CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY

Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring, 2019

The young unemployed and a 'perfect storm' of stigmatisation

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> *The imposition of stigma is the commonest form of violence used in democratic societies…[It] can best be compared to those forms of psychological torture in which the victim is broken psychically and physically but left to all outward appearances unmarked. (Pinker, 1971: 175)*

During the course of my research I interviewed a number of young people who have made a conscious decision to not apply for social security. At first this baffled me as every single young person in this situation was entitled to do so. But when their reasons for not taking up entitlements became clear, I could well understand their decision even if it further impoverished already struggling households.

What is apparent from the interviews I've carried out is the sense of stigma and shame that the young people feel from the potential of accessing social security. Baumberg (2016) makes the point that 'benefits stigma' has seen a resurgence in 21st Century Britain due to a number of overlapping factors. He describes 'personal stigma' in this context as 'a person's own feeling that claiming benefits conveys a devalued identity' (p183). It's clear that such a description chimes with what the young people have been telling me, that they feel claiming benefits would result in them feeling ashamed – and lesser – should they access their entitlements.

But why should they feel this way? Pemberton et al (2016) talk about the UK at the moment witnessing a 'perfect storm' as pejorative images and denigrating discourse from TV shows, news media and public and political rhetoric swirl around mainstream culture, serving to 'other' and dehumanise those that have the temerity to access social security. Tracey Jensen (2014) points to the explosion of interest in what she terms 'poverty porn' in the UK since 2013 with a whole host of shows creating this new

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'genre' – shows such as *Benefits Street*, *We Pay Your Benefits*, *On Benefits and Proud*, *Britain on the Fiddle*, *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* and *The Great British Benefits Handout* amongst others. Such shows serve to individualise the consequences of poverty, presenting a narrow view of the subjects of these programmes as feckless and deserving of either pity or contempt (primarily the latter). Hancock and Mooney (2013) make the important point that shows such as these caricature 'poverty and people experiencing poverty' by presenting a narrow and decontextualised view of the lives of a few individuals who are presented as representative of a homogenised whole' (p113). Explicitly – all people in receipt of social security are worthy of our scorn and as such, what are we going to do to punish them?

Alongside such shows has been the increase in attention on welfare recipients since the Coalition government in the UK came to power in 2010; attention that has increased exponentially since. This is not to say New Labour were innocent – but McKay and Rowlingson (2011) suggest that from the coalition on, we have witnessed 'continuation with intensification' and a rise in 'othering' rhetoric. As Patrick (2014) notes, 'in seeking to justify and defend a tightening of welfare conditionality and a reduction in the real value of many benefits, successive Governments have repeatedly returned to the idea of benefits as a lifestyle choice' (p709). In particular, the discourse of 'shirkers and scroungers' and 'strivers Vs skivers' has become a favourite trope of Conservative politicians and a reworking of the older 'deserving Vs undeserving' rhetoric of days gone by. Certain sections of the media have proven extremely helpful in spreading this language into the mainstream, as Beresford (2016) notes:

> Successive governments have carried out their welfare reform policies in close association with dominant right-wing media. Newspapers such as the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, and their online platforms, have been cheer leaders for welfare reform; headlining benefit fraud, attacking welfare claimants and acting as a mouthpiece for ministers like Iain Duncan Smith, supporting benefit cuts and caps uncritically. (p422)

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In combination with the aforementioned poverty porn, life on welfare is presented as a vehicle for the imagined 'underclass' to shun a decent, civilised and above all hard-working life in order to live the life of riley on fags, booze, big-screen TVs and to breed with impunity. In other words, it encourages a life of immorality whilst the 'hard-working families' are positioned as some sort of mugs for allowing 'them' to do so.

Of course, such figures have proven extremely elusive as study after study has shown (e.g., Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Dunn, 2011; Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992). What research consistently finds is areas of high unemployment, decimated by rapid deindustrialisation and the:

> …economic dispossession of the working-class of Britain's old industrial centres over the latter third of the 20th Century…unemployment, insecurity and poverty. This to us seems the start of a more persuasive story than one that pretends that there are places where no-one works; 'Benefits Streets' where families have never worked for generations and where unemployment is a preferred way of life. (MacDonald *et al*, 2014: 5)

Indeed, the site of my study in Scotland is one such area. The glaring lack of decent employment (or any employment) accessible to these young people is airbrushed out of the picture. As is the fact that not one of the young people has spent any longer than a couple of months idle. All are desperately trying to make something of themselves but this isn't enough for them to feel able to claim their entitlements, it seems. All of the young people have worked, volunteered, attended employability courses of varying quality and many have spent months in exploitative employment in an attempt to 'get on' but still they feel 'undeserving'.

Several of the young people I interviewed highlighted the scrounger/skiver language and made explicit reference to poverty porn as reasons for non-take-up of entitlements, wishing to avoid the associated pejorative labelling. It seems apparent that the pernicious outcome of the perfect storm is the internalisation of this discourse to the

point where the young people are 'self-disciplining' and eschewing income that would alleviate (a little) the very worst outcomes of impoverishment. As Garthwaite (2016) observed in her study on foodbanks, such rhetoric has also served to stop people accessing essential food packages, as the discourse 'at times creat[ed] a stigma so powerful that it could not be overcome. This resulted in people skipping meals, eating foods that were out of date and foraging for food, which could have notable negative outcomes for both physical and mental health' (p285).

The young people in my study spoke often about parents and guardians (primarily mothers) struggling financially, often 'going without' themselves in order that the young people were suitably fed and clothed. And as Patrick (2014) also found, my young people and their families were often engaged in other forms of contribution – 'parenting, volunteering and care work – which are all too often under-valued and neglected in government accounts that continue to conceptualise paid work alone as the route a to full, 'active' citizenship status' (p716). Perhaps more disconcertingly, several of the young people were unable to work due to health factors or other responsibilities. But they too had internalised the belief that they were shirkers or skivers, despite their situation. The only 'real' work is paid employment and anything else is a personal failure even if these factors are out-with their control.

As Kaufman (2004) suggests, shame is one of the most powerful social emotions we can feel. For the young people in my study I'd suggest it attacks their very sense of self – who they are and what they are capable of. But perhaps it isn't these young people who should be feeling shame. The safety net of social security has been gradually eroded over the last thirty years but for some of the young people interviewed, it appears it no longer exists at all. I suggest that it is others who should feel shame at that fact.

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