

The Power of Framing: Troubled Families or Dysfunctional Economy?

Andrew Sayer

Lancaster University

March 2015

The Power of Framing

- TF – individualisation, refusal to acknowledge structural problems/determinants, political problems reduced to moral ones ('character', 'resilience', 'poverty of aspiration').
- Part of larger neoliberal framing: a market economy never fails, only certain people do.
- Responsibilisation
- Eroding the welfare state.
- Even if we want to oppose TF, as soon as we treat it as an issue or object worth discussing, then it's hard to resist its problematic framing.
- History – underclass, eugenics . . .

Top down, one-sided class war?

- **Economic** – neoliberal attack on organised labour, austerity, welfare-to-workfare, promotion of rentier interests at the expense of the poor (indebtedness, private tenancy, etc.)
- **Disciplinary** – e.g. bureaucratised persecution of jobseekers, benefits claimants
- **Symbolic violence** – stigmatisation – political discourse, newspapers and TV



‘If there is a class war – and there is – it is important that it should be handled with subtlety and skill. ... it is not freedom that Conservatives want; what they want is the sort of freedom that will maintain existing inequalities or restore lost ones.’ (Maurice Cowling – British neoconservative in his *Conservative Essays*, 1978)

New Labour Precedents

- “In 1997, this Government inherited a welfare state weighted heavily towards rewarding and supporting people who were not actively seeking to improve their situation, whether by looking for work or by taking part in training Too many people lacked both the aspirations and the support to get back to work.” (George Brown, 2008, *No-One Written Off: Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility*, White Paper p.5).

The 'pitch'

“For years we’ve had a system that encourages the worst in people – that incites laziness, that excuses bad behaviour, that erodes self-discipline, that discourages hard work . . . above all that drains responsibility away from the people.” (D.Cameron, 2013, *The Fiscal Case for Working With Troubled Families*, p.3)

“For years we’ve known that a relatively small number of troubled families are responsible for a large proportion of the problems in our society. Maybe the parents have an addiction or have never worked in their life. Maybe there’s domestic violence. Often the children are completely out of control.” (DC, *Relate Speech*, 2010, p. 5)

Source of quotes Anna MacLehose *A Foucauldian Analysis of 'Troubled Families'*, U of E. London, thesis
<http://roar.uel.ac.uk/3964/1/u10376333%20thesis%20docx%20.pdf>

Discipline, threaten and punish

Discipline swamps care:

“families signing up to a contract that offered a mix of support and challenge to them[,] with a new threat of sanction if families refused help” (DCLG, 2012:11)

“the threat of sanctions such as loss of tenancy ‘concentrates the mind’ of families and is a key mechanism for bringing about change” (DCLG, 2012: 28)

Undermining of families’ own narratives:

“it was clear that the reasons for that behaviour had come from the household itself – the poor parenting skills, the constant changes in the home, family and partners, and the ongoing verbal and physical violence” (Casey, 2012:59)

Political pressure:

‘So be in no doubt – we are in a hurry, we mean to deliver. You don’t need to talk about it or show empathy. I want you to get on with it. And I know local government can get results... We are going to deliver on this. So get moving.’ (Eric Pickles CLG Conference Speech, 2011, p.2)

Quotes from Sue Bond-Taylor, University of Lincoln, **Tracing an Ethic of Care in the Policy and Practice of the Troubled Families Programme** ‘Getting with the Programme’ Workshop 1: 11th February 2015
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sass/SBond-Taylor-TracinganEthicofCare.pdf>

'Value for money'

- 2011 claimed £9billion spent on Troubled Families (£75,000 av. per family per year +£8billion social costs). FoI requests for evidence refused.
- 'costly waste of human productivity'
- Payment by results – audited but information withheld – political need for positive results: disciplining 'TF', reducing alleged 'burden', saving money, increasing productivity

Result	Attachment fee	Results payment	Total
<p>They achieve all 3 of the education and crime/ anti-social behaviour measures set out below where relevant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each child in the family has had fewer than 3 fixed exclusions and less than 15% of unauthorised absences in the last 3 school terms; and • A 60% reduction in anti-social behaviour across the family in the last 6 months; and • Offending rate by all minors in the family reduced by at least a 33% in the last 6 months. 	£3,200 per family	£700 per family	£4,000 per family
<p>If they do not enter work, but achieve the 'progress to work' (one adult in the family has either volunteered for the Work Programme or attached to the European Social Fund provision in the last 6 months).</p>		£100 per family	
OR			
<p>At least one adult in the family has moved off out-of-work benefits into continuous employment in the last 6 months</p>	£3,200 per family	£800 per family	£4,000 per family

What is the TF agenda really about?

- Those defined as TFs?
- Dealing with social problems?
- Cutting welfare expenditure?
- Or oriented to wooing voters? Adding to the narrative of a feckless, irresponsible poor, a burden on taxpayers/hard-working families, in need of discipline, not welfare – a convenient distraction that will be eagerly seized upon by tabloids. Promoting othering . . .

From structural inequality to behavioural problems of individuals or families

- Behavioural problems or structural problems?
- Lack of agency – the poor as helpless victims, not creative agency.
- Was Titmuss's refusal of 'judgementalism' a weakness?
- Behaviour is influenced by structural position/forces

Political debate is eristic and tactical, not truth-seeking.

Descriptions of behavioural problems likely to be (mis)construed as blaming and stigmatisation, so just to step within the frame is to risk being captured by it.

So what do we do?

The Grapes of Wrath

“Steinbeck gives the rich an easy time, really: for he shows that all injustice can produce is unhappiness. If we understand that injustice can strike its roots into the personality itself, producing rage and resentment and the roots of bad character, we have even deeper incentives to commit ourselves to giving each child the material and social support that human dignity requires.” (Nussbaum, 2001, *Upheavals of Thought*, p.414)

Poverty is not ennobling

- Poverty, exclusion, marginalisation, stigmatisation, depressed/ing environment >> anxiety, depression, difficulty in making decisions, conflict, lack of faith in legitimate ways of making a living, drug dependency.
- Psychological research on altruism shows how it is encouraged (discouraged) by good (bad) treatment and conditions that individuals experience.
- Child neglect, abuse and attachment theory > durable behavioural problems
- Strengths?: resilience, care, toughness, dealing with heavy responsibilities
- Sociological research: e.g. L. Wacquant, 'America as dystopia' in Bourdieu et al *The Weight of the World*; S. Charlesworth *A Phenomenology of Working Class Life*. E.Olson (forthcoming) on young people in poor areas.

Injuries of Inequality

- Inequalities harm people across the board
- Upper class arrogance of ignorance, inflated sense of entitlement, snobbery, child neglect (boarding school pathologies: strategic survival personality, emotional constipation)
- Middle class snobbery downwards, deference upwards, status anxiety.

Inter-class relations tainted with deference and
condescension, resentment, contempt . . .

N.Duffell (2014) Wounded Leaders

Robert Jackall (1988) The Moral Maze

Michelle Lamont's working class men are critical of what they see as managers' lack of integrity, sincerity, and interpersonal skills (Lamont, 2000, The Dignity of Working Men)

Conclusions

- Who is the TF agenda really addressed to?
- How to address the issues in political debates/interventions?
- Challenge the framing and the empirics?
- Purely structural-culturalist approach?
- Or show how the behaviours are influenced by political-economic conditions and symbolic violence?

The long-awaited political sequel to *The Making of Them*



WOUNDED LEADERS

THE PSYCHOHISTORY OF BRITISH ELITISM
AND THE ENTITLEMENT ILLUSION

by Nick Duffell

- Refusing to ignore structural problems –
- (tactical disadvantages of doing so)
- Avoiding both stigmatisation and idealisation
- Poverty is not ennobling. It causes harm *to people*, not just to their circumstances and opportunities. There are real injuries of class, and they are not limited to morally-palatable ones like injured pride, shame, sense of injustice, unhappiness.
- Inequality in general is damaging, at the top and the middle as well: arrogance, inflated sense of entitlement, tendency to confuse inherited advantages with merit, or genetics, managers tend to learn to dissemble, and treat others instrumentally, so that they are seen by workers as purely self-interested and lacking in integrity. Robert Jackall Moral Mazes
- Upper class child abuse – boarding school > injuries plus advantages ‘Wounded Leaders’ (Nick Duffell)
- Probabilities not inevitabilities