

## Rhetoric and reality: exploring lived experiences of welfare reform under the Coalition

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### Introduction

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Over the past five years, the Westminster Coalition Government has placed marked policy emphasis on efforts to radically reform welfare, promising to bring about the most significant reshaping of the British welfare state since the Beveridge Report. Back in 2011, Secretary of State for the Department of Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, outlined his vision for welfare reform:

'We will make sure it pays more to be in work than it does to sit on benefits. And because of that, we can say that if there's work you can do, we expect you to do it – or no more benefits. Work that pays. Benefits with conditions. The two halves of the equation: fairness for the job-seeker, fairness for the taxpayer' (Duncan Smith, 2011).

While there are real questions about how far the Coalition approach in fact represents a radical departure, or instead shows marked continuity with its New Labour predecessors, there is no doubt that the Coalition Government have succeeded in ushering in substantial welfare reform. With a continued emphasis on a supposed need to end 'welfare dependency' and return 'responsibility' to the benefits system, welfare reforms have sought to create a new 'contract' between the state and the citizen. In particular, attention has focused on out-of-work benefit claimants who are judged to require support but ultimately compulsion to make the shift from 'welfare dependency' to 'independence' in the paid labour market. Policy tools of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions have been liberally applied, while a wide range of accompanying reforms have seen restrictions in eligibility for, and reductions in the real value of, many working-age benefits.

### The 'strivers' and 'shirkers' narrative

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These reforms have been accompanied by a rhetoric that often seems to vilify out-of-work claimants, who are characterised as passive and inactive and displaying problematic behaviours. Claimants 'sleeping off a life on benefits' (Osborne, 2012) are compared with 'hard working families', with divisions between 'shirkers' and 'strivers' a contemporary reworking of long standing distinctions between 'undeserving' and 'deserving' populations.

This rhetoric has material value in providing a justification for the Government's reforms, as well as seeming to fit with a hardening of public attitudes towards welfare and benefit claimants in general (Hall et al., 2014). However, there are real questions about the extent of its (mis)match with everyday lived experiences. In an attempt to forefront these experiences, and draw a contrast with dominant narratives on welfare, small-scale research was conducted into the lived experiences of welfare reform. The research project tracked a small group of out-of-work benefit claimants over time as they experienced changes in their welfare entitlement. Participants were interviewed three times between 2011 and 2013, enabling a dynamic picture to emerge of their responses to the changing welfare landscape. Welfare reforms experienced by the participants included the migration of Incapacity Benefit claimants onto Employment and Support Allowance, single parent's migration from Income Support onto Jobseeker's Allowance and the tightening of the conditionality and sanctions regime for young jobseekers. The findings from this research demonstrate a significant disjuncture between policy rhetoric and lived realities.

## The hard 'work' of 'getting by'

Importantly, while David Cameron characterises out-of-work claimants passively 'sitting on their sofas waiting for their benefits to arrive' (Cameron, 2010), this research highlighted the very hard 'work' which 'getting by' (Lister, 2004) on benefits during times of welfare reform demands. Participants spoke of shopping daily to take advantage of the reduced shelves in supermarkets, and going to several shops in an area in an effort to get the cheapest deals. There was also evidence of creative efforts to secure a little additional income, with a disabled woman in her late 50s collecting scrap in the nearby streets, and many participants describing pawning and selling items during particularly straightened times. Managing on very low incomes often entailed having to make hard choices such as to heat or eat (Dugan, 2014) with frequent examples of individuals simply going without. Chloe, a single parent, explained:

'I go without my meals sometimes. I have to save meals for me kids. So I'll have a slice of toast and they'll have a full meal'.

Although not in paid employment, many of the participants were involved in other forms of socially valuable contribution in their work as volunteers, carers and parents. These important forms of contribution are too often neglected in Government accounts that equate paid work with dutiful, responsible citizenship behaviour. In the dominant narrative, 'hard working families' are praised as the 'beating heart of our nation' (Duncan Smith, 2010) with a notable silence on the contributions made by out-of-work claimants. The single parents in the study spoke of the hard work that bringing up a family alone involved, showing an awareness of how far this work went unvalued and unappreciated by Government and wider society. As Sophie put it:

'[The Government] just think that we sit at home on our backsides all day. They don't realise the cooking, the cleaning, looking after the kids and that lot. That's a full time job in itself I think'.

Many of the participants were caring for family and friends, while there were also several examples of participants engaging in volunteering, which was often spoken about as being important for individuals' self-confidence and self-esteem. Those engaged in caring often described this work as demanding and time intensive. Jim, a disability benefit claimant, who cared for his partner and brother, both of whom had serious mental health issues explained:

'[Caring is] all I do. I don't get any time apart from it'.

These lived experiences serve as a counter to the Government's rhetoric, challenging ideas of out-of-work benefit claimants as passive and inactive.

## From 'welfare' to 'work'?

Perhaps even more significant, given the Government's reform agenda, were attitudes and orientations towards paid employment, attitudes which again showed a lack of fit with the dominant narrative. Research has repeatedly shown how out-of-work claimants typically demonstrate a strong work ethic (Shildrick et al., 2010), and describe clear aspirations to enter paid employment, where this is a realistic objective. Furthermore, while the Government characterises some out-of-work claimants as needing help to acquire the 'habit' of work, sometimes describing a 'culture of worklessness', research evidence suggests that most of those out-of-work have previous working experiences, something which this research also found.

Given that this research tracked people over time, it was possible to follow their intersecting and dynamic welfare and employment 'journeys', with several of the participants moving into and out of work during the research time frame, experiences characteristic of the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle (Shildrick, 2012). Some of the employment which individuals secured was low-paid, and arguably exploitative, with one young jobseeker, Josh, working 35 hours a week in a local shop for just £80 (£136.65 less than he was entitled to under the 2012 National Minimum Wage rate of £6.19 an hour).

Those who did not manage to secure employment during the time frame described and displayed enduring aspirations to enter the formal labour market, aspirations which were sustained despite the experience of repeated setbacks and rejections. Explaining why she wanted to find work, young jobseeker Sam described herself as a 'scrounger' demonstrating how the dominant, negative characterisations of claimants are being internalised in ways which can only be damaging to individuals' self-esteem. 'I need a job because I'm sick of scrounging. That's how I think of it anyway.'

### Is welfare reform helping?

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The Government's welfare reform policy approach is premised on the notion that its reforms, and in particular, its supposedly innovative 'Work Programme' will help people to make the transition from out-of-work benefits into paid employment. Indeed, the whole reform agenda is couched in a rhetoric that suggests that tough conditions and the threat of sanctions are necessary to help deliver the transformative rewards of paid employment to ever more of the population. While the strong aspirations to enter employment of most of the people in this research casts doubt on the need for tough conditions, there was also little evidence of welfare-to-work interventions being experienced as beneficial or helpful. Instead, participants spoke of courses that were formulaic and irrelevant, while encounters with advisers were described as brief, unhelpful and constantly framed by a relationship that was perceived as primarily supervisory and disciplinarian.

More generally, there was substantial evidence of the harm that welfare reforms were causing individuals, with participants speaking of their worry, anxiety and fear about current and future welfare reforms. Where individuals were sanctioned, they experienced significant material and emotional hardship, with young jobseeker Adrian describing how desperate his situation became following a lengthy sanction:

'I've lost a lot of weight because of it. That's really put me down ... I'm having like one, one and a half meals a day'.

Ironically, Adrian explained that his sanction made it harder for him to secure employment, as his gaunt appearance led potential employers to dismiss him as someone with substance misuse issues. Allied to this, the uncertainty associated with changing entitlement, as well as the increased work of trying to cover all the essentials with a small income, seemed to make it harder for people to actively plan for the future, occupied instead with coping day to day. This preoccupation with managing in the short term again makes successful and sustainable transitions into paid employment less rather than more likely, given the forward planning that such transitions demand.

### Conclusion

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Listening to what those experiencing welfare reforms have to say is essential if we are to better understand how changes to the benefits system are affecting individual lives. In doing so, what becomes apparent is the extent of the mismatch between the dominant Government narrative and lived realities, a mismatch with implications for the likely success of the welfare reform agenda. In particular, the logic for a strong emphasis on welfare conditionality is undermined by the evidence here presented, while the welfare reforms adopted may ironically be moving people further away rather than closer to the formal labour market (Roberts et al., 2014). The participants in this study dismissed the idea of their choosing benefits as a lifestyle choice, pointing to their difficult lives and asking 'who would choose this?'. As young jobseeker, James, put it:

'[Benefits is] enough for you to live on but you haven't got one bit of luxury left in your life. You're not living, you're existing. And that's how it feels.'

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