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Workers vs. Shirkers - A Critical Review of Public Literature Concerning Unemployment, Austerity and Welfare

Benefits cheats admit they get 'TOO MUCH' dole: New documentary lifts lid on scroungers
The Daily Star, 22nd October 2015

Introduction

Welfare is a topic with massive political currency, particularly for the coalition and Conservative governments since 2010. The government's 'austerity measures' have led to a rise in the use of punitive and conditional measures against welfare claimants and have correlated with a change in public attitudes. The number of people supporting the statement 'The government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it means higher taxes,' has halved since 1987 (IPSOS Mori cited in Tinsley, 2013 p. 46) and the sanctions on benefits claimants by the Department of Work and Pensions now outweigh the number of fines given by courts (Webster, 2015).

A Foucauldian critique attempts 'to make harder those acts which are now too easy' (Foucault, 2003 p 172 in Fryer and Stambe, 2014a). This approach informs elements of my critique of mainstream psychological positions, and the way in which they attempt to explain perceptions and treatment of people living in poverty.

Coverage

This review covers publically available literature on welfare, unemployment and back-to-work schemes from HM Government, the Department for Work and Pensions, Psychologists Against Austerity, Policy Exchange, Mind and the Joseph Rowntree Trust.

Considerations

Fryer et al (2014a) highlight the issue with the term 'unemployed' as it can only exist within a neoliberal labour market, however, for this review I have not rigorously challenged the term. Additionally, language frequently used in the public literature has negative connotations, such as 'low status'. In most cases I have used the original language found in the publication or research.

Critical Review

Prejudice

Qualitative research by Policy Exchange found that the perception of unemployed people was often negative. Many of their respondents believed others 'could find work easily or simply did not need the benefits they were claiming' (Tinsley, 2013 p. 46). Perhaps surprisingly, these opinions were held by people who were also unemployed and claiming welfare.

Social identity theory proposes that people develop self-concept through group-membership (Tajfel and Turner, 1976). In Tinsley's study, the attitudes of job seekers towards other job seekers could be interpreted as them strengthening or improving their social identity and ingroup status by positively differentiating themselves from a perceived lower status outgroup, in this case benefits 'cheats'. In fact, Crocker and Luhtanen's (1990) research shows ingroup favouritism is not as robust in lower status groups as it is in higher status ones. In a similar vein, Realistic conflict theory proposes conflict arises when groups compete for 'scarce resources' (Sherif et al., 1961), in this case welfare. Attribution errors are more likely with outgroups, with individuals blamed rather than external factors.

Prejudice against welfare claimants and people living in poverty may be explained by inescapable cognitive processes as part of social identity or realistic conflict theory, but this ignores the effect of current cultural norms and the dominant discourse found in elements of the media and politics which actively presents certain groups negatively.

Baumburg et al. reported 30% of benefits related media coverage mentions fraud, and members of the public regularly overestimate the percentage of benefits claimed fraudulently. Increasingly, people are likely to perceive welfare claimants as undeserving and lazy (2011).

According to the authors of the Joseph Rowntree Trust publication 'Psychological Perspectives on Poverty', "Policy change intended to benefit those in poverty is likely to meet significant resistance if policy-makers and taxpayers do not consider those in poverty 'worthy' of aid" (Fell and Hewstone, 2015, p3). They make suggestions for decreasing prejudice and improving public perception, including support for Contact Hypothesis, the theory that intergroup contact reduces prejudice through the discovery of similarities.

However, Contact Hypothesis can be considered 'victim blaming', as the onus is put on an already marginalised group to prove they are worthy of better treatment (Henriques 1984). This ignores the larger social issues and discourse which maintain negative perceptions of welfare claimants.

'Skivers vs. Strivers' - political rhetoric and discourse around welfare claimants

We are the party of the want to be better-off, those who strive to make a better life for themselves and their families – and we should never, ever be ashamed of saying so.
(David Cameron, Conservative Party Conference, October 2012)

Daguerre and Etherington (2014) highlight the ways in which the Conservative government in the 1980s led a change in public discourse, reframing the unemployed as either 'lacking energy' or 'plainly dishonest', with 'renewed emphasis on welfare dependency and benefit fraud' (p. 18). They strengthened the division between the 'hard working majority' and 'work-shy', and stigmatised benefit claimants, gaining support for punitive measures and welfare cuts (p. 17). More recently, the government presented benefits claimants as '...people who are either not trying, or who are gaming the system…' and suggested a 'battle to stop claimants slipping back into the benefits system by the back door' (Chris Grayling, 2012).

Government publications regularly mention doing 'the right thing' (2011a), making the 'right choice' (2011b), being 'productive', and people 'working [themselves] out of poverty' (2011a). The blame for unemployment and poverty is placed within individuals, and the rhetoric used fosters the opinion (e.g. Tinsley, 2013) that people are choosing not to work.

Recent research found that among welfare claimants, the unemployed were largely defined within a binary of 'looking for work' or 'exploiting the system' (Tinsley, 2013), echoing recent political rhetoric.

Charities working to support people experiencing unemployment and poverty have published documents which directly challenge the myths used by the government, such as that of 'generational worklessness' (Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2012) and suggest cultural, rather than individual, changes are needed.

Occupational Psychology, 'Personality' and how people can be 'taught' to be employable

To believe that the poor are basically responsible for their poverty is also to exonerate economic and political institutions from that responsibility and to legitimize the efforts of authorities to change the… person's attitudes and behavior.
(Edelman, 1975, p. 132)

The 1980s saw unemployment being 're-cast' as an 'individual problem rather than a social or economic one' (Gough et al, 2013, p. 22). There was a shift towards a neoliberal 'workfare state' (Jessop, 2002 in McDonald and Marston, 2005), where people 'accept responsibility for their own welfare and have specific social obligations to the government and to the broader community' (McDonald et al, 2005, p. 376) and where non-engagement results in penalties.

Fulfilling this 'obligation' to the state requires people to prove they are not just actively seeking work but also engaging in training and, as detailed by Dean (1995), 'job-preparation activities'. These activities can include skills training, numeracy and literacy competency courses, courses on how to improve 'confidence, motivation and presentation' and controversially, unpaid work. 'Mandatory Work Activity' (MWA), is presented as a means of 'providing jobseekers with the disciplines associated with employment, while at the same time enabling

them to make a contribution to the local community' (DWP, 2016, p. 6). Dean (1995) found that the result of individuals not engaging with these services was that they were labelled 'deviant, lazy, difficult and dependent' (Dean and Taylor-Crosby, 1998 in Fryer et al, 2014a p. 11)

Clients of Job Centres are sometimes required to undergo psychological therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or 'JOBS II' to improve their 'employability'. Although mainstream psychology strives to be considered apolitical and neutral, Fryer et al (2014b) suggest by engaging with government 'back-to-work' schemes and psychological therapies like these, it actively reinforces and normalises a shift of blame to the individual thus limiting the potential for 'resistance'.

'Evidence based' systems such as the Australian 'Job Seeker Classification Instrument' (Productivity Commission, 2002) assess 'risk and work barriers'. This is an example of how approaches to unemployment often rely on the flawed concept of a 'stable and consistent' self (Gough et al, 2013) and draw on the concept of 'ideal psychological, behavioural and emotional' states (McDonald et al in Fryer et al, 2014a p. 11). 'Personality' is presented as a site for change, meaning social problems become an individual's, rather than society's, responsibility (Parker, 2015, p. 67).

Identity construction and power relationships in welfare provider settings

Research carried out with staff in North American 'welfare to work' programmes by Seale (2012) explored ways in which professionals construct their identity through talk. The research found 'reconciling contradictions as a [caring] service provider often entails strategic characterizations of clientele, both positive and negative.' (Seale, 2012, p. 501).

McDonald et al (2005) also found that in Australia's 'Job Network' class privileges and power relationships were reinforced through staff/client interactions. In Seale's study, staff in welfare settings were able to absolve themselves of blame when their clients failed to find a job by presenting them as childlike, unmotivated and lacking in effort, though also occasionally as 'rational adults in an unfair system'. By presenting themselves as helping those who were unable to help themselves, harsh punitive measures were seen as justified (McDonald et al, 2005).

Subtle prejudice through paternalization and infantilization, and the establishment of a 'pedagogic authority' was evident in staff/client interactions (McDonald et al, 2005)

In government literature, similar prejudice is evident. MWA clients, it says, may exhibit 'a wide range of behaviours… [including] difficult, aggressive or sometimes violent behaviour.' (DWP, 2014).

There is scope for this area to be researched in Britain, using community psychological (e.g. Fryer, 2003) or ethnographic methods to better understand the identities formed and maintained in attempts to justify increasingly conditional and punitive practices.

Mental Health

Mental health is a common theme within the literature, and supports Fryer et al's (2014a) assertion that mainstream psychology is focused on establishing a causal link between poor mental health and unemployment. Much of 'Psychologists against Austerity's campaign literature is based on this.

Recommendations for psychological interventions (van Stolk et al, 2014) often make use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) models, sometimes delivered using electronic courses. This shows little awareness for possible reasons for poor mental health, instead focusing on enacting 'intrapsychic change' (Fryer, 1998) to reduce unemployment.

Jahoda's Functional Model (1982) suggests the reason for poor mental health is 'exclusion from a social (work) institution' (Jahoda, 1982 cited in Ezzy, 1993). However, Ezzy (1993) considers this to be 'romanticising' employment and instead suggests psychological distress being related to status change and subsequent difficulty in constructing a meaningful social identity.

Critical perspectives offer different explanations. Fryer et al (2014a) argue that the relationship is not psycho-biological or 'natural' but instead linked to a 'set of connected manifestations of social violence' resulting from a neo-liberal labour market.

Fryer (1986) suggests improving theory and practice requires recognition of a person as an active agent, but one constrained by their social situation. Literature from MIND takes this perspective; individual change can only come about with structural change (Farmer, 2014).

Conclusion

The influence of mainstream psychology is clear in dominant discourses, which blame the individual at the 'expense of a thorough critique of the oppressive [neo-liberal] labour market.' (Fryer et al, 2014a p. 14). In workplace psychology, concepts of 'self' and 'personality' are evident in 'personality type' instruments (e.g. Myers Briggs) which Townley (1993) says work to 'compartmentalise not just our work, but also ourselves as workers'.

Despite research showing them to be false, myths such as 'generational worklessness' (Fell et al, 2000; HM Government 2011a; 2001b) and the 'culture of poverty' (HM Government 2011a; 2011b) appear regularly in the literature, and are used to construct and strengthen moral or political positions. Both concepts assume homogeneity among broad categories. An intersectional approach would be useful in better understanding the experiences of welfare claimants and those living in poverty in Britain.

Dominant discourses around poverty and unemployment rely on individuals 'choosing' to change their own situation and disregard inhibiting cultural, societal and political factors.

Social psychology must become increasingly reflexive and critical of 'taken for granted' notions (as suggested in Fryer et al, 2014), and resist normalising the individualising, victim-blaming discourse which maintains neo-liberal power relationships.

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