

1 Navigating the Stigmatised Identities of Poverty in Austere Times: Resisting 2 and responding to narratives of personal failure

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

5 **Abstract**

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

17 **Introduction**

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

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

43 This paper draws on data from the project *Life on a Low Income in Austere Times* which was part of
44 the ESRC funded study Poverty and Social Exclusion in the United Kingdom (PSE UK).¹ The project
45 collected 62 testimonies from a range of people experiencing poverty in England and Scotland. We

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

61 **A Behavioural Discourse for Austere times: 'Workers', 'Shirkers' and the 'Problem' of** 62 **'Dependency'**

63 We recognise there is little new to behavioural explanations of poverty. As Macnicol (1988: 165)
64 notes, there appear to be 'striking continuities' across time in the assertion that 'a growing
65 intergenerational underclass' exists amongst the 'poor' due 'either to heredity or socialisation'.
66 Moreover, Walker and Chase (2013) suggest that behavioural explanations are a quintessential
67 feature of British political and policy understandings of poverty, existing since the Elizabethan Poor
68 Law embedded in the 'deserving and undeserving dichotomy' within the national cultural
69 consciousness. Yet, as Welshman (2002) importantly reminds us, these explanations qualitatively
70 differ at particular points in history and are constantly renewed in line with the specificity of
71 particular political and economic conjunctures – a point underlined by Pantazis in this special issue.
72 With this in mind, we seek to highlight the key features of the latest variant articulated for the era of
73 austerity, which shaped the UK Conservative/Liberal Democratic Coalition Government's (2010-
74 2014) welfare reforms and anti-poverty policy as well as filtering into the broader public
75 consciousness.

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

85
86 'First, we must treat the causes of poverty at their source.....whether that's debt, family break-
87 down, educational failure or addiction...Second, we've got to recognise that in the end, the
88 only thing that really beats poverty, long-term, is work.' (Cameron, 2012)

89
90 As Wiggan (2012: 387) suggests, these pathways are essentially located within the realm of personal
91 responsibility as '*anti-social choices made by individuals, supposedly facilitated by excessive and*
92 *poorly targeted social expenditure*'.

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

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

101
102 According to the logic of these arguments, the alleged weakening of work incentives by the benefits
103 system has given rise to a subculture of worklessness, a set of values and attitudes transmitted
104 across generations. As Duncan Smith put it 'worklessness' has generated 'a cultural pressure' to
105 conform to a lifestyle premised on the mantra that 'taking a job is a mugs game' (cited in Walker and
106 Chase, 2013: 150).

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

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

115
116 Fairness has proved to be a powerful discursive device; the 'shirkers vs workers' metaphor is often
117 cited in contemporary discussions of poverty and welfare reform – this particularly impacted our
118 participants as will be demonstrated later. Such evocative and hostile rhetoric has served to intensify
119 the focus on particular welfare claimants, as Walker and Chase (2013: 150) observe, '*after more
120 than a decade of New Labour's rhetoric on worklessness and responsibilities ministers feel more able
121 to use and be informed by the language of the streets*'. The nature of this language, its simplistic
122 causal logics and its common sense appeal, mean that these messages have been readily
123 popularised through supportive sections of the British print and news media (Wiggan, 2012).

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

142

143

144 **'Pathways' into Poverty': Rejecting the Behavioural Discourse**

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

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

165
166 Others suggested that their current circumstances had resulted from the poor 'choices' they made
167 at earlier stages in their lives, in terms of leaving school or college without qualifications or not
168 seizing particular opportunities to 'better themselves' when they were presented:

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

175
176 As the above quote suggests, those who located their current situations in the context of past errors,
177 also emphasised that their lives were 'back on track' as they either had made steps to return to work
178 or had already re-entered the labour market (see also Dean, 2003). The fact that some participants
179 framed their understanding of their own situations within behavioural terms accords with the
180 findings of previous studies which have made similar observations (Dean, 2003) and as Lister (2003:
181 150) suggests '*...where the problem of poverty is typically individualised and blamed on the poor...It
182 is likely that those affected will make sense of their situation in individualised, often self blaming
183 terms...'*

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

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

191
192 The vast majority of our participants framed their accounts in relation to a series of life events that
193 lay beyond their control. Whilst testimonies were uniquely personal, they revealed important

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

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

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

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

215
216 Others, particularly men over the age of 50 experiencing long term unemployment, framed job loss
217 within a broader historical narrative of deindustrialisation and/or casualisation. For these
218 participants, broader economic restructuring had rendered their skill set obsolete in some cases,
219 forcing them to retrain and to compete against younger and often 'cheaper' workers:

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

224
225 Given the level of competition for jobs at this point, many of our participants who were already
226 vulnerable within the labour market due to personal histories, for example, criminal convictions,
227 interrupted work histories, or holding little relevant work experience, acknowledged this had
228 compromised their search to secure full time paid work. For many excluded from the labour market,
229 the transition back into work was often frustrated by the inflexible nature of employers'
230 requirements and the form paid work currently takes. As our participants recognised, the
231 contemporary labour market is often unable to provide work that is suited to particular groups'
232 needs so that people with long term health problems, disabilities, or drug and alcohol addictions are
233 likely to be permanently excluded (Scharf *et al.*, 2002). Most commonly, as identified in previous
234 studies (Crisp *et al.*, 2009), the lack of flexible working arrangements combined with the expense of
235 childcare, were widely cited as key factors in participants' continued exclusion from paid work,
236 particularly for lone parents.

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

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

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

249
250 Whilst many of our participants expressed an overwhelming desire to return to paid work, they also
251 feared the financial consequences. The transition from welfare benefits to paid work represents a
252 significant risk with potentially dire consequences for people living on meagre household budgets, so
253 that welfare benefits become a 'life raft' to which individuals are forced to cling (Daly and Leonard,
254 2002). An important distinction must be drawn here between the political rhetoric surrounding the
255 'benefits trap' and our participants' emphasis on the problem of a 'low wage' economy.

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

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

265
266 Thus many of our participants viewed the low paid sector as providing unrewarding and insecure
267 work, with little opportunity to acquire skills and to progress into better paid jobs, and this served to
268 explain not only their current position, but also prevented them from escaping in-work poverty.

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

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

277
278 'Fuel goes up constantly, about 6 months ago it was going up every couple of days when I was
279 going in the garage, our fares don't go up, they stay the same, they go up every three
280 years...maybe 5 years ago, I was clearing £400, £500 a week, now I am down to £200 now.'
281 (Low wage worker, Male, Glasgow)

282
283 Previous studies have indicated the difficulties that participants have had connecting their
284 immediate circumstances to broader structural contexts that might be prompted by 'false
285 consciousness' (Beresford and Croft, 1995). Yet this was not the case for the majority of our
286 participants whose testimonies framed their own lives within a narrative of external constraints –
287 although, we must remain alive to the fact this may be a product of the point in time when these
288 testimonies were collected. Neither is it surprising that given the stigma attributed to aspects of life
289 on a low income, we might find that participants make strenuous efforts to demarcate themselves
290 as being poor as a consequence of 'misfortunate events' rather than their circumstances resulting

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

293

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

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

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

312

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

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

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

325

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

330

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

337

338 **Internalising Behavioural Discourses: Self Loathing**

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

345 'When you hear the way that people experiencing low income on T.V. are represented, how
346 does that make you feel?' (Interviewer)

347 'I don't really watch any of it because I get irritated and angry, so I don't bother seeing any of
348 it' (Lone Parent, Female, Gloucester)

349

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

358
359 'When I became a single parent, it was 'you're a scrounger and you sit at home doing nothing'
360 that used to really, really get to me. Not everybody is the same...I didn't ask to end up on my
361 own with four children. They just assume we are all bad, because we are single parents, it
362 made me feel like I wasn't worth anything...it was in the media, you would read stuff about it,
363 people would be judgmental because you were on benefits...' (Lone Parent, Female,
364 Birmingham)

365
366 '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
367 don't think I should be one of those statistics...I used to be one of those people who thought
368 'oh, single parents on benefits' and all that, I hated the fact that I had to do it myself...it just
369 felt like something foreign...I am not working for that money and it feels wrong to have it'.
370 (Lone parent, Female, Gloucestershire)

371

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

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

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

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

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

395
396 'I just think that they think we are all just lazy and we all should be working. In my situation
397 because I don't have friends and family around me and I don't have childcare, it is not as
398 simple as that. Of course, there are people who are lazy and who won't work'. (Lone Parent,
399 Female, Gloucester)

400
401 *Distancing* is also achieved where participants actively refute the application of these identities to
402 their own circumstances. Delineating participants' values and behaviours from those they attributed
403 to the 'poor' was strongly emphasised. Thus, many participants went to considerable lengths to
404 highlight their own work histories, volunteering, and roles as parents or carers, in ways that
405 demonstrate their social worth (Broughton, 2003). It is exactly these behaviours that are viewed as
406 virtues within mainstream society and this suggests that participants very much shared the values of
407 'hard work' and 'responsibility' characteristic of mainstream society (Cohen, 1987). Ultimately,
408 distancing could be achieved if their situation was viewed as temporary, a transient phase rather
409 than a more permanent lifestyle choice that may be attributed to the 'undeserving' poor (see also
410 Broughton, 2003; Cohen, 1987):

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

417
418 'It is not as though I get paid my money every fortnight and I am not doing nothing, I am not
419 sitting on my bum. I am coming and doing voluntary work and that is what I do, other people
420 that is them, they just want to sit on their bum all day. I feel as though even though I haven't
421 worked, and I get this money that the Government pays me or the Taxpayers, or whoever is
422 paying me every week, at least I am trying my best to give back, so even though you are paying
423 out of your money, at least I am trying to provide a service back...' (Unemployed, Male,
424 Gloucestershire)

425
426 With few exceptions, the most common adaptive response amongst our participants to the
427 pervasive and injurious impacts of behavioural discourses, is to create the greatest discursive
428 distance between themselves and the imagined 'other'. One significant consequence, as Dean and
429 Taylor-Gooby (1992: 117) conclude in their study of social security claimants, is the erosion of
430 solidarity among social security recipients, an observation that appears equally applicable amongst
431 participants in this study arising from the potentially injurious consequences of association. This
432 means as Cohen's (1987: 88) study concludes, that through '*formally emphasizing their character in*
433 *contrast to poor people*', participants maintained '*their difference from the 'other', but they also*
434 *isolate themselves from a community of people with similar needs*'. Through rejecting the
435 applications of these pejorative labels to their own lives, participants were forced to place
436 themselves in opposition to others experiencing similar deprivations which often only served to
437 further marginalise our participants.

438 |

439 **Conclusion**

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

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

466 This would be a fairly pessimistic note on which to conclude, particularly as possibilities exist to
467 contest behavioural explanations in their current form. It is important to remind ourselves that, as
468 hegemonic discourses, behavioural explanations require constant renewal to ensure their
469 continuation. It is clear from the testimonies of our participants that when the claims of behavioural
470 discourses are contrasted to the reality of low income that these accounts unravel. Thus,
471 behavioural discourses have been successfully contested, as the extent of in work poverty in the UK
472 has been revealed, that has in particular contexts begun to destabilise the rhetoric of 'worklessness'
473 as a pathway into poverty. Similarly evidence from the recent analysis of the British Social Attitudes
474 Survey (Pearce and Taylor, 2013) demonstrates a softening in attitudes towards the unemployed –
475 which might point to the weakening of the hegemony of current behavioural discourses. It is the
476 responsibility of critical academics to exploit these opportunities; to promote alternative causal
477 models that offer readily accessible connections between the lived reality of poverty that people
478 observe in their daily lives as 'structural symptoms', and in doing so making clear the connections
479 between 'zero hours contracts, 'low pay', 'rising prices' to the current configurations of capitalist
480 relations. Only then might we begin to make significant inroads into the behavioural hegemony
481 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>