
article

Conceptualising the active welfare subject: welfare reform in discourse, policy and lived experience

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The idea of the active welfare subject has become irresistible to both policy makers and academics and has taken a lead role in the transformation of twenty-first century social security systems. Two distinguishable approaches have emerged – the dominant model and a counter model. The dominant model emphasises moralised individual responsibility for ‘wrong choices’ and mandates behavioural change to become active. The counter model situates benefit recipients in the present as disempowered creative, reflexive and resourceful beings. This article develops conceptualisations by comparing benefit recipients’ accounts (from an exploratory qualitative study) of lived experience with both models.

key words active • agency • welfare reform • lived experience

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, there has been growing scholarly interest in developing ‘notions of individual agency and subjectivity’, especially in relation to the ‘creative, reflexive welfare subject’ (Williams et al, 1999, 14). Conceptual insights have evolved in parallel with an international sweep of welfare reforms, which have increasingly sought to reduce entitlements and intensify conditionality by individualising responsibility and mandating behavioural change. The influence of the ‘incentive paradigm’ (van der Veen and Trommel, 1999) has been wide-ranging, affecting principles of governance and service delivery as well as policy design (van Berkel, 2010; Larsen and van Berkel, 2009). In the UK, successive governments have reinforced the goal of individual behaviour change. The UK Coalition government (2010–present), influenced by the libertarian paternalism of ‘nudge’ behaviour economics (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009; see Jones et al, 2013), have attributed the difficult circumstances of welfare subjects to ‘wrong choices’ (Cameron, 2011, 1). All of these developments have involved reconceptualising the welfare subject as more ‘active’ – albeit in different ways for a variety of purposes. A substantial degree of ambiguity remains about exactly how this new ‘active welfare subject’ (Williams, 1999) is constituted, however, and what this means for policy analysis.

The aim of this article is to explore these differing conceptualisations of the active welfare subject in relation to users’ perspectives on the lived experience of receiving

benefits and using advice and employment services in the UK. It draws on the literatures on activation and welfare reform, the active welfare subject, agency and user empowerment. It is in three sections. The first identifies dominant and counter models of the active welfare subject. Second, the in-depth qualitative research methods are outlined. Third, the context of welfare reform is detailed. Fourth, the dominant and counter models are compared with findings, based on data from 16 in-depth user interviews. The article concludes by arguing that the dominant model is limited in several respects and that more effective policies could be developed based on the counter model and insights from users' accounts of the lived experience of claiming benefits and receiving advice and employment services. Its findings contribute to the international literatures on activation and welfare reform by identifying improvements to the concept of the active welfare subject.

Constructing the active welfare subject

There is no single agreed definition of the active welfare subject and perspectives within academic literature, policy and discourse are inconsistent and ambiguous. Nevertheless, the image of the active welfare subject has been very powerful in both legitimising a particular type of policy change and in inspiring important developments in theory and research. Broadly, two contrasting constructions of the active welfare subject can be distinguished: the dominant deficit model, which views benefit recipients as inherently deficient and in need of intervention to *become* 'active'; and the counter model that credits welfare subjects with already *being* 'active' and seeks to assert the voices and interests of competent yet disempowered actors.

*The dominant model: active welfare subjects as 'becomers'*¹

Since the late 1990s, the targets of welfare intervention have been re-written in popularised supra-national and national discourses of 'activation' (Crespo Suarez and Serrano Pascual, 2007). Both the dominant discourse and policy detail have operated on the understanding that pre-existing policy responses to unemployment treated benefit recipients as 'passive'. This dominant deficit model of the active welfare subject, with its intrinsic exhortation to *become* more active, relies on a blanket view of welfare subjects as naturally inactive and in need of activation – either because of their perceived incompetency or immorality. Here, the active welfare subject is a figure of aspiration, a transformation possible only via coerced self-improvement. Despite its popularity, there are several problems with this construction. First, it constitutes an historically inaccurate representation of the eligibility criteria and behavioural expectations of unemployment schemes, which have always been conditional on past work experience and job-seeking activities (Sinfield, 2001). What changed in the late 1990s in many OECD countries was that reductions in entitlements were accompanied by new policy instruments that made these conditions more explicit and in many cases more standardised or simplistic (van Berkel, 2010). Second, the redefinition of pre-1990s social security systems as 'passive' has strong implications in the enduring narrative of policy change, and for future policy possibilities, because it allowed 'the problem' to be redefined in more individualistic terms, minimising the structural causes of unemployment (such as global recession, changes in labour market conditions and employer demand) and facilitated a widespread moral denunciation of

non-employment, less fettered by concerns of capacity for work. The significance of this version of events, which has now become embedded deeply in many parts of the world, is that it ‘robs us of the power to conceive of things in any other way’ (Crespo Suarez and Serrano Pascual, 2007, 108). Third, the suspiciously neat ‘passive’/‘active’ distinction detracts attention from the complexities of the purposes of social security systems and the lived experience of being at the receiving end of them.

The notion of benefit recipients as essentially deficient is related to the influential, yet problematic, diagnoses of both Murray’s (1990; 1984) ‘underclass’ and Mead’s (1992; 1997) ‘welfare dependency’. Murray (1984) presents claiming benefits as an immoral but rational alternative to job seeking that should be eradicated by reducing welfare provision; while Mead’s (1992, 133) view on intentionality differs in considering benefit recipients as willing potential workers who are ‘dutiful but defeated’. Both analysts sought policy redesign in order to alter the motivations and actions of benefit recipients, through deterrents or disincentives, in order to prevent misbehaviour, particularly in the form of freeloading. In the UK context, these concerns have appealed to politicians across the ideological spectrum and have influenced social security and employment service policy design for more than 15 years.

Key contributions to the debate came from Giddens’ (1994, 12) notion of the ‘autotelic self’, which is similarly transformative, with the implicit injunction to ‘be active’ in accepting individual responsibility for solving welfare problems. This injunction is, however, dislocated from consideration of the means by which benefit recipients could attain the prerequisite ‘ontological security’, ‘inner confidence’, ‘self-respect’ and ‘self-actualisation’ (Giddens, 1994, 12) that might allow such self-assured engagement with life’s challenges. Similarly, Le Grand’s (2003, 163–5) concern with empowering welfare subjects to be active ‘queens’ rather than ‘pawns’ was based on faith in quasi-markets to harness the forces of competition to offer choice and enhance respect in ways that could be compatible with equity and altruism. Indeed the appeal of rebadging ‘clients’ as ‘customers’ has influenced employment service delivery under all UK governments since the early 1990s, ranging from the Jobseeker’s Charter to the large-scale contracting out of job placement services in 2007. However, the idea that benefit recipients attending mandatory interviews can be considered as ‘customers’ raises fundamental questions about choice and control (see below).

Le Grand’s (2003, 25) notion of the individual knave ‘who pursue[s] their own interest by any means, legal or illegal’ also incorporates analysis of another prevailing construction of the active welfare subject within the dominant discourse – the welfare subject as individual self-seeking economic maximiser. Although it is well recognised, even by behavioural economists themselves (Frey, 1999), that ‘rational economic man’ is a hypothetical model incapable of reflecting the full scope and complexity of real human decision-making, the idea has gained more purchase in policy design than empirical evidence warrants (see Gregg, 2008; Halpern et al, 2004). More recently, a purportedly new and improved version of economic man as fallible and in need of pre-structured ‘choices’ has underpinned the liberal paternalist ‘nudge’ approach (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009), which has inspired a raft of conditionality and behavioural change initiatives in many areas of social policy, including social security.

These approaches have been valuable in highlighting ‘the relationship between the assumptions and realities of human motivation and agency – [which] are crucial to the success or otherwise of public policy’ (Le Grand, 2003, 2), but the prevailing impression from the dominant view is that there is an association between the active

welfare subject and self-interested wrong-doing, which requires correction by power-holding others whose own intentions are not open to scrutiny. Thus, taken together, these different elements form a recognisable dominant model of the active welfare subject as a project in the making. A multi-faceted counter model has, however, also developed, which, as will be demonstrated below, offers greater depth of insight into the lived experiences of benefit recipients and forms the basis of an alternative view of the policy process and welfare reform.

The counter model: active welfare subjects as 'beings'

Over the last decade and a half, there has been growing scholarly interest in conceptualising and representing the subjective experience of benefit recipients in more differentiated and contextualised ways. Several bodies of work have contributed to a counter model that credits welfare subjects with already *being* 'active', capable of making decisions and taking action, in contrast to the dominant model which sees being 'active' as a transformative state produced by coercive, punitive or quasi-market intervention. Several authors have sought to improve previous conceptualisations, which tended to either underestimate the capabilities of benefit recipients, sometimes in potentially patronising ways (Fennell et al, 1988), or overemphasise their moralised misbehaviour (as above). There are two main bodies of ideas that contribute to counter model understandings of the active welfare subject: first, politicised user empowerment; and second, the concept of 'agency'.

Active welfare subject as empowered user

Concern with the politics of disempowerment, discrimination and (mis)representation is the starting point for those who have sought to establish terms of debate that reflect the perspectives of benefit recipients more accurately, respectfully and empathetically (Fraser, 2005; Lister, 2004; Williams, 1999). From this perspective, the welfare subject is active in the sense of being the competent expert in their situation, but is largely disconnected from the design of policies and services that have an impact on lived experience. In effect, the shared goal of a range of perspectives contributing to a counter narrative is to address 'lack of voice, disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self-esteem, shame and stigma, powerlessness, denial of rights and diminished citizenship' (Lister, 2004, 7). At the heart of the counter model (which incorporates insights from a range of standpoints including feminist, anti-racist, disability and anti-poverty) is the political positioning of welfare subjects, which incorporates the relational/symbolic as well as material and physical aspects of lived experience (Lister, 2004, 7; Fraser, 2005).

An important component of the counter model comes from the political response of the Disabled People's Movement (Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Charlton, 1998), which was borne out of 'a deep sense of injustice fuelled by poverty, discrimination and social exclusion' (Barnes and Mercer, 2006, 1). User-controlled services and user-led action in health and social care have played a crucial role in reconceptualising the welfare subject as active and competent from an emancipatory democratic standpoint (Beresford, 2005) that 'people have a right to participate and to be heard, to exercise choice, to define problems and to decide on appropriate action' (Barnes and Mercer, 2006, 72). Although the focus of these debates was not initially or principally on

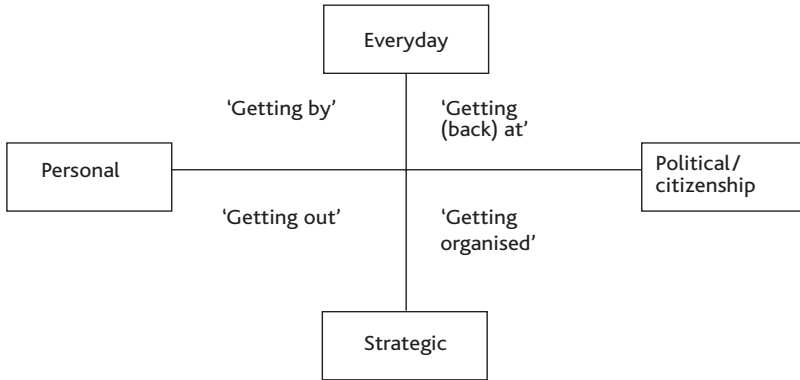
social security, disability activism led to ‘a radical critique of traditional social “care” and welfare services’ (Barnes and Mercer, 2006, 49), which rewrote and empowered service users as active welfare subjects. However, there has been much criticism that the user involvement version of the active welfare subject has been appropriated by policy makers to justify a consumerist approach that confines the scope of change to technical or practical issues of delivery while leaving broader oppressive systems and power relations intact (Oliver, 1992; Beresford, 2005). Being an ‘active’ user can translate as ‘influencing processes without influencing outcomes’ (Braye, 2000: 23). In this way, the aim of giving voice as a route to empowerment can be subverted (Beresford, 2005) and reinterpreted as ‘empowering the powerless to adjust to the consequences of economic restructuring, without addressing underlying socio-economic and power structures’ (Lister, 2004, 174).

Active agents

Counter model understandings of the active welfare subject also relate to agency in social policy (Deacon, 2004; Deacon and Mann, 1999). In this case, ‘agency’ usually refers to ‘purposive² human action or behaviour’ (Deacon, 2004, 447), involving the study of motivations, decisions and the causes and consequences of personal action or inaction. The issue of morality is acknowledged, since agency may be exercised to the detriment of self or others (Hoggett, 2001), but, crucially, the potential for malevolence is not confined to those actors currently claiming benefits. Lister (2004) identified two axes of agency (see Figure 1) exercised by people living in poverty: the everyday–strategic dimension; and the personal–political/citizenship dimension. Each quadrant showed a different type of agency from the personal/everyday ‘getting by’ (informal coping with regular demands and dealing with traumas – often not acknowledged as a form of agency at all); through the everyday/political ‘getting back at’ (resistance); and the political/strategic ‘getting organised’ (including campaigning and political action) to the personal/strategic ‘getting out’ (for example, via education or paid work). An actor may vary in approaches or occupy more than one position.

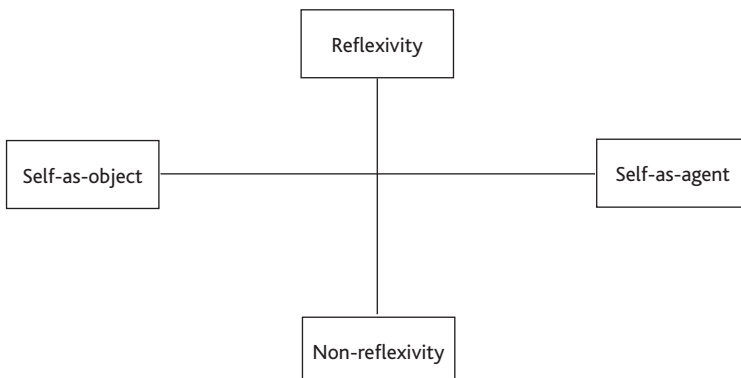
Here, active welfare subjects exercise agency creatively and differentially but are located within a disempowering context of ‘Othering’, which promotes social distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’ (Lister, 2004, 101; Beresford and Croft, 1995). The counter model offers more accurate understandings of welfare subjects by recognising heterogeneity, rather than relying on simplified homogenous categorisations or misrepresentations. A core aspect of ‘Othering’ is the dehumanising effects of large-scale stigmatisation that equates the shameful experience of poverty while claiming benefits with unapproved behaviours, which then may be absorbed into self-image (Lister, 2004; Oliver, 2001).

The concept of agency has been most thoroughly developed by Hoggett (2000, 32), who promotes a nuanced understanding of self and agency that incorporates the ‘mutability of identity rather than its fixity’. This has an affinity with certain feminist viewpoints which highlight collective aspects of agency, relating to the interdependency and collaborative construction of lived experience (Finch and Mason, 1993; Williams, 2001). Agency is ‘profoundly enmeshed in shared expectations and accomplished in everyday life through interaction’ (Wright, 2012). Hoggett (2001) highlights the differential impact of feelings (for example, fear, doubt, hurt, pain, love) on social actors with fluid identities, navigating an indeterminate social world,

Figure 1: Lister's (2004) model of forms of agency exercised by people in poverty

within which life chances are nevertheless broadly pre-ordered. Hoggett's (2001) model of agency also moves beyond the binary positioning of welfare subjects within the dominant model (for example, 'passive'/'active' or 'pawn'/'queen' or unitary sets of actors whose motivations and actions may be considered at a collective level, for example, 'workers' or 'users') by recognising the variety of positions possible in relation to how active one's agency might be (self-as-object or self-as-agent) and how aware and reflexive one may be about that agency, including the possibility of gaps between intent and action and action and awareness (see Figure 2). In this view, the self is neither unitary nor fixed (Hoggett, 2001), but dynamic, malleable and open to the influence of others – emergent, contingent (Prior, 2009), relational and dynamic. Hoggett (2001) distinguishes between the axes of reflexivity and non-reflexivity and 'self-as-object' or 'self-as-agent', to recognise that social actors vary in their awareness of their motivations, choices and actions and the implications of these for self and others (including harm to others) in the former axis, while on the other axis, social actors vary in the extent to which they view themselves as 'self-as-object' or 'self-as-agent'. This highlights that while it is possible for welfare subjects to operate actively as agents, it is also possible to experience a collapse of agency, for example in cases of depression.

Both the dominant model and the counter model call for welfare subjects to be understood and treated as 'active', but according to different assumptions and towards

Figure 2: Hoggett's (2001) model of agency

different ends. These ideas are applied (below) to interviewees' accounts of their experiences of receiving benefits and using advice and employment services.

Methods

The data presented in this article were collected in 2008 as part of an exploratory research project on 'Rights, Advocacy and Independence' with the Child Poverty Action Group,³ funded by The Baring Foundation and the City Bridge Trust (Wright and Haux, 2011). This article reanalyses data from one element of the study, based on 16 qualitative interviews with adults receiving benefits. The impulse to reanalyse was sparked by the observation that themes, for example, 'control and choice', offered rich insight into the lived experience of concepts such as 'agency' and the 'active welfare subject', which were not explored fully within the remit of the original project report. Interviewees were accessed through seven advice agencies (two private providers and five voluntary agencies). 'Advice' was user defined, including a broad range of information, advice, support and employment services (relating to benefits, tax credits and looking for work). This covered a wide variety of types and sizes of organisation, including: mixed-sector agencies, housing associations, health professionals, local authorities, a telephone support service for tax credit claimants, a careers advice service for young people and an MP. All of the interviewees had experienced a range of provision, from Jobcentre Plus to small and diverse independent advice agencies. Interviewees were selected to represent a variety of: benefits (Jobseeker's Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and Income Support); household types (single and partnered parents and non-parents); and ethnicities (people from white, black and minority ethnic groups). The small size and variety of the sample was intended to provide in-depth exploration of a range of experiences in order to identify key issues for future research. It is not possible to assess the extent to which interviewees' experiences were typical of a group to which they may be assigned (for example, lone parents), so there is no attempt to generalise. The study was not designed to select interviewees with multiple needs or those facing complex challenges, although it does appear that a high proportion of research participants can be described in these ways. Since benefit receipt is known to involve stigma and shame (Lister, 2004), interviews were designed compassionately to minimise emotional harm with sensitivity to the power dynamics between researcher and participant (see Holloway, 2008; Wengraf, 2001). The interviewer used empathy to 'read' participants and adapt the interview accordingly. Although a minority of interviewees gave limited responses, the quality of the majority of the data reflects a high level of trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewee. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Applied Social Science (University of Stirling) and conducted in accordance with the ESRC Research Ethics Framework and the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice.

Welfare reform context

UK policy reforms over the last 15 years have followed two core principles: the individualisation of responsibility and marketisation of delivery. These principles share a behavioural change logic, which dictates that motivation and action of individuals (both benefit recipients and front-line workers) is the source of the problem, which can

and should be changed in order to achieve the goal of ‘getting people off benefits and into work’ (DWP, 2010a; 2010b). For successive UK governments across the political spectrum, the priority of cost-cutting and belief in market values has outweighed research evidence in policy design (Newman, 2011). This means that welfare reforms have developed according to priorities and principles that are disconnected from the lived experiences of being out of work, claiming benefits, receiving advice and seeking work. Political consensus has also resulted in a firm anti-dependency discourse, which has consistently ‘Othered’ (Lister, 2004) the welfare subject.

Although more work-focused, social security policies have been developing since the 1980s, it was the New Labour government (1997–2010) that developed welfare to work programmes concertedly (with a series of New Deal programmes for different target groups) and realigned the social security system towards more coercive conditionality based on the principles of ‘work for all’ and ‘work first’ (Lindsay et al, 2007; Lindsay and Dutton, 2013). A new era of conditionality towards the end of New Labour rule saw benefits become more reliant on ‘citizens meeting certain conditions which are invariably behavioural’ (DWP, 2008, 1). These reforms brought the biggest changes for lone parents and ill or disabled people, through reform of Income Support and the replacement of Incapacity Benefit with Employment and Support Allowance – which have increasingly required Work Focused Interviews and job-seeking activities (Patrick, 2011). These efforts have been endorsed and intensified under the UK Coalition government (2010–present) with policy direction taking a more punitive and behavioural turn (Jones et al, 2013), particularly evident in the Welfare Reform Act 2012. A main thrust of this cost-cutting approach was the introduction of a new means-tested benefit (replacing six existing in-work and out-of-work benefits), Universal Credit, and the Work Programme, an outsourced version of employment services (Dwyer and Wright, 2014). Both have served to extend job seeking conditionality, now applied to all but the most severely disabled and carers of the youngest children, and to compel behavioural change on threat of harsh sanctions.

The behavioural turn in conditional social welfare policies (Dwyer, 2008; Flint, 2009) also heightens pressure on the role and performance of advisers to implement ‘personalised conditionality...designed to influence behaviour’ (DWP, 2008, 39). From the late 1990s onwards, employment advisers in Jobcentres/Jobcentre Plus offices and, increasingly, sub-contracted private or charitable agencies, have been expected to tackle benefit recipients about their perceived motivational and activity deficiencies in order to increase the frequency and intensity of job search activities. Their role is to *change* behaviour in line with incentives and controls, to ensure compliance and to guarantee outcomes. Little is known, however, about how benefit recipients experience information, advice and employment services, beyond official satisfaction surveys and evaluation results.

Findings

This section presents findings from the study, based on benefit recipients’ accounts of their lived experience in relation to the two conceptual models of the active welfare subject (outlined above).

Choice and control

The central question of this article is: to what extent, and in which ways, is the ‘active welfare subject’ *active*? Choice and control represent one of the strongest thematic couplets to emerge from existing academic literature, policy and discourse. Debate continues about the extent to which benefit recipients have chosen the circumstances in which they live and the extent to which they can control the events and conditions to determine their own biographies (see Johansson, 2007). Contrary to the dominant model, there was no evidence that interviewees had chosen their circumstances purposively, or that their current difficulties could be attributed to ‘wrong choices’. The dominant ‘personal responsibility’ discourse does not adequately explain these interviewees’ lived experiences. Rather, difficulties – associated with unemployment (16 interviewees); homelessness or severe housing problems (nine); disability or severe and/or unpredictable ill health (nine); or major care demands (10) – tended to be experienced as unwanted and unbidden intrusions into life plans. Interviewees certainly did not consider benefit receipt to be a preferable state of living (as implied by Mead, 1990) – quite the contrary. Many described a chain of events that led to no other alternative but to rely on the state for financial support in order to meet their own and their family’s most basic needs.

‘I don’t think I feel in control. Had I felt in control, I could do something about the situation.’ (Janet, homeless disabled lone parent)

Interviewees’ accounts of their situations usually reflected feelings of powerlessness, rather than powerfulness, in which their choices had repeatedly been undermined by unpredicted events and processes that unfolded against their will. In this respect, according to the counter model, interviewees inhabited the ‘self-as-object’ end of the spectrum, in contrast to the alternative conceptualisation of ‘self-as-agent’ (Hoggett, 2001). However, it is important to note that interviewees’ lack of agency in relation to choice and control did not indicate passivity, since all of the interviewees described taking a series of tangible steps to change their situation. Their accounts were of external denials of agency, which blocked their attempts to alter their life courses, rather than the type of internal inadequacy that is indicated by the discourses of ‘dependency’ within the dominant model.

Struggling to ‘get by’

Interviewees were therefore caught in the tension between what they knew in their own case to be an inappropriate dominant discourse of personal responsibility for ‘wrong choices’ and the emotionally demanding task of coming to terms with not being able to realise choice in self-support through paid work. The counter model views this as an active exercise of everyday/personal agency in order to ‘get by’ (Lister, 2004), which fits with Janet’s account of the intensity of the unsustainable struggle at the margins of coping with everyday life:

‘It’s like a fight with a huge monster. And you are always scared that you are buried alive again. Sometimes I can’t breathe when I think about it. It’s like reaching for help and you can’t even feel the tips of the other fingers

touching you. Sometimes all that confidence, all that I gained...It's like swallowing me.' (Janet, homeless disabled lone parent)

Another aspect of the everyday lived experience of benefit receipt, under-acknowledged by the dominant model, was the degree of unpredictability faced by some interviewees. For Mary, a disabled homeless woman, choice and control were alien concepts. Her lived experience was characterised by flux in health, housing and employment. Mary's main concern was her health, which she could neither control nor predict – presenting a fundamental challenge to the rational actor aspects of the dominant model of the active welfare subject. In the absence of the parameters of certainty, Mary struggled to exercise agency at the basic level of making sense of her situation and expressing it to advisers.

'I was living in and out of supported accommodation, I mean not easy at all. I wasn't able to, sort of, you know, I was in and out of work...I was on medication at the time, which didn't help my behaviour, you know, I wasn't, sort of, a lunatic or anything like but you know, it's kind of like a very, I mean I obviously knew about it. I knew myself. It is very difficult to deal with taking medication and stuff – like with drugs. It is not nice...I just couldn't sort of explain things in detail, couldn't pinpoint what the problem was and sort of, I used to get confused and I couldn't explain things properly...You are relying on it [medication] to help your brain function properly.' (Mary, disabled homeless woman)

Mary's mental health condition prevented her from knowing or trusting herself, which had major implications for her ability to exercise agency. In this sense, the counter model notion of a 'collapse of agency' (Hoggett, 2001) helped explain Mary's lived experience, whereas the dominant model's emphasis on taking immediate action on threat of sanction seemed unrealistic and unsuited to her fluctuating condition. The nature of Mary's mental health condition and its combination with instability in housing, income and employment conditions, affected her capacity to make life-directing decisions. Mary's difficulties in understanding and expressing her issues also reflected limitations to the reflexivity dimension of her agency (Hoggett, 2001). Although she was looking for a job, it did not appear to be realistic for Mary to sustain independent living at the time of the interview.

Thus the issues of individual choice and control, alongside the struggle to 'get by' highlight some of the complexities and ambiguities of the notion of the active welfare subject in lived experience, in comparison with the dominant and counter models. The next section explores interviewees' accounts in relation to the inter-relationships between personal agency and contexts of policy and practice.

Mediating 'activity'

One crucial difference between the dominant model of the active welfare subject and the counter model is the degree to which personal responsibility is attributed to the individual. As outlined above, the dominant model relies on a relatively homogenous view of welfare subjects as deficient and/or self-interested. In contrast, the counter model highlights differentiated experiences within the context of politicised power

relations. This section considers interviewees' perspectives as mediated by their experience of policies, systems and interaction with front-line advisers.

Activity without results

Many of the interviewees demonstrated clearly their acceptance of personal responsibility (as advocated by the dominant model of the active welfare subject) and identified a series of frustrated attempts to actively bring about change in their housing, health or job situations. One interviewee, Janet, was a homeless disabled lone parent who cared for both her mother with dementia and her son. Janet's account of her experiences as a benefit recipient identified her as an already fully formed 'active welfare subject' (rather than an active welfare subject in the making, as implied by the dominant model). Janet was reflexive, creative, highly motivated and taking action on several fronts, an exemplar of Giddens' (1994) 'autotelic self'. Janet's story was one in which she firmly rejected passivity in resolute determination to improve her situation through every means possible. Janet's desire to engage with paid employment was very strong as was her intention to provide a secure home for herself and her son, who had been housed in 'temporary' local authority accommodation for three years.

'I am saying to the government: "Hear! Hear! Listen to me! I want to get a job. I don't want your benefits! I don't want them!" I want to get a job and lead my life.' (Janet, homeless disabled lone parent)

Although Janet's lived experience of claiming Incapacity Benefit as anxiety-ridden and pressurised, she was not 'dutiful but defeated' in Mead's (1992, 133) sense because the source of defeat was external, rather than lack of self-actualisation. Neither increasing obligations nor removing welfare provision could have prompted any greater effort. Janet shifted between a strong assertion of what Hoggett (2001) describes as 'self-as-agent' until she was stopped by insurmountable obstacles, which then seemed to trigger 'self-as-object' responses, such as insecurity, powerlessness and feeling 'broken'. Despite repeated active attempts to resolve the main areas of tension, she continued to experience poverty and debt and was not able to find a way to meet her and her family's housing, health or income needs. The complex nature of Janet's situation also demonstrates the limitations of attributing 'personal responsibility' at a purely individual level. The issues she described were inter-related and interdependent – both in cause and consequence. Janet's own wellbeing could not be separated from that of her mother or her son, which highlights the intersubjective nature of agency (a central feature of the counter model of the active welfare subject). Furthermore, it was evident that the agency exercised by others to her detriment (for example her ex-husband's non-payment of child maintenance), affected the conditions in which Janet lived and had a bearing on her own ability to exercise agency.

'It's a lot of a load...The rent is £1200 per month...I am a woman who wants to go to work. I want to get a job. But I am so scared because if I go, when I get a job, I am going to be depressed because of all that money I have to pay. And he [personal adviser] said, "Well you know it all. We can't do anything about that." So I left the Jobcentre again with another brick of the wall piling up in front of me.' (Janet, homeless disabled lone parent)

In Janet's case, the solution to her and her family's complex needs was neither easily identifiable nor readily attainable, either through her own efforts or those of her advisers. This highlights a misattribution effect in the dominant model used for policy design and discourse, which presents individual passivity as the main cause of benefit receipt and leaves little space to acknowledge either external contributory causes or gaps between actions and outcomes, where reasonable action did not result in the desired or approved outcomes. The prescribed policy solution, of mandatory active job search, was neither necessary (since Janet was in any case voluntarily and concertedly seeking work) nor effective (since appropriate vacancies were scarce, competition for jobs was voracious and the security of contract and wages necessary to cover rent costs were elusive). The impact of this combination of external factors far outweighed the effect that Janet's own agency could have in altering her circumstances. In effect, the intentions and actions of this willing, active and reflexive agent were largely irrelevant to the conditions in which she lived. This constitutes a major challenge to the logic of the dominant model, which implies that 'activity' is a sufficient response. Janet was acutely aware of this:

'The government has contracted these companies... who are basically to help you, trying to talk to you psychologically. But when it comes to the concrete realistic fact of getting a job – there isn't any. Plus are we going to forget that we are in a huge recession at the moment?... I am crying: "Help me", but wherever you turn it is like a wall.' (Janet, homeless disabled lone parent).

This section has demonstrated how interviewees experienced limitations both to their ability to exercise agency and to the scope of the changes they were able to bring into being. However, their lived experiences were also affected by aspects of policy and practice that operated more potently against their attempts to be active welfare subjects, as the next section outlines.

Deactivating the welfare subject?

Several aspects of policy and front-line practice appeared to operate against the dominant model's goal of 'activation'. The policy context had an impact on interviewees' potential to exercise agency, for example, by setting living conditions in which the unyielding experience of poverty overshadowed the daily lives of those in the study. One of the foremost challenges was the impossible and unabating task of repeatedly attempting to meet basic minimum personal and family needs on an insufficient income. Poverty affected interviewees in ways that seemed to devalue and deactivate the 'self-as-agent' and promote a view of self more akin to the 'self-as-object'.

'It was just really, really difficult and I just felt, you know, that I just didn't matter.' (Dave, unemployed man)

The fundamental inadequacy of benefit rates caused even greater distress for those who were subject to deductions (for example, for debt repayments – sometimes incurred as a direct result of the below-poverty benefit levels) and, in one case, relating to a past tax credit overpayment. There were three key insights that were significant to

agency: the psychological resources needed to confront the inadequacy of benefits; the emotional distress of added financial pressures and the lived experience of stigma.

Interviewees varied in their attitudes, awareness and inferences in relation to the inadequacy of benefits and support. Some were very reflexive and had insight into the power relations they were subjected to. Many, already living in a state of crisis, expressed shock at the limitations of state financial assistance and support for those out of work. For example, one taxpayer who had worked for many years prior to claiming, was taken aback to discover the bad terms and conditions of the social citizenship contract:

‘Had you told me earlier in the year, had I known, had I known that I would be made redundant, but then there is nothing for me to fall back on... whichever way you look at it, I am really being had.’ (Miriam, lone parent)

Being actively reflexive, like Miriam, exposed the lived experience of benefit receipt as an exercise in the acceptance of being subjected to state-organised, publically endorsed injustice. Coming into contact with employment services and advice agencies thus constituted a practice of confronting exploitation. The suffering that this caused was experienced as disempowering and, for some, deeply humiliating. Thus, the lived experience of claiming benefits involved at least partially adopting a spoiled self-identity (see, Goffman, 1963). This aspect of receiving benefits seemed to impair, rather than empower, the potential to exercise agency. Even those high on the ‘reflexivity’ axis of Hoggett’s (2001) model were pushed towards the ‘self-as-object’ side of the continuum. In this way, the design of policies and their translation into practice can be seen to have a direct impact on interviewees’ internal resources and ability to develop self-determined action. This is not, however, to suggest that claiming benefits ‘saps character’, but rather that the active awareness of power-infused social relations led to realisations that were of profound consequence to sense of self.

Enacting ‘activity’

The possibilities for welfare subjects to *become* active (as advocated by the dominant model) or to be recognised as active (as promoted by the counter model) were also mediated by street level advisers. The factors conducive to enabling active agency were: being treated with dignity and respect; being listened to sympathetically and attentively (ideally during long or flexible appointments); being understood; being appreciated holistically as a person; receiving consistent advice from a named advisor; feeling empowered and being ‘in control’ of the interaction; and the offer of direct assistance (for example, with form-filling, especially for those with language or literacy difficulties). Interviewees appreciated advisers who were: helpful and friendly; and competent and knowledgeable to assess their needs accurately and process their case quickly, correctly and effectively. Although these preferences may seem self-evident, they highlight two key issues: first, the contrasting dynamics and impacts of forms of advice that were based on these principles and those that were not; and second, the power of intersubjective aspects of agency.

Interviewees identified a range of advice/employment services experiences. For example, the dynamics of interactions based on being treated ‘like a person, an intelligent person’ (Dave, unemployed man referring to Citizens Advice Bureau

services), contrasted sharply with those that involved being treated like ‘a different species...[Jobcentre Plus advisers] think you are incompetent’ (Sandy, disabled woman). In Dave’s case, the advice encounter appeared to promote ‘self-as-agent’ (Hoggett, 2001), whereas in the Sandy’s case, the interaction left her feeling devalued and ‘Othered’ (Lister, 2004) as different and inferior, encouraging a sense of ‘self as object’. Interacting with advisers in various services could have a lingering impact on sense of self and motivation, which could either obstruct or enable ‘self-as-agent’ towards ‘activation’:

‘They [Jobcentre Plus] don’t really care what I’m trying to say. It really doesn’t matter what you’re saying.’ (Jasvinder, lone parent)

‘She was a nice lady [housing association adviser]. She filled in the form for me...She is very helpful. She understands, when we talk, she understands more...She will listen. She will sit down and she will talk and explain.’ (Ruby, lone parent)

However, it is important to note that interviewees identified empowering forms of advice, and valued the support of named advisers, across the broad range of advice and employment service providers that they used. Although the institutional context did have a bearing on the dynamics of the adviser–user interaction and the possibilities for empowerment, it did not entirely determine the potential for enhancing ‘self-as-agent’. The range of services that interviewees accessed for support relating to benefits, tax credits and looking for work reflected different organisational goals, which can be compared with the two models of the active welfare subject. At one extreme, mandatory JCP interviews are based mainly on the dominant model’s assumptions of the welfare subject’s motivations and behaviour, while at the other end of the spectrum, voluntary user-defined services (including advocacy) offered by charities like Citizens Advice Bureau were more aligned with the counter model concern for user empowerment. Interactions within these different types of organisational context were also influenced by funding as well as ethos (for example, JCP cost-cutting has reduced front-line advisers and the decision to minimise contact time has left little opportunity for the long flexible interviews and direct assistance valued by interviewees). The dynamics of mandatory advice (provided by Jobcentre Plus and some DWP-contractors) did not always support the welfare subject in being active:

‘They [Jobcentre Plus] have got that statutory role and that just colours the whole relationship...They were just focused on getting me back to work whether you were ready or not.’ (Sandy, disabled woman)

In some cases advice was experienced as a standardised empty bureaucratic process without relevance to particular circumstances, involving hollow promises (for example, of job leads that never transpired) or obligatory training that turned out to be meaningless. For a minority of interviewees, being compelled to participate in inappropriate interventions could have a detrimental impact on their ability to be ‘active’ or realise ‘self-as-agent’ (Hoggett, 2001):

'A total waste of time... This bizarre interview where I felt what was the point if I wasn't entitled to anything anyway. It was futile from the outset, but they have to.' (Miriam, lone parent)

It was evident that a range of factors in the design of employment and advice services and the interactional dynamics of the encounter could impact on agency – either to empower or to inhibit 'self-as-agent'. While the type of service and basis of contact (voluntary/user-defined versus mandatory/standardised) did impact on the parameters of the interaction, it did not entirely determine the potential for the empowerment of 'self-as-agent' or the likelihood of action.

Conclusion

The findings presented here contribute to academic knowledge of the active welfare subject and the concepts of 'welfare dependency', 'conditionality' and 'agency' by relating abstract theoretical ideas to users' perspectives of experiencing and enacting agency in the context of receiving advice and employment services. Two contrasting models have been identified: the dominant model of the active welfare subject in the making; and the counter model of the active welfare subject as being. On the one hand, the dominant model views the welfare subject in isolation as a unitary rational individual, personally responsible for their adverse circumstances (and for taking action to resolve them), with self-interested or moral failings that need correction via conditional, residual, punitive or quasi-market welfare reforms (Mead, 1992, 1997; Murray, 1990; Le Grand, 2003). On the other hand, the counter model is based on a view of the welfare subject as connected to others and influenced by shared expectations and the needs of significant others, situated within dynamic politicised power relations, with capacities for reflection and action, but subjected to 'Othering' and in need of empowerment (Lister, 2004; Hoggett, 2001).

The evidence demonstrated that there was a wide gap between the dominant model of the active welfare subject and lived experiences of claiming benefits and looking for paid work. Thus, the dominant model of the active welfare subject has been found to have several descriptive and explanatory failings. For example, the evidence challenges the extent to which benefit recipients may be considered *solely* responsible for detrimental situations that they have not chosen, particularly when the events and conditions influencing their experiences of being out of work and living in poverty were not within their control or influence. The active welfare subject, despite effort and self-development, may still meet a brick wall structured by systems and processes beyond their influence. In this case, receiving inadequate income from benefits, being treated without dignity or respect or being inappropriately subjected to conditional or punitive policies contributed to emotional distress and a collapse of agency, rather than enabling the 'autotelic self' (Giddens, 1994). In fact, the misattribution of 'personal responsibility' was damaging and undermined the 'ontological security', 'inner confidence' and 'self-respect' necessary for self-actualised engagement with life challenges. Nor does the marketisation of employment services appear to have enhanced respect, created empowerment or ensured equity or altruism, as predicted by Le Grand (2003, 163–5).

These findings suggest that the notion of the active welfare subject is useful in understanding key aspects of benefit recipients' lived experiences, but that the

dominant model that currently influences policy, discourse and employment services/ advice provision is deeply flawed and unfit for purpose. It is crucially important that policy makers begin to engage with evidence verified by authentic accounts of lived experiences of: the meanings and impacts of a range of welfare conditionality measures; the complexities of motivation; and the relationships between intentions, actions and outcomes. In particular, it is essential to incorporate, rather than ignore, welfare recipients' immediate and differentiated lived experiences of relative powerlessness and the active role played by the agency of others (for example, non-payment of child maintenance or oppressive policy design) in triggering collapses of agency. This could allow more effective policies and practices to be developed.

Notes

¹This distinction between 'becomers' and 'beings' was inspired by Ridge's (2002) analysis.

²Although Hoggett (2001) argues that motivation and action may be non-purposive.

³Special thanks to interviewer Tina Haux.

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