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Navigating the Stigmatised Identities of Poverty in Austere Times: Resisting and responding to narratives of personal failure

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Keywords: Poverty; Behavioural theories; Underclass; Austerity; Recession

Abstract

Behavioural explanations of poverty and disadvantage have figured heavily in political rhetoric in the era of austerity, as a means to understand trajectories into poverty and subsequent relationships between benefit claimants and the state. These discourses are not restricted to political debate, as previous studies demonstrate they impact upon public consciousness and structure the ways that the general public think about poverty, as well as shaping the ways in which people living on low incomes are treated. Drawing upon the testimonies of 62 people in England and Scotland experiencing poverty, this article seeks to understand our participants responses to these discourses, in particular: how these behavioural explanations impact upon their understanding of their own situations, as well as their self perceptions; how these discourses shape their relationships with others, in terms of their experience of disrespect; and how participants seek to dissociate themselves from their stigmatising implications.

Introduction

In the era of austerity, considerable public and political attention has focussed on social security expenditure, and as a consequence much has been said about the nature and causes of poverty alongside remedies necessary to reduce the levels of relative deprivation in contemporary Britain. These discussions have been dominated by behavioural explanations of poverty, as well as the hostility directed from politicians and the media towards those living on low income. Marginalised in these debates, the voices of the 'poor' rarely feature; rather the 'poor' are constructed as 'other', distinct from mainstream society with alternate value systems and distinct behavioural patterns. This said, people living on low income are neither insulated from these discourses, nor passive subjects, rather they are acutely aware of the ways they might be viewed by others, and in varying circumstances they are required to engage with, respond to, as well as to circumnavigate the stigmatising implications of this discourse.

Given the currency afforded to notions, such as 'welfare dependency' and the 'intergenerational transmission of worklessness', our starting point for this analysis is to consider behavioural discourses that currently dominate policy debates as hegemonic. Our interest here lies in the ways that as hegemonic discourse, behavioural explanations of poverty both shape the practices, attitudes and language of people experiencing poverty, but are also actively resisted and rejected. To paraphrase Lears (1985: 571), behavioural explanations of poverty as hegemonic discourses should be considered to invoke *'a complex mental state...a 'contradictory consciousness' mixing approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation'.* Thus, 'contradictory consciousness' allows us to consider and to make some sense of the complex and contradictory responses that those on low income hold towards the many stigmatising and pejorative connotations of these discourses. We hope to shed some light on the ways in which the same participants might reject aspects of behavioural discourses in relation to their own lives, whilst simultaneously drawing on these explanations to inform the criteria by which they judge others, as well as to critique themselves in particular circumstances.

This paper draws on data from the project *Life on a Low Income in Austere Times* which was part of the ESRC funded study Poverty and Social Exclusion in the United Kingdom (PSE UK).[i] The project collected 62 testimonies from a range of people experiencing poverty in England and Scotland. We

explore how these individualised narratives informed participants' understanding of their own situations, shaped their relationships and attitudes to others, and impacted upon their own sense of self. Data presented in the paper was collected through semi-structured interviews in Gloucestershire (n=21), Glasgow (n=23) and Birmingham (n=18), during 2012-2013, as recession gave way to the initial throes of austerity. Recruitment for the study was facilitated through community and voluntary organizations working with people living on a low income in the three fieldwork areas, all participants completed a screening questionnaire to ensure suitability for the study. A purposive heterogeneous sample was designed in order to capture a variety of perspectives from different low income groups, reflecting standpoints according to gender, age and ethnicity[ii]. The majority of participants (n=53) were not in paid work for a variety of reasons, due to caring roles, unemployment, illness or retirement. Nevertheless all participants, with the exception of one, had some experience of full time paid and many had extensive work histories, almost predominantly in low paid jobs, with a few having worked in relatively well paid skilled manual jobs. A thematic framework analysis was used to identify the impacts of current behavioural discourses on our participants as well as their adaptive responses to these stigmatising narratives.

A Behavioural Discourse for Austere times: 'Workers', 'Shirkers' and the 'Problem' of 'Dependency'

We recognise there is little new to behavioural explanations of poverty. As Macnicol (1988: 165) notes, there appear to be 'striking continuities' across time in the assertion that 'a growing intergenerational underclass' exists amongst the 'poor' due 'either to heredity or socialisation'. Moreover, Walker and Chase (2013) suggest that behavioural explanations are a quintessential feature of British political and policy understandings of poverty, existing since the Elizabethan Poor Law embedded in the 'deserving and undeserving dichotomy' within the national cultural consciousness. Yet, as Welshman (2002) importantly reminds us, these explanations qualitatively differ at particular points in history and are constantly renewed in line with the specificity of particular political and economic conjunctures – a point underlined by Pantazis in this special issue. With this in mind, we seek to highlight the key features of the latest variant articulated for the era of austerity, which shaped the UK Conservative/Liberal Democratic Coalition Government's (2010-2014) welfare reforms and anti-poverty policy as well as filtering into the broader public consciousness.

We identify three discursive strands that dominated Coalition Government rhetoric. These are primarily drawn from the speeches of Coalition Government members and, in particular, those who were most vocal in this regard, Conservative Cabinet ministers. Many of the ideas emanated from Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and the think tank that he has long been associated with, the Centre for Social Justice. The first of these strands, is an aetiological approach, promoted by the Centre for Social Justice, that identifies five behavioural 'pathways' which shape an individual's vulnerability to poverty as *'family breakdown, economic dependency and worklessness, educational failure, addiction and indebtedness'* (Pickles, 2010: 162), as endorsed by Prime Minister David Cameron:

> 'First, we must treat the causes of poverty at their source……whether that's debt, family break-down, educational failure or addiction…Second, we've got to recognise that in the end, the only thing that really beats poverty, long-term, is work.' (Cameron, 2012)

As Wiggan (2012: 387) suggests, these pathways are essentially located within the realm of personal responsibility as *'anti-social choices made by individuals, supposedly facilitated by excessive and poorly targeted social expenditure'*.

Second, Coalition rhetoric focussed considerably on the 'worklessness pathway', as the principal route into poverty, as a rational decision to forego paid work for a life on benefits:

> 'Those within it grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own, the state will support you whatever decisions you make, you will always be able to take out no matter what you put in. This has sent out some incredibly damaging signals. That it pays not to work. That you are owed something for nothing. It gave us millions of working-age people sitting at home on benefits even before the recession hit. It created a culture of entitlement.' (Cameron, 2012)

According to the logic of these arguments, the alleged weakening of work incentives by the benefits system has given rise to a subculture of worklessness, a set of values and attitudes transmitted across generations. As Duncan Smith put it 'worklessness' has generated 'a cultural pressure' to conform to a lifestyle premised on the mantra that 'taking a job is a mugs game' (cited in Walker and Chase, 2013: 150).

Third, the behavioural focus developed through worklessness is forged alongside a distinctly moralistic discursive strand. Fairness was deployed to construct a dichotomy between those who 'contribute' to and those who are 'dependent' on social security, which Wiggan (2012: 390) suggests 'recasts social protection as a generous gift from 'us' to 'them':

> 'Fairness means giving people what they deserve – and what people deserve depends on how they behave. If you really cannot work, we'll look after you. But if you can work, but refuse to work, we will not let you live off the hard work of others.' (David Cameron, 2010, Conservative Party Conference, Birmingham)

Fairness has proved to be a powerful discursive device; the 'shirkers vs workers' metaphor is often cited in contemporary discussions of poverty and welfare reform – this particularly impacted our participants as will be demonstrated later. Such evocative and hostile rhetoric has served to intensify the focus on particular welfare claimants, as Walker and Chase (2013: 150) observe, *'after more than a decade of New Labour's rhetoric on worklessness and responsibilities ministers feel more able to use and be informed by the language of the streets'*. The nature of this language, its simplistic causal logics and its common sense appeal, mean that these messages have been readily popularised through supportive sections of the British print and news media (Wiggan, 2012).

Empirical analysis of media content appears to offer some support for this assertion. For example, Baumberg et al's (2012) analysis reveals that 'negative' media coverage, across a 20 year period, intensified significantly both in the late 1990s and 2010-11. Yet, they observe during the latter period, that the '*language and content of 'negative' coverage'* appears to have changed significantly, with articles *'much more likely now to refer to lack of reciprocity and effort on the part of claimants than they were previously'* (Baumberg *et al.*, 2012). It is clear that these findings resonate with aspects of the behavioural discourse outlined above, specifically in relation to notions of 'fairness' and those who fail to reciprocate the 'welfare gift'. Similarly, Briant et al's (2012: 4) content analysis of newspaper coverage of disability from 2004/5 to 2010/2011 demonstrates a reduction across this period in stories that *'describe disabled people in sympathetic and deserving terms...some impairment groups are particularly less likely to receive sympathetic treatment: people with mental health conditions and other 'hidden' impairments were more likely to be presented as undeserving'.* These messages appear to also shape public attitudes to disability benefits, with the study focus groups reporting the perceived rate of fraud to be higher than it is in reality. As Briant et al (2012: 4) observed *'participants justified these claims by reference to articles they had read in newspapers'*. The point is our participants exist in a world where empathy for those experiencing poverty has been steadily eroded over 30 years, with the recent recession and the onset of austerity serving to further intensify these processes (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007; Pearce and Taylor, 2013).

'Pathways' into Poverty': Rejecting the Behavioural Discourse

Given the intensity and pejorative nature of much of the rhetoric that has dominated both political and public discussions of poverty, how do people experiencing poverty understand their own biographies when afforded the opportunity to author these for themselves? Few participants elected to frame their accounts wholly in line with behavioural discourses. For those who did, they explained that they had 'messed up' their lives, often as a result of self-destructive behaviour such as drug and alcohol addiction, or, involvement in criminal activity. Thus, their pathways into poverty were framed in terms of 'personal failure' and these participants volunteered that they felt they were personally responsible for their plight. However, as the following quote demonstrates, whilst these participants were all too aware of their own limitations, they were also often able to reflect on the contextual factors (traumatic life events, bereavement etc) that influenced their actions:

> 'Self inflicted, I suppose. I have got a gambling problem for one that has caused a lot of problems. I lost my accommodation, split up with my girlfriend, because of family problems, I ended up in a hostel...I have always worked as a labourer...It just got out of control. I have been gambling since I was young, in my teens. I buried my head in the sand. I always knew I had a problem...That is the biggest factor in where I am...The death of my Gran that hit me pretty hard, she looked after us as kids. With the gambling, it helped me cope, she died suddenly in a fire, I didn't seek any counselling or nothing like that, I couldn't talk to anyone about it. The gambling was there, but I had this confidence, no matter what I did my Gran would always take my side, she was a safety net if you like. Once my Gran died, I was gambling more and more...gambling was comfort.' (Unemployed, Male, Birmingham)

Others suggested that their current circumstances had resulted from the poor 'choices' they made at earlier stages in their lives, in terms of leaving school or college without qualifications or not seizing particular opportunities to 'better themselves' when they were presented:

> 'I have lived in the one area all my life...The usual stuff, growing up through school liked my football, I left school when I was just about to turn 16, I wouldn't say I was a delinquent but just fell behind, and got into social situations, underage drinking stuff that, stupid stuff that happens in areas like this where there is a lot poverty. Went off the rails a wee bit and over the last few years I have been able to get my life back on track.' (Low paid worker, Male, Glasgow)

As the above quote suggests, those who located their current situations in the context of past errors, also emphasised that their lives were 'back on track' as they either had made steps to return to work or had already re-entered the labour market (see also Dean, 2003). The fact that some participants framed their understanding of their own situations within behavioural terms accords with the findings of previous studies which have made similar observations (Dean, 2003) and as Lister (2003: 150) suggests *' ...where the problem of poverty is typically individualised and blamed on the poor...It is likely that those affected will make sense of their situation in individualised, often self blaming terms...'*.

However, many of our participants actively opposed and confronted behavioural discourses as a legitimate explanation of their circumstances – particularly, the notion that their situations resulted from a 'lifestyle choice':

> 'You always get looked on, 'oh she's a single parent on benefits, oh she is just having children so she can have benefits, or she is just doing it so she can get a council house'. People always look at the negative side of things. I never chose to be a single mom, it is just the way things happened. (Lone parent, Female, Gloucestershire)

The vast majority of our participants framed their accounts in relation to a series of life events that lay beyond their control. Whilst testimonies were uniquely personal, they revealed important

commonalities in terms of the significant life events that they identified as shaping their current situations. Many participants referred to long term illness or disability as determining their relationship with the labour market, others suggested that the breakdown in intimate or familial relationships to be significant factors in their current situations. For many of our participants, already living with fragile financial circumstances, what may appear to be very common life events, often served as 'tipping points' into poverty.

Participants' biographical accounts were not only framed through such life events, but almost all of our participants also sought to articulate aspects of their situation where external constraints were imposed on their choices and opportunities. At this point in time, given that our participants had endured the deepest recession in recent memory, it is perhaps unsurprising that many were conscious of the structural factors that shaped their lives, such as high rates of unemployment, a low waged economy and the rising cost of living.

For the majority of our participants recession had either resulted in their exclusion from paid work or had extended this period of exclusion due to the shortage of work and increased competition for jobs. For those with already fragile household budgets, the devastating consequences of job loss were clearly articulated:

> 'Four years ago, I lost my job, which meant I lost my home...I was homeless for a couple of months, it took a long time for benefits to come through. Just sleeping on a sofa with no money, I lived off toast for 6 weeks. After a couple of months, I did manage to get a flat, privately rented but I was still skint, just hadn't hardly any money'. (Lone Parent, Female, Gloucester)

Others, particularly men over the age of 50 experiencing long term unemployment, framed job loss within a broader historical narrative of deindustrialisation and/or casualisation. For these participants, broader economic restructuring had rendered their skill set obsolete in some cases, forcing them to retrain and to compete against younger and often 'cheaper' workers:

> 'I am an engineer by trade, I worked in Coventry in the factories, big boom, but of course there are no factories anymore, there is no factory work, it has all been moved away to other countries, there is no factory work there anymore really.' (Long term unemployed, Male, Gloucester)

Given the level of competition for jobs at this point, many of our participants who were already vulnerable within the labour market due to personal histories, for example, criminal convictions, interrupted work histories, or holding little relevant work experience, acknowledged this had compromised their search to secure full time paid work. For many excluded from the labour market, the transition back into work was often frustrated by the inflexible nature of employers' requirements and the form paid work currently takes. As our participants recognised, the contemporary labour market is often unable to provide work that is suited to particular groups' needs so that people with long term health problems, disabilities, or drug and alcohol addictions are likely to be permanently excluded (Scharf *et al.*, 2002). Most commonly, as identified in previous studies (Crisp *et al.*, 2009), the lack of flexible working arrangements combined with the expense of childcare, were widely cited as key factors in participants' continued exclusion from paid work, particularly for lone parents.

Our participants also suggested that current wage levels either served to exclude them from the labour market by pricing them out of some jobs, or alternatively, if they worked in the low paid sector, the inability to escape low pay was a key factor explaining their current situation. Many participants suggested that low waged work does not pay a 'living wage' capable of meeting the costs of private rented accommodation, rising food prices, rising heating costs and transport (Crisp

et al., 2009). Thus many participants who were unemployed and actively seeking work reported being forced to calculate whether they could afford to return to work:

> 'I have gone out and looked for work, but the money that they are offering would just throw me into debt, it wouldn't cover my rent is £450 a month, that is just my rent, the water people they want £1000 a year, council tax whatever that is, and we haven't started living yet, at the moment as we speak my gas is £600 a year, because it is £50 a month, the same as my electric.
> (Lone Parent, Female, Birmingham)

Whilst many of our participants expressed an overwhelming desire to return to paid work, they also feared the financial consequences. The transition from welfare benefits to paid work represents a significant risk with potentially dire consequences for people living on meagre household budgets, so that welfare benefits become a 'life raft' to which individuals are forced to cling (Daly and Leonard, 2002). An important distinction must be drawn here between the political rhetoric surrounding the 'benefits trap' and our participants' emphasis on the problem of a 'low wage' economy.

For those participants in full time paid work, competition for jobs had frustrated their attempts to escape low paid and insecure jobs. Thus, the opportunities to move up the 'career' ladder into more secure, better paid work with improved conditions were circumscribed:

> 'The company I left, before I came to this one. I tried to get a job, I phoned up about a job it was just a delivery driver, it was just in the Job Centre the day before and I rang up and said to the boy, 'how many applicants have you got in' and he said 'only 150 so far', in one day do you know what I mean! There is absolutely no chance getting a job you know, especially when you have done the same job for 12 years...'
> (Low wage worker, Male, Glasgow)

Thus many of our participants viewed the low paid sector as providing unrewarding and insecure work, with little opportunity to acquire skills and to progress into better paid jobs, and this served to explain not only their current position, but also prevented them from escaping in-work poverty.

Finally, many of our participants discussed the ways that the deprivations they experienced had intensified as a result of macro-economic trends. More specifically, they suggested that were caught at the 'sharp end' of two converging trends, namely falling/stagnating incomes and the rising cost of living:

> 'Things have always been hard, but since January of this year, it has not been hard it has been impossible, absolutely impossible, I don't know how people survive...it's all benefits, the money has stayed the same, but the cost of living has gone out of the roof.'
> (Lone parent, Female, Birmingham)

> 'Fuel goes up constantly, about 6 months ago it was going up every couple of days when I was going in the garage, our fares don't go up, they stay the same, they go up every three years...maybe 5 years ago, I was clearing £400, £500 a week, now I am down to £200 now.'
> (Low wage worker, Male, Glasgow)

Previous studies have indicated the difficulties that participants have had connecting their immediate circumstances to broader structural contexts that might be prompted by 'false consciousness' (Beresford and Croft, 1995). Yet this was not the case for the majority of our participants whose testimonies framed their own lives within a narrative of external constraints – although, we must remain alive to the fact this may be a product of the point in time when these testimonies were collected. Neither is it surprising that given the stigma attributed to aspects of life on a low income, we might find that participants make strenuous efforts to demarcate themselves as being poor as a consequence of 'misfortunate events' rather than their circumstances resulting

from personal failings. Ultimately our participants wrestled with these conflicting explanations and accompanying emotions.

Behavioural Discourse and the Permission to 'Denigrate': The Wrath of 'Mainstream' Society

To what extent has the intensification of political rhetoric and hardening public attitudes impacted the daily lives of our participants? Our participants' testimonies revealed the varying instances of disrespect that they encountered in their daily lives, and the ways they are spoken to and treated as citizens of 'unequal worth' (Lister, 2003). It was clear that many perceived these experiences to have intensified as a result of the stigmatising representation of poverty in public and media discourses in the context of recession and austerity. These testimonies alluded to a 'perfect storm', whereby the pejorative images and stigmatising features of behavioural discourses that dominated political debates at this time, circulated in the news media, as well as television shows such as the 'Secret Millionaire' and 'Jeremy Kyle', had penetrated the public conscience. Some of our participants noted that this coverage appeared to legitimise public denigration of the perceived lifestyles of people living on low incomes:

> 'I think it is gradually getting worse and worse. For example, the Universal Credit and stuff coming in, it has given the public who don't understand the benefits system the pedestal to say 'oh look they are finally capping this because of how much people are sponging'... Some media voices or outlets are using that and that is already giving some people the soap box to say 'they are finally doing something'... I think that is changing the way people talk about it and making it worse. (Low wage worker, Female, Birmingham)

Many of our participants' testimonies referred to instances of disrespect that they were subject to, which appear to be framed by political rhetoric of 'fairness' and the 'workers vs shirkers' dichotomy. The traction this rhetoric appears to gain lies in the pressures and insecurities that impacted many sections of society and the 'restraint' and 'sacrifice' brought to bear on working households, which to paraphrase Young (2003: 405) turns 'simple displeasure' at the fecklessness of the shirkers into 'vindictiveness'.

Some participants referred to the divisive nature of this rhetoric, serving to exacerbate existing fault lines within their own communities:

> 'It has got really bad. Some neighbours opposite they are in exactly the same situation as you are, but they still stick their nose up at you. You are just fighting a dead battle... It has got worse, it has got really bad now, wherever you go now you hear people say look at these 'dole bums'...' (Unemployed Female, Gloucestershire)

> 'People think she is on benefits she will be alright. The guy who fitted my T.V. to the wall, charged me £70 even though he is my friend...I did try and say can you do it any cheaper, he said 'no sorry, I need it'. He said 'you're alright anyway, it is not your money, it is benefits money, it is my tax money anyway'. (Lone parent, Female, Gloucestershire)

Whilst behavioural discourses seek to label the 'poor' as 'other', set apart from mainstream society as a result of allegedly dysfunctional values, attitudes and behaviour, it appears that the 'workers vs shirkers' dichotomy has had a particularly insidious impact on wider social relationships. Our participants' testimonies suggest that political rhetoric has served to pit neighbours and communities in opposition to one another, creating an environment of intolerance, misunderstanding and hostility (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013).

Internalising Behavioural Discourses: Self Loathing

Our participants understood that when behavioural explanations are uttered publicly and rearticulated in daily interactions that essentially they are being talked about. Whilst they might reject these ideas as an explanatory framework for their own circumstances, they remained acutely aware that others might perceive them in these terms. This evoked a range of conflicting emotions for our participants, including anger and frustration at being thought of as 'lazy' or 'not contributing':

> 'When you hear the way that people experiencing low income on T.V. are represented, how does that make you feel?' (Interviewer)
> 'I don't really watch any of it because I get irritated and angry, so I don't bother seeing any of it' (Lone Parent, Female, Gloucester)

Yet, it is difficult to remain permanently angry or to isolate yourself entirely from pejorative messages. All participants talked about how they internalised these messages and the ways in which they informed the criteria by which participants' self-evaluate. As discussed above, participants might publicly reject behavioural discourse as a means to explain their situations, but to paraphrase Jenkins (1996: 57) '*public image may become self image',* as '..o*ur own sense of humanity is a hostage to categorising judgements of others'.* Internalising messages that suggest that poverty is rooted in choice, personal failure and dependency led many participants to develop injuriously low levels of self esteem and personal confidence:

> 'When I became a single parent, it was 'you're a scrounger and you sit at home doing nothing' that used to really, really get to me. Not everybody is the same...I didn't ask to end up on my own with four children. They just assume we are all bad, because we are single parents, it made me feel like I wasn't worth anything...it was in the media, you would read stuff about it, people would be judgmental because you were on benefits...' (Lone Parent, Female, Birmingham)

> 'I hated it, I felt that I had let myself down...I still don't feel that it is the way I should be living, I don't think I should be one of those statistics...I used to be one of those people who thought 'oh, single parents on benefits' and all that, I hated the fact that I had to do it myself...it just felt like something foreign...I am not working for that money and it feels wrong to have it'. (Lone parent, Female, Gloucestershire)

As with Sennett and Cobb's (1972) classic study that documented the hidden injuries of social class; the very same participants who recognised the determining structural contexts that shaped their lives, also adopted features of behavioural discourses to conclude their financial situation to be a signifier of personal failure. Thus, the quotes above make reference to societal judgements about 'something for nothing', 'scrounging' – that served to shape participants' views of their self-worth. Particularly injurious, as the final quote illustrates, is the shift from 'contributor' to 'shirker', as participants are forced to wrestle with the identities that they might have once constructed and applied to the 'other'. However, these participants may now apply this label to themselves to further compound feelings of failure that accompanied their initial loss of status.

Adaptive Responses to Behavioural Discourses: Avoiding the Stigma of the 'Other'

Although our participants appeared to internalise aspects of behavioural discourses, given the negative connotations associated with poverty, few were willing to unambiguously self-identify as 'poor'. As Lister (2003: 151) observes, given the stigma associated with poverty *'a person is unlikely to want to own it publicly'*. Many participants went to considerable lengths to distance themselves from 'the poor' (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013). *Distancing* was primarily achieved by drawing on

the category of the 'poor' as a device to construct participants' own identities as distinct from those viewed as less deserving than themselves. The testimonies of our participants often served to 'other' groups cited in behavioural discourses as being 'undeserving', including young people, migrants, and lone parents:

> 'I don't want to offend anyone and this may sound harsh, but stop paying women and giving them big houses, so they have more and more kids. If you come into this country, you have got to work, don't just sit here and take houses...Because there are people out there who want to do good, I have got three voluntary jobs...' (Lone parent, Female, Birmingham)

> 'I just think that they think we are all just lazy and we all should be working. In my situation because I don't have friends and family around me and I don't have childcare, it is not as simple as that. Of course, there are people who are lazy and who won't work'. (Lone Parent, Female, Gloucester)

Distancing is also achieved where participants actively refute the application of these identities to their own circumstances. Delineating participants' values and behaviours from those they attributed to the 'poor' was strongly emphasised. Thus, many participants went to considerable lengths to highlight their own work histories, volunteering, and roles as parents or carers, in ways that demonstrate their social worth (Broughton, 2003). It is exactly these behaviours that are viewed as virtues within mainstream society and this suggests that participants very much shared the values of 'hard work' and 'responsibility' characteristic of mainstream society (Cohen, 1987). Ultimately, distancing could be achieved if their situation was viewed as temporary, a transient phase rather than a more permanent lifestyle choice that may be attributed to the 'undeserving' poor (see also Broughton, 2003; Cohen, 1987):

> 'I just try to live my life the best way I can. Round where I am, I am probably only one of two, of most of the people living there who is working, everybody seems to be sat about gassing really, looking at everyone is, you know drinking and smoking, arguing. I like to know I am living a decent life, looking after my family, a respectable citizen in the community, which I am...I wouldn't like to be seen as a rogue and a thief.' (Part time worker, Female, Gloucestershire)

> 'It is not as though I get paid my money every fortnight and I am not doing nothing, I am not sitting on my bum. I am coming and doing voluntary work and that is what I do, other people that is them, they just want to sit on their bum all day. I feel as though even though I haven't worked, and I get this money that the Government pays me or the Taxpayers, or whoever is paying me every week, at least I am trying my best to give back, so even though you are paying out of your money, at least I am trying to provide a service back...' (Unemployed, Male, Gloucestershire)

With few exceptions, the most common adaptive response amongst our participants to the pervasive and injurious impacts of behavioural discourses, is to create the greatest discursive distance between themselves and the imagined 'other'. One significant consequence, as Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992: 117) conclude in their study of social security claimants, is the erosion of solidarity among social security recipients, an observation that appears equally applicable amongst participants in this study arising from the potentially injurious consequences of association. This means as Cohen's (1987: 88) study concludes, that through *'formally emphasizing their character in contrast to poor people'*, participants maintained *'their difference from the 'other', but they also isolate themselves from a community of people with similar needs'*. Through rejecting the applications of these pejorative labels to their own lives, participants were forced to place themselves in opposition to others experiencing similar deprivations which often only served to further marginalise our participants.

Conclusion

Our participants' lives were undeniably shaped by the behavioural discourses that emanated from the Coalition Government and took hold within the media following the recession and subsequent austerity policies. Unsurprisingly, behavioural discourses failed to resonate with the reality of their lives, with many participants rejecting these ideas as an explanatory framework for understanding their circumstances. This is in line with the wider academic evidence base which has repeatedly found little empirical support for the various manifestations of the behavioural thesis (c.f., Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992; Shildrick *et al.*, 2012; Welshman, 2007). Thus we might conclude that the hegemony of behavioural discourses is unstable and can unravel when unable to be applied to the immediate contexts in which people find themselves. Behavioural discourses appear best applied from a distance and are most successful in the case of the 'other'. Our participants were rarely able to identify individuals within their immediate social networks who met the constitutive criteria of this discourse. This would appear to echo Mann's (1970) study of working class Americans which demonstrated that whilst participants willingly embraced dominant values as abstract propositions they grew more sceptical as the values were applied to their everyday lives.

Rather our analysis suggests that behavioural explanations endure as hegemonic, not because these theories have explanatory power (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992; Lister, 2003), but due to the ease with which they take hold in the public consciousness. Thus, their power lies in their imprecision; this fluidity of meaning ensures that ideas are rearticulated with some ease in a host of different circumstances. For many living on the margins of social inclusion, the labels 'undeserving' or 'feckless' must therefore be avoided at all costs, if they are to circumnavigate the most corrosive aspects of these discourses for their own perception of self worth. Yet, the distancing and demarcation strategies available to our participants partly serve to lend currency to these ideas insofar as they contribute to wider 'common sense' positions concerning 'the poor' as distinct and different from mainstream society in terms of social norms, values, and behaviours. Through this process, behavioural discourses are framed by the lived experiences of low income, so that these ideas are granted a spurious authenticity through the voices of 'the poor' themselves.

This would be a fairly pessimistic note on which to conclude, particularly as possibilities exist to contest behavioural explanations in their current form. It is important to remind ourselves that, as hegemonic discourses, behavioural explanations require constant renewal to ensure their continuation. It is clear from the testimonies of our participants that when the claims of behavioural discourses are contrasted to the reality of low income that these accounts unravel. Thus, behavioural discourses have been successfully contested, as the extent of in work poverty in the UK has been revealed, that has in particular contexts begun to destabilise the rhetoric of 'worklessness' as a pathway into poverty. Similarly evidence from the recent analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey (Pearce and Taylor, 2013) demonstrates a softening in attitudes towards the unemployed – which might point to the weakening of the hegemony of current behavioural discourses. It is the responsibility of critical academics to exploit these opportunities; to promote alternative causal models that offer readily accessible connections between the lived reality of poverty that people observe in their daily lives as 'structural symptoms', and in doing so making clear the connections between 'zero hours contracts, 'low pay', 'rising prices' to the current configurations of capitalist relations. Only then might we begin to make significant in roads into the behavioural hegemony surrounding poverty and to redress its insidious and divisive impacts.

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[ii] Of the sixty-two participants thirty eight (61%) were female and twenty four male (39%). There was even representation across the age categories used – however, difficulties were experienced with recruiting from 65+ age groups. Finally, in relation to ethnicity, the sample had representation across the minority British ethnic categories, with 15 (24%) participants drawn from non-white British groups. For further details see the report 'Life on a Low Income in Austere Times' (Pemberton *et al.*, 2014) at http://www.poverty.ac.uk/editorial/life-low-income-austere-times