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Living with and responding to the 'scrounger' narrative in the UK: exploring everyday strategies of acceptance, resistance and deflection

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In the UK, a dominant narrative operates to stereotype and stigmatise out-of-work benefit claimants as inactive welfare dependents who require activation if they are to enter paid employment and behave responsibly. Drawing upon a small-scale qualitative longitudinal study into lived experiences of welfare reform, this paper explores how out-of-work claimants respond to this dominant narrative. The paper illustrates the reach of benefits stigma, and the strategies adopted by claimants to manage such stigma: most notably via an 'othering' of those deemed less deserving. It is argued that this 'othering' is best understood as an admittedly defensive form of citizenship engagement.

key words stigma • poverty • benefits • welfare • citizenship

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Introduction

During the 2015 UK general election, politicians from all the main parties competed to be seen as *the* party prepared to stand up and deliver for the 'hard working majority', families 'doing the right thing' by engaging in the formal labour market. By contrast, those in receipt of 'welfare' – a popular, Americanised shorthand for out-of-work benefits – were problematised. The politicians' positioning is reflective of a contemporary climate that sees longstanding divisions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' populations reinvigorated and recast as a dichotomous distinction between 'strivers' and 'shirkers', between those engaging in paid employment and the most visible non-workers (Hills, 2015; Patrick, 2014). Today, out-of-work benefit receipt is often seen as inherently and necessarily problematic, with almost all claimants – except an ever smaller number of those deemed most 'vulnerable' – expected to be on a journey from 'welfare dependence' to a fetishised 'independence' via participation in paid employment.

Against this context, it is critical to explore how out-of-work benefit claimants themselves live with and respond to this stigmatising rhetoric and narrative and this forms the central task of this article. Drawing on ESRC-funded research into the lived experiences of welfare reform, this article explores how a small group of out-of-work benefit claimants spoke about their own and others' social welfare receipt. Following an introduction to the theoretical context and study itself, this article looks at experiences of and responses to benefits stigma. In concluding, this article suggests that the most common response – an 'othering' of those deemed undeserving – is perhaps best understood as a defensive form of citizenship engagement and claim-making that seeks to assert an individual's own entitlement and desert.

The shame and stigma of poverty and benefits receipt

The growing censure and critique reserved for out-of-work benefit claimants is not confined to the UK context, with a recent study into experiences of welfare reform in Germany noting how those living in poverty have gone from being seen as 'threatened' to 'threatening' populations (Fohrbeck et al, 2014). Indeed, a cross-national study found that shame and poverty were almost inevitably linked, with stigma consistently applied to the process of claiming benefits (Walker, 2014). In the UK, it is possible today to speak of a 'framing consensus on welfare' that sees widespread political and media support for efforts to correct and address the supposedly problematic behaviours of out-of-work benefit claimants. This consensus frames discussions and debates that are commonly underpinned by a critique of the behaviour, aspirations and day-to-day activities of those in receipt of 'welfare', which are seen to explain their poverty and deprivation, in a classic 'individualization of the social' (Ferge, 1997). Structural and systemic causes of poverty are neglected and even concealed, through an approach that foregrounds individualised 'pathways to poverty': namely worklessness, family breakdown, addiction, low education and debt (HM Government, 2014). At the same time, engagement in paid employment is consistently valorised, with participation in the formal labour market the hallmark of the dutiful, responsible citizen (Patrick, 2013).

A powerful 'scrounger' narrative and rhetoric is disseminated not just by politicians and the media, but by television shows such as 'Benefits Street' and 'On Benefits and Proud', poverty porn which promises to show the 'reality of life on benefits' but in fact shows a 'reality' that is highly edited and sensationalised (Jensen, 2014). Such programmes arguably fuel further resentment towards and the societal exclusion of out-of-work benefit claimants (Jensen, 2015; Tyler, 2014a), and contribute to an environment in which claimants increasingly report feeling demonised, stigmatised and looked down upon (Who Benefits?, 2014).

In examining claimants' experiences of and responses to this narrative and climate, it is helpful to draw upon ideas of stigma and shame. In their cross-country study of shame and poverty, Walker (2014; 2013) describe how categories and distinctions drawn between 'them' and 'us' operate to determine who has lower and higher social status, and then feed into a shaming process that has negative implications for those judged to sit at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For Walker (2014), shaming that is backed by the power of the state is best described as 'stigmatisation'.

In his classic work, Goffman defines stigma as: 'The phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute which is deeply discredited by his/her society is rejected

as a result of the attribute. Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity' (1990).

Goffman's theoretical account of stigma recognises how people with deviant or discredited identities and behaviours (what he terms attributes) can be rejected and excluded from society. It attends to and focuses on the relational, and the consequences of having particular characteristics that set one apart from the 'normal'. The process of stigma 'spoils' affected individuals' identities, and casts them as deviant and 'other'. This is of clear relevance for out-of-work benefit claimants whose non-work and out-of-work benefits receipt are so often seen as problematic 'attributes'.

Baumberg (2016) describes three categories of benefit-related stigma: personal stigma, claims stigma and stigmatisation. Personal stigma is a person's 'own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful' (Baumberg et al, 2012, 5), a category that attends more to stigma as internalised and applied to oneself rather than traditional theoretical accounts of stigma which are inevitably about societal reaction and responses (see Goffman, 1990). Stigmatisation is the view that others see claiming benefits as shameful, while 'claims stigma' refers to the shame and stigma attached to the processes of claiming benefits (Baumberg, 2016). These three categories are closely related and are often difficult to disentangle because, for example, processes of stigmatisation and experiences of claims stigma often feed into, and directly contribute towards, personal stigma. In this article, rather than thinking of them as separate categories, they are understood more as dimensions of an overarching experience of stigma. Useful in trying to better understand the drivers behind stigma, they are employed here in an effort to map participants' experiences and understanding of the stigma(s) they faced.

What is important is that stigmatisation and what Chase and Walker (2013) term the 'co-construction of shame' are processes that have both internal and external constituents; individuals feel and take on a shamed and stigmatised identity, just as they also respond to and sense external forces of stigmatisation and exclusion. Furthermore, in their efforts to manage their 'spoiled identities' individuals on out-of-work benefits frequently engage in a process of 'othering', which means that they, too, become active participants in the discrediting and undermining of particular attributes (Chase and Walker, 2013). In this article, there is an exploration of both the internal and external aspects of stigmatisation, as well as responses to the stigma of benefits.

The lived experiences of welfare reform study

This paper reports findings from a qualitative longitudinal study into the lived experiences of welfare reform, which involved semi-structured interviews with out-of-work benefit claimants who were experiencing at least one change to their benefit(s). Interviews took place between 2011 and 2013, with participants interviewed three times to enable a dynamic picture to emerge of anticipations, experiences and reflections on the ongoing impact(s) of welfare reform. Participants were purposively sampled to include single parents affected by changes to the age of child at which eligibility to Income Support (IS) ends, disabled people being migrated from Incapacity Benefit onto Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and young jobseekers experiencing the reformed welfare conditionality regime. All the interviews were conducted by the author herself with most taking place in the participants' own homes or, on occasions, at the offices of gatekeeper or support organisations. A £10 gift voucher was provided after each interview as a thank-you

to the participant for taking part and giving up their time to share their experiences and perspectives.

The study was conducted in Leeds, and involved an initial, purposively selected sample of 22 out-of-work benefit claimants. Participants were recruited via two gatekeeper organisations, and this approach was particularly important in enabling the research to engage with 'harder-to-reach' populations, including those who sometimes had chaotic lives and experienced multiple disadvantage. From the initial sample, 15 were selected to follow longitudinally, on the basis of those most likely to experience welfare reform during the period of the fieldwork. The sample featured a range of ages, and nine women and six men, with the over-representation of women linked to the inclusion of single parents (disproportionately female) within the sample. Active efforts were taken to sustain engagement, largely through informal contact with participants between interviews, and of the 15 followed longitudinally contact was lost with just one participant between the second and the third interview wave. The deliberate targeting of those affected by welfare reform was methodologically justifiable, given the research's primary focus on experiences of benefit changes.

Interviewing participants over time, as they experienced and responded to welfare reform, created invaluable scope for a dynamic picture to emerge and for insights from one interview wave to inform and shape the design of the next. The research produced rich data and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of experiences and responses to welfare reform, and reliance on out-of-work benefit receipt in Britain today. To manage the large body of data generated, NVIVO was employed, with analysis conducted cross-sectionally across cases, longitudinally by cases over time, as well as seeking to explore the iteration between this synchronic and diachronic analysis. The empirical findings from this study on experiences of and responses to benefit stigma and shame are now discussed, looking first at experiences of claims stigma and stigmatisation.

Experiencing claims stigma

In this study, there was widespread evidence of stigma being attached to the process of claiming benefits (claims stigma), with 12 of the longitudinal sample of 15 recounting experiences of this form of stigma. Participants frequently described processes and interactions which were dehumanising and alienating, findings which are reinforced by other research (Chase and Walker, 2013; Baumberg et al, 2012). Encounters with Job Centre Plus (JCP) and Work Programme advisers were characterised by judgemental treatment, with an absence of respect frequently evident. Sophie explained how she felt her advisers questioned whether she was really looking for paid employment, something highlighted by several participants:

[Job Centre staff] do look down at you...last week when I went down, she went, 'Have you applied for any jobs?' I went 'Yeah, 23.' And she looked at me as if to say 'Right okay, whatever'...Basically they look at us like rubbish 'cause we are on benefits...it's like they put you in a category or something... like low-lifes or something like that. It does get you mad. (Sophie, Single Parent (SP), W3¹)

James explicitly picked up on the dehumanising nature of the claims process:

You're just another number, you're not a person. That's how I feel about it [being on benefits]. (Young Jobseeker (YJS), W3)

Cath highlighted the impact of the security guards present at Job Centres:

When I started to go in the Job Centre again there were guards. Security men, and I'm thinking what a thing... It's wordless. It's a silent, ooh, I don't even have the words. It's the image... They're symbolising the fact that they're the big superpower and we are powerless and we've got to do as we're told, when we're told. (Cath, Disability Benefit(s) Claimant (DBC), W1)

The presence of security guards reflects the ways in which claimants are characterised and managed as 'threatening' populations (Fohrbeck et al, 2014), while Cath's narrative illustrates how individuals so targeted can in fact feel 'threatened' by the JCP environment.

What is important is that processes of welfare reform, and changes to benefit entitlement were sometimes experienced as deepening and extending the reach of this claims stigma, particularly around the questioning of eligibility that the reforms so often entail. Terri described how she felt targeted by the ESA reforms: 'It makes me feel as if I've been singled out... as somebody that has no medical problems' (DBC, W1).

Isobella described her own benefit receipt as deserved, and yet still felt uneasy about claiming social welfare:

I don't like the word benefit, actually, I'd like to call it entitlement because I do think I'm entitled... [but] even asking for an application form for things is a bit iffy and I don't feel very good about it, but it's a necessity and I do think, ooh, I should be able to cope by myself, I should be able to do something to enable me to earn enough money, but I can't. (DBC, W1)

Over time, Isobella had to navigate her migration from Incapacity Benefit onto Employment and Support Allowance, and so was repeatedly required to prove her incapacity in order to justify her desert. She continued to describe a discomfort around her benefits receipt:

I was always brought up that... you paid your own way so that's the other thing that I find is difficult as well, especially with the questionnaires that you have to fill in, because I feel I shouldn't be having to fill them in, because I should be able to manage. Of course, I can't. So that is also something else that wars with me and again a lot of confidence I think is lost because I feel almost as if I'm saying 'Oh please give me something', instead of saying 'Look, I'm entitled to this.' So I think that can have a big impact. (W2)

The welfare reform process meant that Isobella was forced to complete numerous application forms and so continually face up to her reliance on the benefits system. In her final interview, Isobella reflected on the negative impact the process of claiming benefits, and the underlying stigma associated with it, was having on her:

This isn't a lifestyle choice for me [but] there doesn't seem to be that recognition that people who are on benefits aren't on benefits because they necessarily want to buck the system...So you do feel a bit like a washed up sponging off society, even though for years and years I've paid in and have been a good girl and done what I was told to do. And now it's all thrown back in my face. (W3)

In Isobella's account, we see how her personal stigma around claiming benefits is only reinforced and intensified by the demands of a benefits claiming process that requires her to complete lengthy forms as part of an effort to 'prove' her own entitlement. In this way, the personal and claims dimensions of stigma operate together to entrench and deepen her feelings of shame and stigma. Isobella had to manage this stigma at the same time as facing an ongoing struggle to demonstrate her eligibility for disability benefits, with the stigma adding to the emotional strain she already faced.

At present, the benefits claiming process primarily serves to further entrench the exclusion of out-of-work benefit claimants, through treatment and practices that leave individuals feeling stigmatised, shamed and stereotyped as second-class citizens. Evidently, there are risks that these processes, and the overlapping (and intertwined) stigmas will lead some people to under-claim benefits to which they are entitled, and there is evidence of this both in this research and in the wider literature (Shildrick et al, 2012; Garthwaite, 2014; Baumberg et al, 2012).

Stigmatisation

It is important to now explore how and in what ways participants felt that others see claiming benefits as shameful; what Baumberg (2016) describes as stigmatisation. Obviously, these subjective perspectives are themselves framed and interpreted through the lens of individuals' own attitudes to their benefits receipt and so are closely connected to personal stigma.

Many participants appeared to understand, and even accept, what they perceived as people's antipathy towards benefit claimants:

I think a lot of people who work do resent people who are on benefits 'cause it's like they're getting a chunk out of their wage...getting put into the system for the benefits...I'd probably feel the same. (Sharon, DBC, W3)

A lot of people don't like paying their taxes and it's going towards somebody who's not doing anything...I do tend to agree. (Josh, YJS, W3)

At the same time as being accepting of resentment towards benefit claimants, participants also spoke of the impact of this stigmatisation on their own lives, highlighting interactions with members of the public and consequences for familial relations. When asked if she ever felt that she was treated differently by people because she was on benefits, Amy responded:

Sometimes I think, yeah. Get looked down on sometimes and things like that. Thinking I'm not worth nothing. (DBC, W1)

Karen was also very conscious of stigmatisation, highlighting the role social media increasingly plays in constructing and circulating critiques of out-of-work benefit claimants (Jensen, 2014; Tyler, 2014b):

A lot of people just slag us [people on benefits] off. Like we don't work, we don't need to work 'cause we get paid for it and I want to work. I want to get off benefits but it's hard.

Interviewer: when you say people slag you off, do you mean like to your face or...

SP: No, it's all over Facebook like 'Oh, look at people on benefits, they get everything.' But we don't. (SP, W1)

It is important to note that Karen's narrative shows how she resisted these negative characterisations of claimants, rebutting the ideas of generous benefits payments, and the notion that she did not want to enter paid employment. She described how she felt the shame and stigma of being a benefit claimant and single parent in her everyday interactions:

People stare at you in the street like you're summat they stood on. I think it's just wrong. (W1)

Three of the participants – Amy, Cath and Jessica – explained that they sometimes felt excluded within their families as benefit claimants whose poverty meant that they could not participate in family celebrations, and whose benefit receipt was perhaps shameful where it deviated from the family 'norm'. When asked if she felt being on benefits affected the way she was treated, Cath answered:

Yeah, of course it does. In my own family...I've had things like 'How long you been on benefits now, Cath?' across a room. (DBC, W1)

The fact that such a question was interpreted by Cath as an attempt to differentiate her from the rest of her family, even to stigmatise her, demonstrates the extent to which benefit receipt is now mired in negative associations, and bound up in feelings of stigma and shame. It also reinforces the fundamentally relational nature of these processes of stigmatisation, with participants perceiving their relationships and interactions with family members, friends and broader society as being harmed by and affected by negative views of benefit receipt.

I feel like a bum: the personal stigma of benefits

In this study, eight of the 15 followed longitudinally described experiences of stigmatisation but even more common (reported by ten participants) was feelings of personal stigma. Participants sometimes appropriated the derogatory words associated with benefit reliance to describe themselves, perhaps indicating an internalisation and partial acceptance of processes of stigmatisation:

I feel like a bum. I feel useless. When you're walking around the streets... everybody knows that you're not a worker because you're out and about through the day so you feel worthless... You feel like some people are looking at you as if to say 'Fucking, he's taking piss, he's another one that just sits about and does nowt.' And then when you go shopping and you're having to buy all the cheapo stuff, you feel, I don't know, you feel ashamed. That's how it is. You see people putting nice products in their trolleys and you can't, you've got to get the minimum and it's tough if you like it or not because that's all you can afford. (James, Young Jobseeker (JYS), W1)

James described being embarrassed about being on benefits, and the material deprivation this inevitably entailed:

It can be embarrassing [being on benefits]. Your friends can be going out for a drink but [you] can't go...so then you feel embarrassed because people know that you can't go because you've no money. (W1)

In James' narrative, there is evidence of a stigma of poverty and benefits tied to the material manifestations of poverty; what having to do without means, and how it visibly excludes and differentiates affected individuals from mainstream society. At the same time, James' describes his non-work as contributing to a feeling of worthlessness, suggesting a particular stigma around economic inactivity, and non-engagement in the paid labour market.

There was also evidence of individuals describing negative associations around being reliant on the state, which some participants self-described as 'scrounging'. This links into recent research by Pemberton et al (2016), which found that many claimants reported an anger and self-loathing linked to their benefits receipt. Young jobseeker Sam showed a particular replication of dominant narratives, and described feeling as if she was a 'scrounger' in two of her three interviews. Sam's characterisation of herself as a 'scrounger' emerged over time, and seemed to correspond with her transition from IS onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), and into the world of job search and JCP, again showing how the different dimensions of stigma intersect. When first interviewed, Sam was a recent care leaver who had just secured an independent home. She was at full-time college and hoping to find employment in the future in IT, and was in the process of being moved onto JSA. In this first interview, Sam made no reference to 'scrounging'. By the time of the second and third interviews, Sam had left college, was claiming JSA and trying – without success – to find paid employment. It was at this point that Sam began to characterise her situation as 'scrounging':

I feel a bit weird when it comes to the jobseekers bit because I don't like scrounging off of people...I don't like scrounging money. (YJS, W2)

I need a job; because I'm sick of scrounging. That's how I think of it, anyway, I'm sick of scrounging. (W3)

Sam conceptualised a future move into paid employment as having the potential to 'get that feeling of being ashamed off me' (W3), and so her experiences of the shame and stigma of benefit receipt contributed towards her motivations to enter

employment. Over time, as Sam continued to vocalise her experience of personal stigma, she arguably demonstrated the extent to which benefits receipt can cause psychological and relational harm, as well as material hardship.

In following participants over time, it was possible to observe how changes to employment status affected experiences of personal stigma, with some participants welcoming the loss of stigma which they associated with a move into paid employment. This was notable in the account of Rosie, who started the research in receipt of out-of-work benefits but who had secured full-time employment by the time of her third interview. She reflected back on her experiences on out of work benefits:

I've been poorly through depression every time I've been on benefits. Because my mum and dad have worked hard all their lives to be where they are and so that's the impression I get, that you need to work hard and earn your money. (SP, W3)

Rosie contrasted her experiences in work and in receipt of benefits:

When you work for your money it's a lot different to receiving benefits because you kind of feel better to spend that money because you've earned it. (W3)

Rosie's intersecting 'welfare' and employment journeys illustrate the dynamic nature of the personal stigma around benefits, as well as the value attached to paid employment as a means of shedding such stigma, something also evident in Sam's account.

Overall, then, the participants in this study demonstrated the extent to which the stigma associated with benefits receipt is affecting how people see themselves, imagine they are seen by others, and experience the processes associated with benefits receipt. These experiences of stigma can be profoundly damaging for individuals' self-esteem and sense of self-worth and so may actually make the government's efforts to see people transition from benefits and into paid employment less rather than more likely. In exploring the reach and extent of benefits stigma, there are signs of both tacit acceptance but also – on occasions – resistance to an understanding of benefits receipt as shameful and problematic. These diverse and sometimes contradictory reactions are also in evidence in benefit claimants' responses to benefit stigma, which feature some resistance but, more commonly, a tacit acceptance of the negative characterisation of claimants when applied to some, less deserving 'other'.

Managing and resisting the 'scrounger' narrative

In seeking to manage the stigma of benefits, there were examples of people seeking to 'pass' as non-benefit claimants, concealing their stigmatised identity, a classic strategy for managing stigma (Goffman, 1990; Tyler, 2013). Tessa, who was living with paranoid schizophrenia, explained:

I don't tell anyone I'm on benefits, apart from me close mates and stuff... Well I don't tell them about me illness 'cause everyone reacts wrongly when they hear 'schizophrenia'... people do judge, if you're on benefits and stuff. (DBC, W2)

There were also limited forms of resistance, with some participants challenging the stigma of benefits receipt, in ways which reflected the active everyday agency of people living with and responding to poverty (Lister, 2004). Susan, when relating negative treatment by JCP staff, challenged the dehumanising processes of benefit claiming:

I might be on benefits but I'm also a human being. (SP, W2)

Sophie repeatedly questioned the characterisation of benefit claimants as passive by emphasising the hard work associated with being a single parent:

[The government] just think that we [single parents] sit at home on our backsides all day. They don't realise the cooking, the cleaning, looking after the kids and that lot. That's a full time job in itself I think. (SP, W2)

There were also some attempts to highlight the 'deservingness' of most, if not all, benefit claimants, and to emphasise that fraudulent and undeserving 'behaviours' were limited to a minority of cases. This could be seen as an explicit challenge to the dominant narrative, and was most notable in the accounts of Cath and Isobella. Both highlighted how there are 'undeserving' people in every walk of life, a more inclusive approach than the more common 'them' and 'us' dichotomy:

I believe, in all walks of life [there are] people swinging the lead. (Cath, DBC, W2)

I'm willing to conceive that there's an awful lot of people claiming benefits that perhaps shouldn't like there's a lot of bankers claiming bonuses who shouldn't. (Isobella, DBC, W2)

Othering

While there were some signs of resistance to the dominant 'scrounger' narrative, what was most notable in this research was the 'othering' in which so many of the participants engaged, where they shored up their own deservingness to benefits via a critique of some 'other' deemed less deserving and whose behaviour was characterised as more problematic. There is a growing body of literature illustrating the 'othering' in which people in poverty engage, whereby they emphasise the non-deservingness of some 'other' while – very often – simultaneously defending their own entitlement to benefits (Walker, 2014; Chase and Walker, 2013; Garthwaite, 2014; Batty and Flint, 2013; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). This 'othering' needs to be considered against a backdrop of increased and enduring hostility towards benefit claimants, both in the media and in government rhetoric. It is critical to recognise that the negative narrative on 'welfare' frames the lives of out-of-work benefit claimants who may both engage in and be subject to 'othering' (Lister, 2008; 2004).

Participants frequently spoke about the undeservingness of immigrants, those with substance misuse issues, fraudulent disability benefit claimants, and those with no previous employment experience. Immigrants came in for frequent censure, and there was often significant anger about what was seen as the government's continued support for immigrants, which was sometimes explicitly contrasted with the apparent

lack of support for British out-of-work benefit claimants. This was particularly notable in Chloe's narrative, and featured in each of her three interviews:

I'm doing this basically all by myself on what they give me and it's ridiculous. And then there's people like Zara next door and she's from a different country, she's from Pakistan and she's a lovely, lovely woman but she gets free gas, free electric and Home Office pay her shopping. She gets everything for nowt, and they still get money [too]. (SP, W1)

There were clear correlations between individual participants' own benefit claiming identity, and those whom they identified as being undeserving, with evidence that participants were implicitly seeking to emphasise their own deservingness by critiquing and 'othering' those who were unable to display the same characteristics as themselves, something also highlighted in Chase and Walker's research (2013). For example, both Robert and Isobella described their previous working experiences as a justification for their own deservingness of benefits and then suggested that 'others' who had never worked were less entitled to the same social welfare. As Robert explained:

If you haven't put nowt into country you shouldn't get nowt off country. Like I still pay me tax on [stewarding job]. (YJS, W3)

The disabled participants were particularly likely to talk of undeserving disability benefit claimants who were not *really* disabled. This was part of an effort to distance themselves from 'others' who do not deserve disability benefits, and to mitigate the effects of the increased hostility towards much of the disability benefit population. Sharon was 'offended' when she received a questionnaire to reassess her eligibility for disability benefits, and became upset when she situated this reassessment against what she saw as the broader context:

There's so many people out there that are just lazy and don't want to work and they...won't get questioned and sent to [ATOS]. They'll just get left. And there's people out there that are on disability that don't deserve it. I mean I've seen a man a couple of weeks ago that was on disability and had a disability badge and everything, and he was just walking normal and swinging his walking stick about like it was nowt. And I thought there's people there that actually really deserve it that could do with the money, and they're not even getting it and it just winds me up. (DBC, W2)

In differentiating between the undeserving 'them' and the deserving 'us' it was common to make a broad distinction between those who 'choose' benefits, or who were to 'blame' for their own situation, and those who were reliant on benefits due to factors beyond their control such as impairments, unemployment and caring responsibilities. In making this distinction, participants commonly re-emphasised their own lack of choice over their situation, as well as highlighting that many did actively choose to stay on out-of-work benefits and so accepting the 'benefits as lifestyle choice' rhetoric when applied to some 'other'. Sometimes the contrast drawn was explicit:

Some people choose it [benefits], some people think 'I'll have a kid and go on benefits and that'll be me.' Some people are used to it, but I'm not. Well, I never have been. (James, YJS, W1)

Through their engagement in 'othering', itself a response to the 'othering' they experience as members of a stigmatised and presumed deficit population, out-of-work benefit claimants are themselves re-circulating and extending the reach of the 'scrounger' narrative. As the 'othered' also 'other', the framing consensus on 'welfare' is further embedded and strengthened, in ways that reduce scope for an alternative narrative or solidaristic challenge to the status quo (Chase and Walker, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which out-of-work benefit claimants experience and respond to a dominant narrative that stigmatises and problematises those in receipt of out-of-work benefits. It has shown how individual claimants often occupy unstable and sometimes contradictory positions, variously accepting, internalising, resisting and sometimes challenging dominant narratives on 'welfare'. By following individuals over time, it has been possible to generate dynamic pictures of benefit stigma, which illustrate triggers for changing attitudes to one's own position. For example, Sam gradually began to self-identify as a scrounger, an occurrence which coincided with her transition from IS onto the more conditional and supervisory regime of JSA. It is possible that Sam was also affected by taking part in the study, with the repeat interviews encouraging her to reflect upon her position and even begin to problematise it. However, interview questions were open and not focused on stigma, and so this type of research effect is perhaps fairly unlikely.

As well as illustrating the reach of benefits stigma, this article has explored strategies for managing such stigma, most notably through engaging in a critical 'othering'. The emergent literature on 'othering' has highlighted the power of the hegemonic narrative on 'welfare' that treats 'welfare' and those who rely upon it as inherently negative and problematic and so creates a climate where claimants perhaps feel unable to challenge the dominant discourse, and so instead seek to justify their own desert by referencing some less deserving other (compare Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Pemberton et al, 2016). There has also been a sustained emphasis on the idea that, by 'othering', claimants are effectively seeking to deflect the stigma they potentially face, through a process of symbolic distancing and transference (Fohrbeck et al, 2014; Pemberton et al, 2016). By so doing, claimants are challenging the dominant narrative and stereotypes on 'welfare' as being inapplicable to 'them', while at the same time recirculating and employing these same stereotypes as a resource to legitimate their own claims through a process of comparison with some less deserving 'other' (Pemberton et al, 2016).

Arguably, this 'othering' is best understood as an admittedly defensive form of citizenship engagement (Ellison, 2000) and claim-making, which sees claimants make use of the dominant narrative as a discursive resource (Fohrbeck et al, 2014) that can be deployed to shore up their own deservingness and entitlement to social welfare. Defensive forms of citizenship engagement encompasses activities that seek to defend the real or perceived erosion of social rights (Ellison, 2000; Cook et al, 2012). They can be contrasted with more proactive forms of citizenship engagement, where individuals

and groups feel able to mobilise in efforts to extend their entitlement, and even to make demands for new rights (Ellison, 2000; Cook et al, 2012). Othering as a form of defensive citizenship engagement and claim-making is inevitably negative in tone, and can of course have repercussions for claimants' own citizenship inclusion given that it serves to reanimate and strengthen the dominant, problematising narrative. However, when set against a context in which many mainstream politicians, much of the media and wider public seem united in their critique of the behaviours and dependencies of out-of-work benefit claimants, it is a perhaps unsurprising response. Understood in this light, 'othering' becomes an active effort by claimants to assert their own deservingness and lay claim to their citizenship rights, at a time when these are repeatedly threatened and undermined both by a discursive and stigmatising narrative, but also by policy reforms that retrench and residualise social welfare provision (Patrick, 2014).

What is also notable from this study is the ways in which – as well as 'othering' – participants were sometimes illustrating an internalisation of the dominant narrative, through their articulation of a personal stigma of benefits. Frequently, negative associations with benefit receipt were closely linked to non-engagement in the formal labour market, illustrating the ways in which a citizenship narrative that privileges paid employment as the primary responsibility of citizenship and neglects other forms of socially valuable contribution can contribute to and drive benefits stigma. These processes of internalisation can be profoundly damaging for individuals' sense of self, and self-esteem, and may, ironically, make transitions into paid employment less rather than more likely, the opposite of the government's intent. Where people experience social welfare receipt as demarcating them as members of a problematic, threatening, even abject population (Tyler, 2014b), this is unlikely to increase their likelihood of securing paid employment and instead can operate to demoralise affected individuals and can – of course – have negative impacts for their mental health, in ways which may mean benefits receipt stretches into the longer-term.

The widespread evidence of the stigma associated with the process of claiming benefits suggests that the benefits system itself operates to entrench and deepen the extent of benefits stigma. There is thus clear scope to explore how this claims stigma might be reduced, with particular potential here to look at strategies for shame-proofing public services (Lister, 2015). As Universal Credit is rolled out and those in receipt of in-work benefits are expected to participate in work-related activity and attend Job Centre Plus, there have been calls for a change of culture in how these street level bureaucracies operate (DWP Select Committee, 2016). This perhaps represents an opportunity for reforms to create a system grounded in principles of dignity, equality of treatment and respect. The experiences of the participants in this study suggest such principles are currently little in evidence, if not entirely absent, contributing to a pervasive benefits stigma with negative repercussions for how individuals see themselves, are seen by others, and – what is equally important – see others.

Note

¹ W1 denotes first wave of interviews, W2 second wave, and W3 third wave

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