid less than award-rate wages. Discursive resistance was similarly displayed by Caitlin in her dismissiveness of job interview role-plays in which jobseekers were coached to provide perfect answers when applying for low-skilled work. In viewing employment as a straightforward exchange of labour for payment, Caitlin rejected the notion of a psychological contract between employee and employer as was sustained by neoliberal rationalities.

Anecdotes were provided of young people resisting the normalisation of WfD through a lack of commitment to formal tasks assigned to them by scrolling through their smartphones or watching YouTube clips. As a means to maintain her self-respect, Cassie refused a directive from her jobactive provider to enrol in online training due to her mistreatment by a previous training organisation. Similarly, Ruby's decision to withdraw from WfD, which resulted in her being denied income support, epitomised what Foucault referred to as specific acts of performative resistance (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) to Workfare practices which eroded one's humanity.

Lucas enacted agency to disrupt the power imbalance that existed between himself and his jobactive provider by insisting he be permitted to source his own WfD activity. Although he would have preferred to avoid WfD altogether, undertaking office administration skills training with YouthNow's BizE Centre afforded him a level of dignity that mandated cleaning activity did not. Meanwhile, the form of resistance adopted by Ashleigh, while less overt than some of her peers in this research, was still consequential. In rejecting the characterisation of her unemployment as being the result of personal choices and individual deficits, Ashleigh was to some extent able to distance herself from the harmful effects of problematic Workfare discourse. Thus, her resistance was anchored in her cultural identity and familial support as she performed

the expected role in her community, evading the dominant discourses that placed blame on individuals for being lazy or undeserving.

Foucault's central tenet of governmentality conceptualised as 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2008, p. 186) was discernible on occasions in the way young people who considered themselves to have choice and agency thought and acted in accordance with the demands and confines imposed on them by unequal power relations. Analysis established that resistance was further suppressed by discursive neoliberal techniques which did not allow for young people's suffering to be expressed or critically analysed collectively. In this way collective 'conscientization' (Freire, 1998), organisation and solidarity were often, but not always, rendered untenable by the techniques of surveillance and control applied to jobseekers and labour market participants more broadly. An exception identified in this research was the consciousness of Ally and her friends to engage in collective care as resistance to the neoliberal state. They did this by establishing online networks to support peers experiencing mental health challenges during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Within the conceptual framework of a Foucauldian account of power, 'resistance is an integral component of power relations and overlaps with it' (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 5). While resistance is often regarded as a collective exercise of public political activity, Foucault recognised how the diffusion of resistance to power – through one's self-construction of an identity and the 'care of the self' (Foucault, 1982, p. 212) – could still challenge institutions and normalisations and provide agency to those often constructed as powerless and victims (Watson, 2000). Resistance, as exhibited by the young people interviewed for this study, occurred at localised or proximal levels, and confirmed the Foucauldian perspective of power relations whereby 'subjectivity' was frequently 'a site of struggle and resistance' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85).

9.3 Relevance of findings

Findings were consistent with existing research that has established how unemployed or precariously employed young people responsibilised their personal circumstances based on life choices, perceived deficits and failure to build sufficient human capital (Diprose, 2022; Kelly, 2017; Oinonen, 2018; Wyn, 2015). Young people revealed an inclination to engage in self-blame and loathing (Peeters, 2017; Pyykkönen, 2010) and

experienced a 'double suffering' (Frost & Hoggett, 2008, p. 449) as a consequence of their unemployment. In actuality, this suffering was aggravated by the effects of the pandemic, which created a triple suffering by exacerbating inequalities in Australia. This was because, as detailed throughout this thesis, 'the social and economic impacts of the Australian Government's policy responses to COVID-19 further entrenched experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage' (O'Keeffe, 2024, p. 139).

Most of the young people interviewed were seemingly unable to recognise or articulate the structural inequities (Dick & Nadin, 2010; Worth, 2018) that were the true cause of their oppression. Consistent with the research of Sofritti et al. (2020), young people in the study reconfigured themselves as neoliberal jobseekers (Read, 2009) through an orientation geared around entrepreneurialism, employability and lifelong learning (Cotoi, 2011; Field, 2000). The efficacy of disciplinary Workfare practices of time regularity and punctuality were evidenced by how young people ultimately complied with workfare temporality (Helman, 2020) and accepted any available job (Boland, 2016). Research findings reinforced literature which demonstrated how oppressed citizens could be complicit in their own control and reproduce asymmetrical power relations (Foucault, 2008; Kopecký, 2011; Thomas, 2016). This occurred through both tacit and overt endorsement of Workfare practices, of how state support was allocated according to citizenship identities (Andrew et al., 2021), and characterisations of fellow income support recipients as undeserving (Boland, 2016).

In being transformed into malleable, neoliberal subjects, young people embodied self-reliance insofar as their expectations of the state and civil society as custodians of their welfare were modest. As previously observed by Furnham (2003) and Thompson (2015), these young people mostly accepted uncritically the injustices inflicted upon them by neoliberal governmentality. In promoting a reliance on family to provide resources to mitigate the effects of their precarity, where possible (Cuervo et al., 2023), young people revealed an adherence to neoliberal discourses which framed societies as market oriented and individualistic (Forrest & Hirayama, 2009). The compelling ideological influences of the education system and the family in the construction of the 'socially desirable' (Kissová, 2021, p. 151) neoliberal citizen were other recurring themes identifiable from the accounts provided by young people.

Significantly, and as is consistent with a Foucauldian conception of power relations, resistance was observable through the young people's accounts of their long-term unemployment, precarity and marginalisation by discursive neoliberal Workfare practices. While not engaged in collective protest or action, they were not helpless or uncritical actors either. Chapter 3 foregrounded how young people are historically and socially constructed as a youth identity category through dominant political and sociohistorical perspectives (Harris, 2009). This category is situated in opposition to 'adulthood' (White & Wyn, 1997, p. 9) and depicts young people according to deficit-account narratives in which they lack knowledge, good judgement and independence (Bessant, 2023). Through these representations young people are infantilised by their exclusion from public discourse on issues affecting them (Daley et al., 2024). Neither did the disruption caused by the pandemic shift the way additional challenges for young people were largely interpreted through an adult lens (Daley et al., 2024).

Despite this, in varying degrees all of the young people interviewed resisted Workfare discourse and techniques as a means of navigating and surviving the severe neoliberal environment they inhabited. Far from being passive victims neutralised by the 'hegemony' of neoliberalism (Côté, 2014, p. 528), the young people challenged 'adultist' (Bessant, 2023, p. 425) characterisations of themselves through nascent, individual acts of resistance. That the young people's resistance to power was diffused across their 'everyday' (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 5) lives aligned with the prominence Foucault afforded the local and immediate nature of resistance (Hamann, 2009). The young people's pushing back against the dominant narrative demonstrated the 'innumerable points of confrontation and instability' (Watson, 2000, p. 68) that made resistance possible, and positioned subjectivity the site of struggle (Ball & Olmedo, 2013).

9.3.1 COVID-19, young people and precarity: transformative potential or continuity?

Findings have verified much of what is already advanced in current literature, and new knowledge was generated by the confluence of unprecedented events created by COVID-19, including the Keynesian response of a neoliberal Australian Government to the social and economic disruption wrought by the pandemic. The study was unique, as the research question was posed at a time and within a context which were novel.

The pump-priming of the economy was a direct contradiction of neoliberal doctrine that state intervention in the functioning of the free market should be limited (Archer, 2009). These actions invited an opportunity to contest neoliberal discursive practices which responsibilised long-term unemployment (Mead, 1992) and depicted income support recipients as morally and psychologically deficient (Bottrell, 2007; Diprose, 2022; Fletcher & Flint, 2018; McGann et al., 2020). This last point was especially pertinent given the proposition that the economic and ideological response to the pandemic unified Australians. Or, as claimed by Prime Minister Morrison at the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia, 'there is not more support for some than others' and 'we are all in this together' (Morrison, 2020).

During the initial stages of the pandemic, some researchers speculated as to the possibilities extraordinary state responses to COVID-19 presented to reform the economic system. For instance, Matthewman and Huppertz (2020) wrote enthusiastically of transformative opportunities with regard to 'welfare reform, progressive taxation, nationalisation, and universal basic income (UBI)' (p. 675). Weisstanner (2022) contemplated an increase in support for UBI given the 'emergency' (p. 96) fiscal measures enacted by European nations in response to COVID-19. Similarly, it was claimed that the inadequacy of neoliberal states to protect those most vulnerable to the health, economic and social consequences of the pandemic was likely to force governments to revisit and rejuvenate the social contract (Razavi et al., 2020). The findings from this study established that the COVID-19 crisis did shift (albeit temporarily) the dominant neoliberal narrative that unemployment was the consequence of an individual's failings. In various ways, young people recalled community sentiment that was more accepting of the unemployed person's plight. The fact that all had family members, friends and acquaintances facing the prospect of joblessness and economic hardship solidified the changed narrative. Ultimately though, the research revealed that government policies implemented at the height of the pandemic served to reinforce the neoliberal narrative of active and passive citizenship (Mead, 1997) by distinguishing between those who were and were not deserving of state support (Andrew et al., 2021; Boland, 2016).

The young people interviewed for this research *were* treated differently to more privileged segments of society by their exclusion from COVID-19 safety-net measures.

They were 'othered' (Dencker-Larsen & Lundberg, 2016, p. 5) by the continuation of disciplinary Workfare measures which denied them full citizenship status (Wood, 2013) and meant the burden of the pandemic fell more heavily on them. In this respect the Australian Government's pandemic response represented a pivotal moment for the neoliberal project and Workfare as a pillar of this strategy. The transformative potential to disrupt the economic system did not materialise as this system merely adapted to preserve the prevailing state of order. This was accomplished by the Australian Government's creation of 'a preferable economic and regulatory environment for business' that made marginalised Australians more vulnerable to the social and economic crises of the pandemic (O'Keeffe, 2024, p. 142).

Relatedly, literature has highlighted how public discourse fuelled the perception of a COVID-19-induced mental health crisis among young people. In Australia alone, public commentators, experts and politicians claimed that the effects of lockdowns, isolation and further delayed transitions to adulthood were potentially lifelong (Daley et al., 2024). That the mental health of young people deteriorated as a consequence of the pandemic is not disputed. According to Shidhaye (2023), 'a meta-analysis that included 80,879 youth globally found that the prevalence of depression and anxiety doubled during COVID-19 compared to pre-pandemic estimates' (Shidhaye, 2023, p. 53). Yet the narrow framing of young people's mental health challenges as being a derivative of COVID-19 warrants critique. As Cuervo et al. (2023) noted in their study tracking the transition to adulthood of young Australians, the conditions of employment precarity preceded the COVID-19 crisis, and 'the disruption and anxiety that it caused was by no means a new experience' (Cuervo et al., 2023, p. 620) for a large portion of their study's participants.

Hence, the politicisation of young people's mental health during pandemic lockdowns and their aftermath was ill-informed. Data confirms that paradoxically, those most in need of psychological support are more likely to encounter structural barriers to accessing care (Shidhaye, 2023). Such was the experience of Skye, whose mental health condition went untreated due to the prohibitive cost of care, a lack of available transport options, workforce shortages, and service access-point gatekeepers who trivialised her challenges. Certainly, the increased focus in public discourse on young people's mental health did not make any material difference to the lives of those

interviewed for this research. Ally, for instance, formed a self-help group to support the mental wellbeing of friends and peers, having observed that young people had to 'fend for themselves during COVID'. Cassie, meanwhile, concluded that given the systemic inhibitors to support she encountered, seeking treatment for her anxiety required more effort than it was seemingly worth. These outcomes align with a recent study which demonstrated how the needs of young people not in education, employment or training in the UK were further relegated during the COVID-19 crisis by over-extended welfare support services which favoured those who had previously experienced less hardship. As Wrigley (2023) found, COVID-19 emergency social welfare and labour-market activation measures were mostly geared towards those considered more likely to re-engage in education, employment or training.

What these findings again demonstrate is that young people, already significantly disadvantaged by their precarity, uncertain futures and continued marginalisation by discursive Workfare practices, were not considered deserving of equitable support according to the Australia Government's pandemic response. COVID-19 simply imposed additional burdens on these young people which exacerbated the scarring effects already caused by their circumstances (Borland, 2020; Jackson, 2020). That key political players 'were keen to virtue-signal their commitment' (Daley et al., 2024, p. 361) to young people's mental health during pandemic lockdowns invites scrutiny, given the neoliberal state's failure to address decades-long declines in young people's financial independence and mental wellbeing. Herein lies scope for future research to explore such contradictions within dominant public discourse and explicitly, the notion of the 'newness' of precarity (Curevo et al., 2023, p. 607), particularly as the impacts of COVID-19 and climate change create economic and psychological aftershocks. Can contestations of these narratives provide the impetus to challenge existing policies which neglect investments in young people's wellbeing and futures compared to other age groups more readily provided with support? (Baxter & Carroll, 2022; Daley et al., 2024)

The research findings also reaffirmed the efficacy of governmentality in sustaining the neoliberal project during COVID-19 lockdowns, despite conditions which some theorists considered were conducive for affecting structural change. Tellingly, each of the young people interviewed expressed attitudes which were contrary to their own

best interests and served to advance those of society's dominant groups (Lears, 1985). European Union and OECD labour market policies have even associated COVID-19 with additional opportunities for young people to enhance their employability by being enterprising and entrepreneurial (Carbajo & Kelly, 2023). This proposition was corroborated by accounts provided during the research. Young people's energies were directed to enhancing their brand marketability and diversification of skillsets. Conventional job search techniques were dismissed as incompatible with the rules of competitive conduct (Hamann, 2009) as demanded by the unpredictable labour market. Most participants had turned their attention to pursuing multiple jobs across various sectors, niche markets and the gig economy, or to developing start-ups.

9.3.2 Catalyst for change through young people's engagement with new modes of civil engagement?

The research aimed to interrogate the legitimacy of Workfare doctrine that ascribed long-term unemployment to a person's moral and psychological deficits. Australian Government pandemic interventions showed this proposition to be untrue. The status quo remained both during and following the lifting of COVID-19 lockdowns. Nevertheless, it is recognised that the young people who participated in the research did engage in activity to resist Workfare practices. These acts were invariably exercised at the borders of the young people's governed spaces. Under limits imposed by neoliberal governmentality, such acts are said to be the only forms of protest available (Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2012). Yet in applying the conceptual lens of Foucauldian governmentality and FDA to their experiences of unemployment and precarity, it was apparent that the young people made use of and generated power in a number of ways. Through their thinking and actions they were able to contribute to power relations. As observed by Törnberg (2021), prefigurative or micro acts of resistance – such as the examples provided earlier – had the capacity to promote a reimagining outside of institutionalised politics of what society could be like (Moreira Fians, 2022). It was this reimagining that enabled the preconditions necessary to make Gramsci's conception of counter-hegemony a possibility (Robinson, 2005).

In terms of the formation of a collective critical consciousness to produce change, the challenges remain formidable. The likelihood of disparate social groups coalescing to

advance a common purpose – what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) described as the chains of equivalence – appeared remote when the findings of the *2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report* were released. This report measures attitudes to ‘immigration, trust in others and in the government, multiculturalism, and perceptions of financial security and happiness’ (O’Donnell, 2023, p. 3). It identified that the Scanlon–Monash Index of social cohesion had declined to its lowest score since the project commenced in 2007. Among significant concerns cited by Australians surveyed by the study were cost-of-living pressures, housing affordability and shortages, climate change, rising inequality, distrust of government, and a lessened sense of national pride and belonging (O’Donnell, 2023). Meanwhile, the national *General Social Survey* concluded that Australians were becoming more civically and politically detached. For example, in 2023 only a quarter of Australians belonged to social and community groups, compared with two-thirds of the population in 2006 (Vromen & Rutledge-Prior, 2023).

Despite the realisation from findings that the forces of neoliberal governmentality are seemingly unassailable, green shoots of possible resistance do exist. A critical indicator is the shift in voting trends of younger-generation Australians away from the major parties, as environmental issues, housing affordability and intergenerational inequality displace political allegiances (Australian Electoral Commission, 2022; Chowdhury, 2022). Wider contextual trends which denote a spurning of institutional participation reveal the possibilities for young people to be a catalyst for change via new and emerging modes of civil engagement or alternative political action. ‘Participatory politics’ refers to a framework of ‘political engagement and activism where change is promoted through social and cultural mechanisms rather than established political institutions’ (Jenkins, 2016, p. 2). Vaughan et al. (2022) have drawn attention to alternate ways young people engage in civic activity, particularly with regard to social media and petition platforms which enable organisation around specific issues or events. Social movement protest represented by mass public demonstrations and civil disobedience is similarly being accompanied and complemented by slow or lifestyle activism. This activism describes voluntary lifestyle changes made by individuals as counter-narratives to the capital work culture and consumer culture which perpetuates social inequality and the climate emergency (della Porta & Portos, 2021).

Young people's shifting attitudes and behaviours towards work culture is personified by a decline in employee commitment referred to as 'quiet quitting' (Mahand & Caldwell, 2022, p. 9). A practice in which a worker performs the bare minimum requirements of their job description to remain employed, quiet quitting should not be attributed to a lack of motivation amongst generation Z and millennial workers. While the *Wall Street Journal* quantified more than half of US workers born in 1989 and after as not engaged in their work, it was claimed their quiet quitting was more likely a result of an unhealthy workplace environment (Ellis & Yang, 2022). This form of resistance reflects a realignment in which the wellbeing of people is valued over productivity. With reference to the cohort of young people represented by the participants in this research, quiet quitting can be viewed as a form of resistance to the precariousness of one's existence. For many young people, COVID-19 caused further disruptions to their capacity to plan for their futures and altered career-related optimism (Wake & O'Donnell, 2024). Consequently, affected young people were likely to reconsider their 'practices and orientations to the future' (Cook et al. 2024, p. 332) with regard to planning and work futures. As with the 2008 GFC, young people were most affected in the early stages of the pandemic in terms of loss of employment and reduced work hours (Borland & Coelli, 2021). And as unemployment and precarious employment impacted other life realms such as health, housing and relationships (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019), it is unsurprising that young people would engage in covert practices to subvert an economic system that did not work for them.

Another longer-term implication of the pandemic was the widespread adoption of work-from-home measures as a result of national public health orders during COVID-19 lockdowns. Through this unintended consequence of the pandemic, the landscape in many workplaces has been disrupted. Employees now expect to be able to work more flexibly if they wish (Beck & Hensher, 2020), and the justification for seeking to do so is supported by findings that working from home has minimal impact on productivity (AIHW, 2023). Evidence of Australian workers' changed attitudes to working arrangements is provided by research that found that as of July 2022, 88 per cent of Australians wanted to work from home at least partially, and 60 per cent preferred a hybrid arrangement, with days in the office and at home (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2023). A shift in the power dynamic in the employee–employer relationship is also confirmed by a *State of Future*

Work report which established that three out of every four Australian workers aged under 54 would be motivated to seek alternative employment if flexible work options did not exist in their workplace (Ruppanner et al., 2023).

With few exceptions (e.g. collective care, as enacted by one of the young people interviewed as resistance to the failings of mental health services under neoliberalism), the findings of this research largely highlight the absence of solidarity amongst young people despite shared experiences of long-term unemployment, precarity, Workfare and suffering. Opportunities might therefore exist for future research to investigate whether generational trends, mobilisation not guided by deference to elite institutions (Cohen & Kahne, 2012) and non-hierarchical, 'leaderless movements' (Tattersall et al., 2021, p. 45) can be harnessed by young people to mount collective resistance to the neoliberal techniques and discursive practices of Workfare.

The peer-based School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C) protest represents a benchmark for young people's activism. Inspired by a Swedish teenager's lone protest outside her nation's parliament urging climate change action, within months SS4C had emerged as the pre-eminent global social movement advocating for greater climate protections (Laux, 2021). The second Australian SS4C, held across capital and regional cities in September 2019, attracted the largest gathering of protesters nationwide since the 2003 marches against Australia's involvement in the military invasion of Iraq (White et al., 2021). Movements like SS4C demonstrate how networks established through social media platforms comprised of horizontal, flat structures and offering peer-to-peer learning are transforming political engagement by allowing young actors to become committed activists and reach a global audience (Boulianne et al., 2020; Tattersall et al., 2021). Could such a movement inspire solidarity amongst jobseekers that result in the fanning of nascent acts of resistance that lead to larger social movements demanding social justice and change?

This thesis further recognises that young people are a heterogeneous population whose identities are positioned differently according to intersectional differences such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and social and political context. Just as climate change represents an existential crisis for young people, so too does precarity produced by neoliberal market conditions which consigns young people to a 'continuous present' (Bone, 2019, p. 15), requires them to endure trials of ongoing

‘self-transformation’ (Boland, 2021, p. 37) and commits them to a ‘mortgaging of an uncertain future’ (Kelly, 2017, p. 57). Climate change and its impacts are highly visible in the form of recurring spectacular and catastrophic weather events. Far less tangible is the slow and symbolic violence perpetuated by the discursive techniques of Workfare which, as the research confirmed, are disguised and embedded into the practices of the everyday to problematise the individual (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016). It is this violence which silences suffering through fragmenting and isolating those subjected to Workfare by engendering feelings of shame, anxiety and worthlessness (Frost, 2019). Consequently, unemployed and precariously existing young people are denied space to develop a critical consciousness to name their experiences (Thompson, 2015) and push back against their oppression.

A general distinction can also be made between the access to material and temporal resources available to young people engaged in the SS4C movement and the cohort represented in this study. Findings reaffirmed the causal and logistical barriers which prevent those experiencing precarity from building solidarity and agitating for change. The neoliberal project ensures that these young people’s personal resources are consumed by the struggle to survive. In contrast, it has been noted that ‘educated, middle-class and privileged young people are over-represented in, and often leading, climate school strikes and mobilisations’ (della Porta & Portos, 2021, p. 25). Moreover, research has examined how working-class people can feel excluded from climate activism. One young person who participated in Arya’s 2022 study of environmental movements was critical of ‘middle-class reformists’ (Arya, 2022, p. 50) who preached lifestyle choices, such as food purchases, which ignored the realities faced by those living on the margins. Young Australians involved in movements such as SS4C are also more likely to be privileged in terms of their time commitments, socio-economic status and agency, and in having more certain future trajectories (White et al., 2021).

9.3.3 Can emerging forms of resistance and participation inspire Workfare activism among young people?

From the research findings, glimmers of hope can be found which suggest it is still possible for young people shackled by the neoliberal system and Workfare to collectively resist their oppression. A key to this opportunity is the environmental movement. The research of Arya and Henn (2021) highlighted how young climate

activists viewed the ecological and economic crises as interwoven, and Arya (2022) made the argument that young people seeking solutions to climate change are increasingly critical of capitalism and propose ecological solutions which incorporate social justice. Notably, ecological modernisation theory conceives of reduced environmental impacts being contingent on substantial reforms to capitalism (Dietz et al., 2020).

The prefigurative acts of resistance the young people deployed reflected an awareness of the practices that controlled and oppressed them. These everyday acts to survive the rules of neoliberal governmentality, in the form of strategising, non-compliance, withdrawal, subversive language, counter-narratives and refusal, were not pointless or unimportant. Even at these proximal or subjective levels, which Foucault identified as being the site where tensions between the diffusion of power and resistance most frequently occurred (Foucault, 1997), prefigurative acts of resistance had the capacity to transform ways of thinking and behaving (Törnberg, 2021), which is a precondition for structural change or counter-hegemony (Bieler & Morton, 2016).

To reimagine a society where alternatives to Workfare could exist, it is necessary to recognise that political activism is increasingly framed and expressed by young people in non-conventional ways which should not immediately be construed as disengagement or apathy (Jenkins, 2016). Levine (2006) noted the contradiction of criticisms of young people for not embracing adultist conceptions of civil and political participation that overlooked how sub-populations engaged with issues of concern to them or refused to participate in institutional politics they considered flawed and that had failed them.

Prefigurative acts of resistance gave rise to optimism that change was possible. For instance, Australian research which examined the complexity of young people's present lives in relation to their aspirations revealed evidence of how the pandemic had produced changes in the way youth prioritised and redefined their activism. For instance, a 23-year-old Melburnian employed as a climate campaigner told researchers that a sustainable post-COVID future was contingent on society addressing 'the disaster of capitalism' (Goring et al., 2023, p. 8). Although a single anecdote, the view offers insight into how the momentum behind global environmental

movements provides an opportunity to reach a broader audience in challenging the injustices of an economic system sustained by neoliberal practices, including Workfare. Young people at the forefront of mobilising environmental movements are invariably those less vulnerable to impacts of climate change (della Porta & Portos, 2021), yet many have situated 'themselves as part of a wider global community alongside members of the Global South and Indigenous communities who are affected as a marginalised group' (Arya, 2022, p. 54). It stands to reason that these young people, in furthering their understanding of the impacts of economic inequality through climate activism – including in the context of 'labour market precarity' among young people (Cook et al., 2021, p. 334) – can similarly be allies and advocates for the likes of those in this study whose oppression and suffering is silenced by neoliberal governmentality.

Allyship as a function to eliminate inequities present in social systems (Bourke, 2020) represents an opportunity for future research to examine new possibilities for resistance to Workfare ideology and practices. Allyship is the practice of 'advantaged group members' engaging in 'committed action to improve the treatment and/or status of disadvantaged groups' (Droogendyk et al., 2016, p. 4). To be effective, allies must build and maintain relationships with members of target populations and potential allies belonging to privileged groups and work with, not on behalf of, oppressed groups (Bourke, 2020). For example, climate activists might insist that existential ecological challenges cannot be addressed without a recalibration of the prevailing economic system. However, progress will not occur unless those who benefit from institutional and systemic privileges commit to dismantling these systems (Ejegi-Memeh et al., 2023).

With regard to the concept of allyship, it is necessary to appraise the capacity of future research to investigate how alternate generational trends and new forms of political action that occur outside institutional engagement can build on this thesis' findings. These findings have reinforced the ways young people are excluded from debate and policymaking around issues that affect them (Daley et al., 2024), most notably through the popular portrayal of the pandemic as 'unprecedented' (O'Keeffe, 2022, p. 1), when insecure employment, precarity and uncertain futures had already been the reality for many young people (Cuervo et al., 2023). Likewise, literature identified how

consultation with young people was rarely representative or inclusive of their experiences, and mostly relied upon a deficit approach which sought to create 'good citizens' (Vromen & Collin, 2010, p. 98).

For these reasons, for future studies to be of utility in building on this thesis' findings, the theoretical construct and research approach must challenge adultism (Corney et al., 2022, p. 4) to provide young people with spaces and strategies to project their voices and work together to reimagine new ways of being and doing. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) provides such an opportunity by working in partnership with young people to train them in 'research methods to study and improve conditions in settings relevant to their lives' (Ozer et al., 2022, p. 2). In YPAR, adult researchers 'bring knowledge of important elements of the research process and social contexts' (Bettencourts, 2020, p. 156). However, it is the young people who possess 'expert knowledge derived from their everyday participation in the contexts under investigation and their direct engagement with the issues under study' (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 23). YPAR approaches are framed to challenge deficit models of young people by recognising that they 'possess knowledge and attributes that make collaborative research mutually beneficial across participants' (Bettencourt, 2020, p. 157).

9.4 Challenges in research with young people experiencing precarity

This section addresses the challenges of the study with regard to the method of participant recruitment and sample size, the theoretical assumptions observed to investigate the research question and the overall recruitment challenges. This qualitative study represents a 'snapshot' (Hall et al., 2010, p. 128) of the subjective views of the young people researched and the analysis of their responses to research questions. The study acknowledges that the research was undertaken at a particular time, and in a unique setting and context. As such, the study makes no claims to the universalising of findings beyond the setting of the young people and their experiences of unemployment and Workfare.

9.4.1 Recruitment challenges

At the commencement of this undertaking I overestimated the willingness of young people whose voices had long been silenced to accept the offer of a platform to

describe their experiences of long-term unemployment, Workfare and precarity. This materialised in the recruitment challenges of young people as participants. The initial recruitment effort yielded responses from only five young people who agreed to participate. These interviews were conducted between 27 April and 4 July 2022. As explained in Chapter 6, attempts to recruit additional participants in the second half of 2022 proved unsuccessful. COVID-19 lockdowns were a contributing factor, as social distancing regulations resulted in the suspension of most mutual obligation requirements, including YouthNow's BizE Centre program, which was postponed indefinitely. I conducted another three interviews for a total of eight interviews and these proved to be diverse and of the depth needed for qualitative research. It is important to consider and plan for challenges in the recruitment of young people in a study such as this, as they could be wary of researchers, perceiving them as another 'official' or adult questioning them about their lives.

COVID-19 lockdowns were not the only impediment to the recruitment of research participants. Literature revealed why young people might be reluctant to consent to be interviewed. Frost (2019) identified suffering that was silenced by discursive practices which were internalised to engender shame, anxiety and a sense of worthlessness in individuals, and which isolated them from the world. Suffering had also been shown to be suppressed through the containment of critical thought in the form of false consciousness which preserved the ideological orientations of the dominant groups of a society (Thompson, 2015). Others have referred to a 'pluralistic ignorance' in which people tolerated unjust social conditions based on the assumption that the majority disagreed with their beliefs and that nothing but 'embarrassment' could be achieved by revealing these (Miller & McFarland, 1991, p. 298). A further theory posited was that development programs targeted at young people were framed around neoliberal narratives which promoted the values of individualism and self-reliance (Hillman, 2016). Accordingly, young people infused with these ideals were more likely to indulge in self-blame (Jost, 1995) instead of railing against an economic and political system that was responsible for their marginalisation and oppression (Schulzke, 2015).

In regard to the collection of data, as stated, the first five interviews were undertaken between 27 April and 4 July 2022. It was not until after the resumption of YouthNow's WfD activity in February 2023, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, that the

final three interviews took place. These occurred during the second week of March 2023. Consequently, a period ranging from between nine to 10-and-a-half months had elapsed from when the first and second set of interviews were conducted. All eight interviewees possessed similar predetermined characteristics (Carman et al., 2015) insofar as age, length of continuous unemployment, geographic location and type of WfD activity undertaken. However, the timing of the interviews meant that the perspectives of the first and second set of interviewees could be assumed to be different in certain ways. To begin with, the first five young people had more time to reflect on and form perspectives of their WfD experiences. By contrast, the last three young people were engaged in WfD when interviewed. Of the first five young people interviewed for the research, three were employed when interviewed, while a fourth had been working after completing his WfD commitments until injured in a workplace accident. With regard to the young people interviewed in March 2023, they had only recently been enrolled in the BizE Centre program.

9.5 Conclusion

This chapter framed an understanding of the research by first revisiting the overarching research question and restating the research aims. After summarising the key study findings, these findings were contextualised by highlighting the ways the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the supremacy of neoliberal doctrine, and exacerbated the marginalisation and deprivation of the young people whose experiences of long-term unemployment, precarity and Workfare were the focus of this research. By applying a FDA lens to these lived experiences, the research demonstrated that the young people were not helpless or uncritical actors. This was significant. The young people's emergent, individual acts of resistance to Workfare discourse and techniques pushed back against adultist representations and offered insight into how resistance at a proximal level could be a precursor to disrupting power structures.

While not downplaying the fact that the forces that maintained the primacy of neoliberal governmentality remained formidable, this chapter referred to demographic changes and young people's participation in new forms of activism which rejected engagement with institutional politics. From this perspective, the restructuring or dismantling of Workfare could be imagined, particularly given the surge of non-hierarchal

environmental movements led by young people, and how these view the ecological and economic crises as interlinked and critical of capitalism.

For emerging forms of resistance and participation to inspire activism among young people that pre-empted systemic change, the role of allies was considered in relation to the commitment of 'advantaged group members to improve the treatment and/or status of disadvantaged groups' (Droogendyk et al., 2016, p. 4). Importantly, given how the voices of long-term unemployed young people were excluded by COVID-19 policy discussion and debate, this chapter emphasised the utility of YPAR to improve the lives of young people by having them research and provide insider perspective to their social contexts.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

The research aimed to critically analyse the power structures that contributed to young people's experiences of long-term unemployment and precarity during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns. To achieve this aim, a theoretical framework of Foucault's governmentality was applied to interrogate the research problem. This Foucauldian lens conceptualised how the fusion of social control, discipline and punishment had people regulate their own behaviour and the behaviour of others for the purpose of directing human capital formation (Foucault, 2009). The framework of governmentality underpinned the examination of the impact of dominant neoliberal narratives and individualising discourses on young jobseekers. To further contextualise how the neoliberal practice of Workfare sustained and reproduced unequal power relations, the theoretical framework was complemented by Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Lerner's BJW theory.

The potential for this study to generate new knowledge with regard to the subjectivities of long-term unemployed young people as jobseekers was afforded through the changed economic, social and political conditions created by the COVID-19 crisis. Explicitly, the Keynesian-type interventions implemented by an economically and socially conservative Australian Government, wedded to free market ideology, presented an opportunity to contest the neoliberal claim that unemployment was a result of an individual's personal and moral deficits. This shift in narrative was epitomised by the government's claim at the outset of the pandemic, in an attempt to unify Australians, that 'We are all in this together' (Morrison, 2020).

The second aim of the research was to elevate the voice of low social status, highly controlled and largely silenced young people who were marginalised by neoliberal Workfare policies which perpetuated insecure employment, precarity and wealth inequality. This was achieved by obtaining contextualised data from semi-structured interviews with eight young people who resided in Melbourne's western suburbs, had participated in WfD activity and had experienced unemployment during COVID-19 lockdowns. Through the experiences shared by the young people in this study the thesis found a 'youth-at-risk' (Bessant, 2000a, p. 83) discourse based on assumptions of idleness, delinquency and crime (Kissová, 2021). These young people – in being

mandated to undertake WfD – had been subjected to the most intensive and paternalistic forms of regulation, coercion and punishment. Their challenges were further exacerbated as residents of disadvantaged LGAs. Central importance was placed on providing a safe space for the young people to share their experiences and perspectives. The fact the research was informed by young people belonging to a hard-to-reach cohort was significant. As previously outlined, prior studies involving Workfare participants had highlighted the constraints encountered by researchers independent of the Australian Government in accessing relevant program data (Davidson, 2011; Eardley, 2002; Kellard et al., 2015; Nevile, 2003; Scott & Darlington, 2011). Hence, the critical function performed by YouthNow as gatekeeper for recruitment purposes.

The research was guided by the following overarching research question:

How did young people residing in Melbourne's western suburbs, who had participated in mandated Work for the Dole activity, understand their experiences of long-term unemployment during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

The first sub-question asked how neoliberal ideology, which positioned joblessness as an individual responsibility, was internalised by young people as they experienced unemployment during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns.

The research – as set out in the first of the two overarching themes identified – largely confirmed existing knowledge about how young people subjected to mandated Workfare experienced their unemployment through the internalisation of neoliberal techniques and discursive practices. In particular, the study reaffirmed the research of Sofritti and colleagues (2020), which examined how young people experiencing precarious labour market conditions assumed jobseeking subjectivities through their exposure to 'the discourses of the 'entrepreneurial self', 'employability' and 'self-responsibilisation' (Sofritti et al., 2020, p. 1054) and the processes by which these discourses were internalised. Findings were also consistent with what other researchers had established with regard to how the internalisation of such discourses manifested in the young people's engagement in self-blame (Bénabou & Tirole, 2015; Charlesworth, 2005; Hofmeyr, 2011; Peeters, 2017; Pyykkönen, 2010) and the misdirection of blame for their circumstances (Hamann, 2009; Thompson, 2015).

Findings further confirmed existing research which demonstrated how Workfare, through the internalisation of individual responsibility, produced lasting psychological and physical effects which compelled young people to think and act in accordance with neoliberal ideology (Casey & Lewis, 2020; Charlesworth, 2005; Frost & Hoggett, 2008; van Dijk, 2010; Watson, 2000). This phenomenon, termed bio-power by Foucault (2007), was evidenced in the research in how the young people enacted the behaviours of resilience, adaptation and transformation (Bénabou & Tirole, 2015; Daldal, 2014; Diprose, 2015; Furnham, 2003; Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). These were the behaviours demanded of the neoliberal citizen to navigate the harshness of their world and direct them towards accepting undesirable and precarious employment (Boland, 2016; Doherty, 2007; Helman, 2021; Kissová, 2021; Peck, 2003).

These findings were novel insofar as the research was conducted against the backdrop of the unique conditions produced by the pandemic, and during a time and context when the contradictions of neoliberalism – with particular regard to citizenship identities and the justification for Workfare – were ripe for contestation. Where the study did complement prior research which documented young people's experiences with unemployment, precarity and Workfare was via the second overarching theme which explored how civil society actors reinforced the transformation of young people into jobseekers. The young people's interactions with civil-society institutions, including the education system, the family unit and the NFP sector, further emphasised self-reliance behaviours (Dean, 2002; Joseph, 2013; Vesterberg, 2015) and the uncritical acceptance and normalisation of injustices (Dick & Nadin, 2011; Freire, 1998; Furnham, 2003). Their interactions also demonstrated how human capital formation was diffused through everyday aspects of the 'private realm' (Broomhill & Sharp, 2005, p. 116).

The specific setting of the study – namely, a low-SES region of Melbourne with a large proportion of migrant background residents – represented the potential for future research to build on findings as set out in a number of the sub-themes in Chapter 8. These included how the individualising of responsibility which underpinned Workfare, as intended to produce rational, self-governing citizens, intersected with the kinship responsibilities felt and borne by first- and second-generation Australian adult children of migrants. Opportunities similarly exist to expand on findings which revealed how

Workfare discourse could be internalised differently, and even promote acts of resistance, depending on cultural identities, and also the impact of neoliberal governmentality on gendered assumptions of citizenship identities.

The second sub-question asked what effect the implementation of Keynesian-type monetary interventions by the neoliberal Australian Government, as a response to the COVID-19 crisis, had on the subjectivity of young people as jobseekers and citizens.

Here, the research focused on whether the Australian Government's unprecedented COVID-19 response – in repudiating free market logic by pump-priming the economy – would lead to a 'conscientization' (Freire, 1998) amongst young people and have them question the legitimacy of Workfare. The pandemic had some theorists speculating on a critical reorganisation of neoliberal practices and renewed approaches to address inequality (Matthewman & Huppertz, 2020; Razavi et al., 2020; Weisstanner; 2022). Research findings showed that young people who participated in this study experienced some level of awareness and did engage in some micro acts of resistance to neoliberal governmentality, albeit proximal and nascent. These young people were also, momentarily, exposed to less stigma as a result of their joblessness, due to COVID-19 exposing millions of their fellow Australians to potential unemployment and economic uncertainty. This sentiment was captured by Lucas, who explained how the pandemic had placed workers and non-workers on 'neutral ground'; Ruby, who considered lockdowns 'a blessing in disguise' for the reprieve these afforded her from othering discourse; and Ally's acknowledgment that COVID-19-related job losses were beyond the individual's 'control'.

Ultimately though, the research found that the young people interviewed for this research – despite the changed conditions caused by the pandemic and the Australian Government's adoption of Keynesian-type economic responses – continued to problematise their unemployment. This occurred in a social and political environment where policies and neoliberal discursive practices maintained the narrative of deserving and non-deserving recipients of state support (Andrew et al., 2021). The young people still attributed their joblessness to personal deficits. They misdirected blame for their predicaments and continued to reorient their thinking and actions against their own interests to accord with the dominant ideology. While finding small

acts of resistance, the participants generally remained complicit in their own control by maintaining and reproducing asymmetrical power relations which contributed to their material and physical harms. To this extent these findings corroborate prior knowledge of how neoliberal governmentality promotes a fatalism whereby people accept unjust situations as alternatives to conformity are inconceivable (Freire, 1998).

The third and final research sub-question was intended to surface ways the young people resisted the discursive practices of neoliberalism which ascribed long-term unemployment to psychological and moral deficiencies.

The research findings reaffirmed the literature which addressed the efficacy of neoliberal governmentality in depoliticising populations, eroding solidarity and suppressing collective challenge to systems of oppression (Brown, 2005; Vesterberg, 2015). Yet the young people did engage in acts of resistance. Instances included Skye enacting her agency to challenge 'dodgy' work practices, and Lucas successfully insisting that he be permitted to complete his WfD requirements with YouthNow, rather than the cleaning activity his jobactive provider had steered him towards. Caitlin's refusal to conform with expectations of how a jobseeker should provide 'perfect answers' in a job interview represented pushback against Workfare techniques and discursive practices. Then there was Ruby, who declined income support to escape the control and surveillance the mutual obligation framework imposed upon her.

These were nascent acts. They were mostly individual, not collective, acts of countering, with the exception of one participant organising a support group for peers with mental health issues. These practices did not represent a direct challenge to the political, economic and social power structures that sustained neoliberalism and produced the societal inequalities which oppressed the young people in the study. However, these small acts of resistance cannot altogether be dismissed as futile or inconsequential and can be viewed as prefigurative actions. Törnberg (2021) referred to prefigurative action as political strategies 'that model a future society on a micro level and aim to instantiate radical social change in and through practice' (Törnberg, 2021, p. 83). Therefore, while everyday micropolitical acts of resistance by the young people were not going to trigger an overhaul or abolition of Workfare, these acts had the potential to transform ways of thinking and behaving outside of institutionalised,

representative politics, and promote a reimagining of what society should or could be like (Moreira Fians, 2022).

The young people who participated in the research did not overtly express a belief that structural change to Workfare was feasible, and only Lucas articulated a view that unemployment could be as much a result of structural macroeconomic causes as individual shortcomings. These findings were initially disheartening, as the study had been in part predicated on an assumption that the Australian Government's extraordinary COVID-19 pandemic response, in drawing attention to the incongruities of neoliberalism, might have led to a re-examination of how Workfare practices were diffused and internalised. This expectation was especially germane with regard to the young people in this study, who were amongst the most adversely impacted by Workfare. As such, these findings reiterated how the phenomenon of false consciousness can engender a resignation that structural change is not possible (Jost, 1995).

Nevertheless, a cause for optimism that young people might still be able to collectively resist their oppression is identifiable by reimagining the research within the context of changing demographics and the way young people are embracing new and emerging modes of activism – namely, participatory politics – outside of established political institutions (Jenkins, 2016). Horizontal and leaderless movements such as SS4C have shown that opportunities do exist for future studies to build on this research to investigate how young people can organise to resist neoliberal practices. Environmental research has underscored how ecological and economic crises are considered interwoven by young climate activists, and how these activists propose solutions to such crises that incorporate social justice (Arya, 2022; Arya & Henn, 2021).

With regard to socio-economic status and life trajectories, those highly engaged in environmental movements are mostly distinct from the young unemployed jobseekers who were the basis of this study. Yet by binding the environmental crisis to the crisis of capitalism, young climate activists can be allies to members of marginalised groups (Gorman et al., 2024) such as the long-term young unemployed, by leading resistance against neoliberal ideology and practices, including Workfare.

For future research to be of utility in building on the findings of this thesis, these studies must be underpinned by a YPAR approach to move beyond adultism perspectives which silence young people and characterise them according to deficit narratives.

The possibility for a reimagined society, in which the mainstreaming of Workfare discourse and practices is challenged, is further contextualised by how the Australian Government represented and responded to the COVID-19 crisis. At the outset of the pandemic, Prime Minister Scott Morrison assured Australians that ‘We are all in this together’ and that ‘there is not more support for some than there is for others’ (Morrison, 2020). This study has shown this rhetoric to be false. The young people spotlighted by this research – unemployed prior to and during Melbourne’s COVID-19 lockdowns and residents of a disadvantaged SES region of Melbourne – were treated differently than other, more privileged segments of the community. This is because Australian Government approaches to the pandemic continued to responsibilise unemployment by framing who was and was not deserving of state support according to whether there were unemployed either prior to or as a result of COVID-19. Consequently, the neoliberal narrative of citizenship was maintained and inequality was widened.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Confirmation of ethics approval

quest.noreply@vu.edu.au

Thur 17/02/2022: 9.51 AM

To: Alison Baker

CC: Bryce Andrew Lewis; Tim.Corney@vu.edu.au

Dear DR ALISON BAKER,

Your ethics application has been formally reviewed and finalised.

- » Application ID: HRE21-182
- » Chief Investigator: DR ALISON BAKER
- » Other Investigators: ASPR TIM CORNEY, Mr Bryce LEWIS
- » Application Title: How do young participants of Work for the Dole, residing in Melbourne's West, view their experiences of unemployment during COVID-19 pandemic?
- » Form Version: 13-07

The application has been accepted and deemed to meet the requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 'National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)' by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval has been granted for two (2) years from the approval date; 17/02/2022.

Continued approval of this research project by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC) is conditional upon the provision of a report within 12 months of the above approval date or upon the completion of the project (if earlier). A report proforma may be downloaded from the Office for Research website at: <http://research.vu.edu.au/hrec.php>

Please note that the Human Research Ethics Committee must be informed of the following: any changes to the approved research protocol, project timelines, any serious events or adverse and/or unforeseen events that may affect continued ethical acceptability of the project. In these unlikely events, researchers must immediately cease all data collection until the Committee has approved the changes. Researchers are also reminded of the need to notify the approving HREC of changes to personnel in research projects via a request for a minor amendment. It should also be noted that it is the Chief Investigators' responsibility to ensure the research project is conducted in line with the recommendations outlined in the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 'National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).'

On behalf of the Committee, I wish you all the best for the conduct of the project.

Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee

Phone: 9919 4781 or 9919 4461

Email: researchethics@vu.edu.au

Appendix B: YouthNow letter of support



7th January 2022

Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee
Office for Research, Victoria University
Footscray Park Campus
Footscray VIC 3011

Dear Committee members,

As Chief Executive Officer of YouthNow – a training and employment services provider to young people in Melbourne's western suburbs – I provide this letter in support of the research thesis being undertaken by Bryce Lewis at Victoria University.

I confirm that my organisation is willing to assist Bryce with the recruitment of research subjects who are either current or previous participants in our 'BizE Centre' Work for the Dole activity. These participants will range in age from 22 to 26 years, will have experienced extended periods of unemployment, and be residents of Melbourne's western suburbs.

Bryce has explained to me the purpose, significance and aims of his thesis titled: **How do young participants of the Work for the Dole program residing in Melbourne's western suburbs view their experiences of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

I understand Bryce's research will involve collecting data on no more than 12 young people's lived experiences of long-term unemployment and precarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been informed that this will be achieved through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 to 60 minutes' duration. I am also aware that prior to being interviewed, research participants will be asked to complete a brief paper questionnaire made up of general questions about their background and employment history.

YouthNow staff will help facilitate the recruitment of research subjects by identifying and approaching either existing or former participants of our BizE Centre Work for the Dole activity. Staff will provide these young people with a copy of the participant information sheet and participant consent form produced and supplied by Bryce. These young people will be instructed to direct any questions they might have about the research and their potential involvement to Bryce, and if they agree to participate, to send him their signed and dated consent form using the stamped, return addressed envelopes provided by Bryce.

YouthNow staff will be explicit in explaining to clients that their participation in the research will not enhance their employability or create work opportunities.

PO Box 901 Sunshine Vic 3020

Visy Cares Hub 80B Harvester Road Sunshine, VIC 3020

p 03 8311 5800 e info@youthnow.org.au w www.youthnow.org.au

ABN 55695248210



Our clients will also be assured by YouthNow staff that the research has no link to Centrelink, their jobactive provider, or YouthNow as their Work for the Dole activity host, and therefore, they should feel under no obligation to participate.

I am aware that participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage, and that their names or any information that could identify them will not appear in the final thesis or any other published materials.

I have been advised that I can direct any queries related to the research to either Bryce or his Principal Supervisor Dr Alison Baker. Similarly, I understand I can raise any issues with the Ethics Secretary at Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Colleen Bergin".

Colleen Bergin
Chief Executive Officer, YouthNow

PO Box 901 Sunshine Vic 3020

Visy Cares Hub 80B Harvester Road Sunshine, VIC 3020

p 03 8311 5800 e info@youthnow.org.au w www.youthnow.org.au

ABN 55695248210

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT DURING COVID-19

Are you an unemployed young
person aged between 18 and 24?

Have you been made to join Work for the
Dole to continue to receive income support?

Do you live in Melbourne's west?



If you answered **YES** to all 3 questions
WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR STORY

As part of a **Victoria University** research project, we are asking
young people to describe **IN THEIR OWN WORDS** what it was like
to be without a job during **COVID-19**

You will receive a **\$30 retail voucher** for your participation.

For information and to register your interest to participate in an
interview contact Bryce at **Bryce.Lewis@live.vu.edu.au**



Institute of Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities

Appendix D: Information to participants involved in research

Information to participants involved in research

You are invited to be involved in a research project entitled **'How did young people who had undertaken the Work for the Dole program living in Melbourne's western suburbs view their experiences of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic?'**

This project is being conducted by graduate researcher Bryce Lewis as part of a Doctor of Philosophy at Victoria University, and supervised by Associate Professors Alison Baker and Tim Corney.

What is this research about?

This research aims to learn about the experiences of unemployed young people who had previously taken part in the Work for the Dole program during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Young people experiencing unemployment don't often have many chances to share with the wider community their experiences of unemployment and the jobactive network. This research aims to provide a way for young people to describe in their own words what it was like to be long-term unemployed, at a time when finding secure and ongoing employment was difficult.

Bryce Lewis will be conducting interviews with young people who have been enrolled in the Work for the Dole program, who have been unemployed for 12 months or longer at some point in their lives, and who live in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to take part in one interview and possibly, a shorter follow-up interview at a later date. The main interview will last for around 45 to 60 minutes. It will be an informal discussion about your experiences of employment and the government support system during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before being interviewed, you will be asked to fill out a brief paper questionnaire made up of general questions about your background and employment history.

The interviews will take place face-to-face, at a time and place that you choose. If COVID-19 social-distancing rules don't allow this, the interviews will take place online or over the telephone. To make sure that what you say is captured accurately, the interview will be audio recorded with your permission. You will be given a \$30 retail voucher to cover the cost of your time.

Participation in this research is voluntary. The research has nothing to do with Centrelink, your jobactive provider, or your Work for the Dole activity host, so you should not feel that you have to take part. Please also be aware that taking part in this research will not improve your chances of finding a job. At any time during the research, you can decide to withdraw, and any answers you have given won't be included in the research.

What will I gain from participating?

The interviews are intended to create a space for voices of long-term unemployed young people living in the western suburbs of Melbourne. This research will allow unemployed young people to describe how the pandemic may have made their efforts to gain employment difficult, and what these difficulties may mean for their future.

What will you do with the information I give you?

The information you provide during the interview will help to produce findings for the research project. This information will focus on the life experiences of unemployed young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, and will appear in the final research thesis. The information may also be used in conference presentations and academic journal articles. Your name or any information that could be used to identify you will not appear in any of these publications.

Are there any risks to me?

You have been asked to be interviewed because of the valuable knowledge and unique insights you can bring to the research. By talking about your experiences of unemployment and Work for the Dole, there is a risk that you may become frustrated, angry or anxious. For this reason, you only need to answer questions if you feel comfortable, and if you do become upset, you can take a break or stop the interview at any time.

If you become distressed during or after the interview, you can contact one of the following support services that operate 24 hours per day, seven days per week:

- Lifeline: (13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au)
- Beyond Blue: (1300 22 4636 www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service: (1800 512 348 <https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au>)

How will I be chosen to take part in the research?

A recruitment flyer inviting you to take part in the research will be emailed directly to you by a YouthNow staff member. YouthNow will not provide your contact details, or any of your personal information, to Bryce Lewis. Details on how to register your interest in being interviewed by Bryce, or to find out more information about the research, have been included on the recruitment flyer.

If you decide to contact Bryce, he can answer any questions you have about the research, and arrange to send you this Information to Participants sheet, and also a Participant Consent Form. You should feel free to talk with a family member, friend, or person you trust, before agreeing to be interviewed.

If you agree to take part, Bryce will either email or phone you to arrange a date and time to conduct the interview. Before the interview takes place, you will be able to ask any questions about the project or your involvement in the research. You will also be asked to sign a Participant Consent Form.

Who is conducting the study?

Bryce Lewis is a graduate researcher at Victoria University's Institute of Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities. Please feel free to contact him on email, text, or phone if you have any questions: bryce.lewis@live.vu.edu.au or 0419 322 777.

If you have any other questions regarding taking part in the study, please contact Principal Supervisor Dr Alison Baker on email: alison.baker@vu.edu.au

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, please contact the Ethics Secretary at Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email: researchethics@vu.edu.au, or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix E: Consent form for participants involved in research

ABOUT THIS STUDY

You are being invited to take part in a study entitled **‘How did young people who had undertaken the Work for the Dole program living in Melbourne’s western suburbs view their experiences of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic?’**

In a one-on-one interview that will last for around 45 to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded with your permission, you will be asked to speak about your experiences of unemployment as a young person living in Melbourne’s western suburbs during the COVID-19 pandemic. You will be also asked to explain what effect the pandemic has had on your attempts to find a secure and ongoing job, and how you see your future. You might also be contacted by the researcher to take part in a follow-up interview at a later date. This follow-up interview will be much shorter, and will only take place if the researcher needs to check up on something that was said in the first interview. Before taking part in the first interview, you will be asked to fill out a brief paper questionnaire which will ask some general questions about your personal and employment history.

All steps will be taken to make sure that you cannot be identified. For example, we will use a fake name in all publications. The information you provide will help to produce findings for the research project, and will be used in the final published research. The information may also be used in conference presentations and academic journal articles.

This project is being conducted by graduate researcher Bryce Lewis, as part of a Doctor of Philosophy study at Victoria University, and is supervised by Associate Professors Alison Baker and Tim Corney.

CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I, _____ (write your name)

of _____ (write your suburb/city)

agree that I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily give my consent to take part in the study entitled **‘How did young people who had undertaken the Work for the Dole program living in Melbourne’s western suburbs view their experiences of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic?’**

By giving my consent I agree:

- To fill out a paper questionnaire that asks general questions about my background and employment history.
- Take part in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, either in person, online or by telephone. I know that this interview will be sound-recorded.
- To be contacted by the researcher after the one-on-one interview at a later date, to answer some more questions in a short, follow-up interview.
- The aims of the study, any risks to me by being involved in the research, and the ways I will be protected from these risks, have been fully explained to me.
- I have had the chance to have any specific questions about the research and my involvement answered;
- I can withdraw from this study at any time, and if I do, this will not have negative consequences for me; and
- It has been explained to me that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Can you please provide your email address and mobile phone number for any follow-up interviews?

Email: _____

Mobile: _____

You can ask any questions you might have about taking part in this research by contacting Bryce Lewis on email: bryce.lewis@live.vu.edu.au, or mobile 0419 322 777, or by emailing Research Supervisor at Alison.Baker@vu.edu.au

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix F: Information about participant questionnaire

Information about participant questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research project entitled ‘**How do young participants of Work for the Dole view their experiences of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic?**’

Before you take part in your one-on-one interview with the researcher, you are being asked to answer some general questions which will provide background information for the research.

The questionnaire is brief and the questions are straightforward. The questionnaire is anonymous, which means you cannot be identified by the answers you provide. Once you have finished answering the questions, please return this form to the researcher, either as a scanned email attachment to bryce.lewis@live.vu.edu.au or in hard copy by the postage-paid and addressed envelope you have been provided. Even after you have completed this questionnaire, you can withdraw from this study at any time.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Part A: General details

1. How do you identify? (Please tick the relevant box)

- Male ☐
Female ☐
Non-Binary or Gender Diverse ☐
Transgender ☐
Agender ☐
Prefer Not to Say ☐
Other (Please Specify) _____

2. What is your age? _____

3. What is your postcode? _____

4. Who do you live with? _____

5. If living with family, have you ever lived outside of the family home? (Please tick the relevant box)

Yes ☐
No..... ☐

6. Is English your first language? (Please tick the relevant box)

Yes ☐
No..... ☐

7. If not, what is/was the main language(s) spoken in your family home?

8. What is your country of birth? _____

9. What is your highest level of education? (Please tick the relevant boxes)

Secondary School ☐
VCAL ☐
VCE ☐
TAFE/VET ☐
Apprenticeship ☐
University Bachelor's Degree ☐
University Post-Graduate Degree ☐

PART B: Employment history

1. What is the length of time you have currently been unemployed?

2. Is this the first time you have been unemployed? (Please tick the relevant box)

Yes ☐
No..... ☐

3. Have you had a job previously? (Please tick the relevant box)

Yes ☐
No..... ☐

4. If yes, what job/jobs have you had?

5. If you have had a job/jobs, were you a? (Please tick all relevant boxes)

Casual Employee ☐
Permanent Part-Time ☐
Permanent Full-Time ☐
Self-Employed/SoleTrader ☐

6. What is the longest length of time you have had continuous/ongoing employment?

7. Why did your previous employment end?

8. Have you been required to perform Work for the Dole? (Please tick the relevant box)

Yes ☐
No..... ☐

9. What tasks did you carry out when performing Work for the Dole?

Appendix G: Indicative interview schedule

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me and be interviewed for this research project. The research aims to examine the experiences of young Work for the Dole participants living in Melbourne's western suburbs. In particular, the research is focussed on the experiences of young people such as yourself during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is Bryce and I'm a graduate researcher at Victoria University. My project is being supervised by Associate Professors Alison Baker and Tim Corney. I have previously worked as a Youth Development Worker, and currently assist people of all ages in the western suburbs who either are homeless, or are at risk of homelessness.

I have been unemployed. I had a jobactive worker, had to undertake mutual obligation requirements, and over a five-month period, unsuccessfully applied for well over 100 jobs before being finding work.

The information you provide during the interview will help to produce findings for the research project, and will be published in the final research thesis. The information may also be used in conference presentations and academic journal articles. Your privacy will be protected by using a name that is not your own whenever you are referred to in the research, and by also removing any information that could be used to identify you.

The types of questions we will be discussing today relate to mental health, unemployment and the impacts of COVID, which we recognise can be sensitive. How are you feeling today? Are you feeling well enough to go ahead with talking about these topics?

Do you have any questions about the research project or the interview you are about to take part in? Do I have your permission to audio record this interview to make sure what you say is accurately recorded?

Schedule:

About the young person

1. Before we get to some of the questions about unemployment, I'm really keen to hear about you.
 - Can you tell me about your interests and the things you enjoy doing?
 - What was COVID-19 and the lockdowns like for you?
 - In what ways, if any, did COVID-19 and the lockdowns change your day-to-day life?

The experience of unemployment

2. What has life been like for you as an unemployed young person?
3. Do you ever feel like people see or treat you differently because you are an unemployed young person?
4. Apart from not having enough money, in what other ways has being unemployed affected your life?
5. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, a lot of Australians either lost their job, had their working hours cut, or faced losing their job. Do you think, or did you notice, that people's attitudes towards the unemployed changed during this time?

Perception of employment prospects

6. How do you rate your chances of getting a job now that lockdowns have ended?
7. What steps have you taken, or do you think you will need to take, to improve your chances of getting a job.
8. What would help you to find a job? What could the Government do to help?

Attitudes to Work for the Dole

9. How do you feel about being made to do Work for the Dole?
10. If there are more people applying for jobs than there are job vacancies, why do you think the Government makes unemployed people do Work for the Dole?
11. Would you say Work for the Dole has given you skills and experiences that will help you get a job?
12. What worked well or didn't work well when you were in Work for the Dole?

JobSeeker rate

13. Now I am going to ask you about the Coronavirus Supplement (which started off as an extra \$550 per fortnight on top of the JobSeeker payment). What difference did this extra money make to you?
14. How did you feel when the Government cut back the Coronavirus Supplement payment, and then ended it completely, when the pandemic was not over?
15. Is the unemployment payment enough to live on? What sort of things have you needed to do to 'get by' on this amount of money?

Future plans

16. In what ways has your unemployment affected your plans for the future, including;

- the type of job you would like to have?
- housing arrangements
- relationships
- having a family

Other questions to introduce, or use as prompts, where relevant

Does being unemployed make you feel 'different' from other people in the community? In what ways?

Has your wellbeing or outlook on life been effected by being unemployed? In what ways?

Do you think the Government is stricter on people who receive unemployment payments than on businesses and workers who receive Government support? If so, why do you think this is the case?

Who or what is to blame for your unemployment?

What other barriers have you faced that makes getting a job difficult?

Do your training and qualifications match the type of jobs you have been applying for? If not, why not?