Representing Attitudes to Welfare Dependency: Relational Geographies of Welfare

Pykett, Jessica

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Abstract: This article outlines the recent circulation of media images and discourse relating to characters pre-figured as 'welfare dependents' and reaction to *Benefits Street*. The article provides a brief overview of sociological analysis of such representations of apparently spiralling 'cultures of dependency' and proposes an alternative relational geography approach to understanding existing welfare dynamics. It describes a shift from putative welfare dependency, to dependency on geographically uneven employment opportunities, low-wage dependency and dependency on a new migrant division of labour. It then contrasts this relational geography approach with the increasingly behaviourist overtones of contemporary welfare reform, which began under New Labour and have accelerated under the Coalition government since 2010 and are in part reliant on the aforementioned media images in securing public acceptance. The article concludes by speculating on the apparent importance of *Benefits Street* in marking the possible 'end times' for the welfare state as we knew it.

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> 'If working people ever get to discover where their tax money really ends up, at a time when they find it tough enough to feed their own families, let alone those of workshy scroungers, then that'll be the end of the line for our welfare state gravy train.'   (James Delingpole 2014)

The reaction of right-wing journalists to the airing of Channel 4's *Benefits Street* in January this year, was predictable enough. This six-part documentary followed the fortunes of a group of low-income and welfare claimant residents of James Turner Street, in Winson Green, Birmingham – said to be one of Britain's most 'benefit-dependent' streets [2]. The series created something of a media storm, a twitter 'backlash' and a wider debate about the character traits, personal responsibilities

and lifestyles of those people featured, casting a spotlight over many intimate facets of their daily lives. The public reaction to the show motivated a campaign by third sector organisations (the 'lavishly pampered charities sector', as Delingpole would have it) to challenge media stereotyping of welfare claimants. After a sustained period of denigrating and responsibilizing the poor, arguably heightening over the last two decades, it is perhaps no surprise that the attitudes of the mainstream media, the right-wing press, the Conservative-led coalition government, and the 'general public' seem to have largely converged. *Accessing* public opinion is by no means a straightforward endeavour (Osborne and Rose 1999), and much work remains to be done in establishing the links between the public, media and public policy. After briefly outlining the recent circulation of media images and discourse relating to characters pre-figured as 'welfare dependents' and representations of the notion of spiralling 'cultures of dependency', this article proposes a relational approach to understanding existing geographies of welfare. In so doing, the second section describes a growing shift from putative welfare dependency, to dependency on geographically uneven employment opportunities, low-wage dependency and dependency on a new migrant division of labour. It contrasts this relational geography approach with the increasingly behaviourist overtones of contemporary welfare reform, which began under New Labour and have accelerated under the Coalition government since 2010. The article concludes by speculating on the apparent importance of *Benefits Street* in marking the possible 'end times' for the welfare state as we knew it.

Telling welfare stories

Sociological critique of media discourses relating to welfare 'dependency', the 'underclass' and more generally, the poor is well established (e.g. Kelly 1998; Misra *et al.* 2003; Tyler 2008). Much of this work offers a semiotic analysis of media imagery, linguistic devices and the political symbolism through which stereotypes are reproduced, welfare stories are re-told and specific welfare 'characters' imagined. For sociologist, Imogen Tyler (2008), the depiction of the character of Vicky Pollard in the popular BBC series *Little Britain* is one such example which on cultivates feelings of disgust, and ridicules the unruly bodies and 'weak' morals of working-class mothers. The fictional invention of comedians and writers, David Walliams, Matt Lucas and Andy Riley, Vicky Pollard appeared on on UK television from 2003 to 2006 and has become a popular cultural reference point for political debates concerning welfare reform [1]. Vicky Pollard is shown as a teenage mother of many children, who at one point swaps her child for a pop music CD. She is depicted as over-weight, sexually promiscuous and poorly educated. . This kind of media representation creates a personal typology described as being a 'chav'. This label carries with it the visible markers, behavioural

features and character traits associated with being poor and/or working class. The term has entered not only everyday language, specific 'chav-bashing' websites, but also apparently serious policy debates and the broadsheet and tabloid press alike. The term has sprung a wealth of critical commentary (e.g. Runnymede 2009; Jones 2011) relating to the cultural and economic denigration of the white working-class in particular – reflecting earlier interventions on the role of popular disgust in the production and maintenance of class distinctions (Lawler, 2005; Elias 1994 [1969]).

Teenage mothers appear to have a long-held significance in media imagery of welfare dependency, as noted in Kelly's (1998) analysis of 'stigma stories' relating to teen mothering, and Duncan and Edwards' (1998) account of the 'gendered moral rationalities' associated with lone mothers. Media representations matter, according to Kelly, because they constitute a 'morality play' which shapes public debate, steers public policy, and impacts on the lives of young mothers (1998: 444). They are posited as a threat to the social order, a threat to family values and a catalyst for 'big government', which must necessarily intervene in their 'chaotic' lives. Tony Blair, in an introduction to a report from the Social Exclusion Unit writes: '[t]eenage mothers are less likely to finish their education, less likely to find a good job, and more likely to end up both as single parents and bringing up their children in poverty' (Blair 1999, cited by Duncan 2007: 308). Duncan draws our attention to the contrasting evidence which suggests that the age of pregnancy has not been shown to have a significant impact on social outcomes. Instead, the choice to start a family relatively early is argued to be an entirely rational and morally justified decision which young women living in particular geographical contexts make on the basis of local economic circumstance and community expectation (2007: 307).

It is not just lone mothers who have long been portrayed as social pariahs. More recently, people living with disabilities and long-term health problems have been pilloried in the press, with personal interest stories revealing 'benefits cheats' and fraudulent claims being prevalent. Headlines such as 'Caught out on holiday hula-dancing' and 'Pictured: 'Disabled' £100,000 benefits cheat caught mowing lawn' are not uncommon (*Daily Mail* 2012; 2009). Again, public policy appears to be merely aligning itself with prevailing public opinion; responding to negative media coverage by portraying a hard-line on fraudsters and explicitly setting out targets to reduce the number of disability-related claims for out-of-work benefits (Deacon and Patrick 2011: 165). This is achieved by re-assessing people previously judged unfit to work as newly capable. In recent surveys commissioned by

disability charity, *Scope*, disabled respondents have reported that they had felt an increase in hostility directed at them in public. They put this down to negative media portrayals and to people claiming benefits to which they are not entitled, suggesting that perceptions of disability-related benefit fraud are equally wide-spread amongst people with disabilities (Scope 2012). The Chief Executive of *Scope*, Richard Hawkes, stated that: 'It is telling that these figures come as the Government continues to put the issue of weeding out illegitimate claimants at the heart of its welfare rhetoric'.

Whilst the lifestyles and character traits of these groups are often given particularly detailed treatment in media representations of welfare dependents, the very notion of dependency itself is given special value as an intergenerational cultural phenomenon by cabinet ministers. George Osborne and Ian Duncan-Smith (2012) have continuously restated their claims that the New Labour Government 'created a culture of dependency', and intergenerational 'cultures of worklessness' (DWP 2012), whilst David Cameron (2008)) has previously described how the children of our 'broken society' are:

> '[r]aised without manners, morals or a decent education, they're caught up in the same destructive chain as their parents. It's a chain that links unemployment, family breakdown, debt, drugs and crime'.

Cameron was responding to media reports of the involvement of Karen Matthews in the disappearance and subsequent recovery of her daughter in West Yorkshire in 2008. Another infamous recent example is the case of Mick Phillpot from Derby, whose 'welfare dependency' was portrayed by both politicians (David Cameron and George Osborne) and the media as the root of his violent behaviour (Tapsfield 2013). The media reporting of such cases is indicative of the way in which stories of criminality have been used to justify anti-welfare arguments in UK political debate (Mooney and Neal 2010). Harrowing, violent, anti-social, and often involving children, these stories are paraded as evidence of the treachery of the welfare state, its support for undesirable behaviour and its role in sustaining problematic lifestyle choices and 'trapping' families in poverty. This was similarly the tenor of Channel Four's *Benefits Street*, which was often voyeuristic in its portrayal of some of the residents' criminal drug-related activities and in the insinuation of welfare fraud amongst its key characters. The producers and interviewers involved in this programme evidently set out to ask questions about the behavioural effects of living on welfare benefits in the UK today. Clearly some segments of the media deal in these kind of extremes because they are more

'entertaining' and offer easy explanation for the conduct of those characters to whom we are introduced on screen and in print. But for those interested in the research evidence, the very notion of 'cultures of welfare dependency' is not something which stands up to scrutiny (MacDonald *et al.* 2014).   Rather, we need to take seriously the imperative to think sociologically and geographically about those depicted in personalised and behavioural terms as   the so-called 'underclass' by influential scholars such as Charles Murray (1990).   The cultures of poverty thesis, according to Bagguley and Mann (1992) is part of a methodological misstep, the well-known 'ecological fallacy' – where census data in specific geographical areas (e.g. on poverty, crime, educational achievement, single parenthood) are aggregated in order to make false inferences about the individual behaviours of people in that area. In other words, the correlation of crime with poverty is taken to mean that poverty *causes* crime, and this is reflected in the associations between benefits claimants and criminality. Furthermore, what *Benefits Street* failed most explicitly to do was in any way attempt to understand the specific geographical context in which the residents of James Turner Street lived – a context revealed by local historian, Carl Chinn (2014) – as one characterised by significant economic decline in the former industrial heartlands of the West Midlands.

Relational geographies of welfare

Whether it is an ideological conspiracy to demonise the poor, or whether ongoing deliberations concerning the structural causes of poverty and welfare needs simply doesn't sell papers and win TV ratings is a moot point.   But certainly, the above stories, and *Benefits Street* alike are pre-occupied with uncovering salacious detail, 'unusual' sexual activity, drug and alcohol use and criminal behaviour, which become associated if not correlated with the apparently self-defeating 'dependency' of their main protagonists on state benefits. But what other forms of dependency, dependence and independence do such stories silence? By taking a geographical approach to the welfare imaginary, we can begin to unpack specific relations of interdependency which might challenge dominant discourses which have a limited focus on character, moral and behavioural arguments.   Fraser and Gordon's (1994) seminal work on the historical emergence and residual traces of the keyword of 'dependency' is an important starting point for such an approach. They show how dependency has come to signify an incomplete, infantilised and gendered state which carries with it the stigma that we associate with the phrase 'welfare dependency' in the UK and USA today. This is contrasted with past meanings of dependence, which in pre-industrial societies was very much the social norm, referring to anybody who worked for a living (contrasted only to those lucky few with 'independent wealth/means'), and conferring social order, reliability and appropriate

deference.   They note that the 'semantic geography of dependency shifted significantly' (1994: 314) during the industrial era. This was the period in which dependency developed moral, psychological and behavioural connotations, associated both with liberationist political movements which sought independent citizenship as their ideal, and with the idea that waged labour was the only route to that ideal.   This placed a stark moral dividing line between the worker and 'the pauper' (p316) which also began to hold the latter to account for his character defects, idleness and reliance on charity. This gendered figure was not able to look after his own family; the aspiration for independence soon being almost entirely absent from the idealised behaviours of the necessarily dependent and weaker woman.   A fundamental point to note from their detailed exploration of this keyword is the process by which *economic* relations of dependency gradually became exempted from the negative portrayal of dependency in general. It was fine to be dependent on and subordinated to capital through waged-work but other forms of dependency were to be avoided; such residual dependency was explained away as a weakness of character.

Fraser and Gordon's careful account of this lineage of dependency sheds light on how the contemporary 'semantic geography of dependency' has come about. In eliminating capital-labour relations from the negative connotations of dependency, structural inequalities are obscured. These are the inequities which work together to logically re-produce workers' *dependence on regional geographies of employment,* their *low-wage dependence*, , and the state's *dependence on new migrant divisions of labour* for economic growth. First, any account of welfare dependency which fails to take into account the regional disparities in welfare take-up, and their negative correlation with employment opportunities falls short in explaining why it is that people claim welfare benefits. As Hamnett (2013: 4) has demonstrated, claims for Job Seekers Allowance, housing and disability benefits are most commonplace in old industrial and mining areas and deprived areas of London, and reflect a well-established north-south divide in the nation's economic prosperity. He argues that current welfare reforms will succeed only in widening the gap between areas of deprivation and prosperity along the these regional lines. The worst affected local authorities have been identified by Beatty and Fothergill (2013: 3) as those located in the UK's most deprived counties, and will lose around 4 times as much in terms of welfare funding than those least affected. Second, it is now increasingly recognised that poverty cannot simply be explained away by narratives of the 'workshy scrounger' as Delingpole would have us believe. Research has provided evidence that the majority of those living in poverty are those who live in households in which at least one person is working, amounting to 6.1 million people (Aldridge *et al* 2012). This makes welfare claiming much more of a mainstream experience and concern, with an estimated 70% of the UK's households in receipt of at

least one benefit (Hamnett, 2013: 4). Such workers, simply put, are paid a wage which is below the level required to maintain a minimum standard of living, with dependence on high-cost personal credit commonplace. Furthermore, the real cost of out-of-work benefits is often over-estimated in relation to the welfare bill for pensions and in-work benefits such as tax credits, obscuring the significant role that the British state plays in subsidizing the low-wages paid by employers in order to meet this minimum standard of living for the 'hard-working families' so beloved of political rhetoric. Third, the personalisation and moralisation of welfare dependency conceals the dependence of the UK economy on taking advantage of global economic inequalities which provide a ready pool of relatively cheap migrant workers who keep global cities such as London and key UK industries working. Such workers, as May *et al.* (2007) show, disproportionately work in elementary occupations paying the lowest wages (domestic workers, cleaners, caretakers, porters, refuse collectors and labourers, retail and hospitality staff). They often have limited access to pensions, sick, holiday and maternity pay. They are flexible to the point of disposability, and are thus a highly attractive prospect to employers who must navigate the boom-bust tendencies of global capitalism. But far from a straightforward local consequence of broader global forces, May and colleagues argue that successive UK state policies actively de-regulating the labour market, reforming welfare to incentivise work and managing migration to facilitate a new 'reserve army of labour' have actually brought this set of interrelated dependencies to bear.

In the absence of any serious prospect of mainstream political opposition to this wider economic status quo it is perhaps unsurprising that facile explanations for dependency are offered. In order to side-step the far-reaching consequences of addressing negative aspects of free-market capitalism and income polarisation, the negative traits of dependency are transferred onto specific characters who take on the persona of the weak, vulnerable, incomplete, unmotivated and ill-disciplined figures to be laughed at, disgusted by and condemned. It is these figures who are invoked in the justification of a behaviouralist imperative for welfare reform. This is manifest in: welfare-to-work programmes which seek to address the deficient 'employability' of job-seekers, or otherwise mandate unpaid work; conditional welfare programmes which set evermore intensive and interventionist work-focussed interviews and tougher conditions for the receipt of benefits (not least, the withdrawal of income support and the expectation that parents with children of school age should be working rather than caring for their children, as identified by Whitworth and Griggs (2013)); sanctions and benefits withdrawal for welfare claimants who do not comply with these conditional welfare programmes, already commonplace in the USA (Schram *et al.* 2010); and pilot policy initiatives which have aimed to measure and modify the psychological traits of job-seekers

(Cromby and Willis 2013). It has therefore been noted that the reform of the welfare system may be part of a wider political agenda of behavioural change associated with libertarian paternalism (Standing 2011; Harrison and Hemingway 2014). This 'behaviour change agenda' thus distinguishes between the highly paternalistic techniques of conditional welfare which are evidently targeted at low-income groups, and a relatively liberal regulatory approach directed towards the arguably equally 'anti-social' or self-excluding rich, who's behaviour remains relatively untouched. As such, the 'othering' effects of media representations of welfare dependency are of critical importance in understanding how the welfare policy debate becomes decontextualized from its relational geographies and interdependencies.

Channel 4's *Benefits Street* was at once decried for its demonization and stereotyping, and celebrated as a realistic portrayal of the lives of welfare claimants which opened up public debate on the current direction of welfare reform through an 'entertainment' format. Seen in the context of a much longer set of divisive representations of the 'underclass' and the '(un)deserving' poor, and in light of the changing meanings of dependency itself, we can begin to see how telling welfare stories as a morality play provides a script for welfare state reforms based on selective behavioural interventions targeted at specific social groups. Whilst there are certainly welfare rights groups and third sector organisations, who despite cuts to their own funding, strive to give voice to those who are vilified in the press, there is little reason to be optimistic that they will be successful in protecting the welfare state as we knew it. With this general direction of travel, there may be every reason for commentators such as Delingpole to proclaim the end of the 'welfare gravy train', specifically in anything like its universal, redistributive and non-conditional guise. In the meantime, however, there is an urgent need to understand sociologically and geographically the dynamic, co-constitutive and contingent relationship between media representations of welfare dependency, public opinion and the current political struggle for welfare reform.

Footnotes

[1] In 2006, James Delingpole wrote in the Times of the enduring comedic value and political salience of of Vicky Pollard: "she embodies with such fearful accuracy several of the great scourges of contemporary Britain: aggressive all-female gangs of embittered, hormonal, drunken teenagers; gym-slip mums who choose to get pregnant as a career option; pasty-faced, lard-gutted slappers who'll drop their knickers in the blink of an eye; dismal ineducables…" (Delingpole, Times, 13 April 2006)

[2] http://www.channel4.com/programmes/benefits-street/episode-guide (accessed 10/04/14)

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