

Researching social security
policy in a (post) pandemic
world:
considering the potential of qualitative methods

University of Leeds, School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Seminar

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Outline

- ◇ Summary of motivations and points for discussion
- ◇ Qualitative methods in social security policy research
- ◇ The social security system and COVID-19
- ◇ Charting a programme of research

Key points for discussion

(Within the (post) pandemic context)

- ◆ Using qualitative methods.
 - ◆ Beyond ‘everything moved online’
 - ◆ Moving ‘beyond’ interviews
 - ◆ Adapted interviews
 - ◆ Collecting alternative forms of qualitative data
 - ◆ The place of participation in developing new methods
- ◆ Social security policy
 - ◆ Which groups were particularly affected by the pandemic?
 - ◆ (Within an exploratory research design) What are the key policy themes?

Motivations

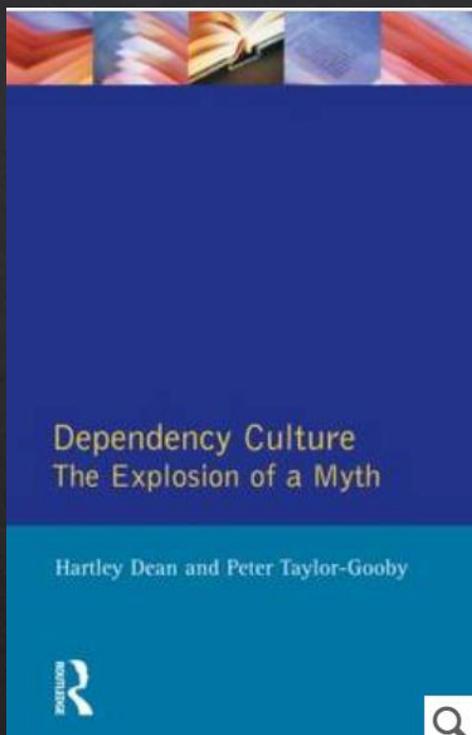
METHODOLOGICAL

SUBSTANTIVE POLICY
CONTEXT

PARTICIPATION

Qualitative methods in social security policy research

Ubiquity of interviewing



Couples balancing work, money and care: exploring the shifting landscape under Universal Credit

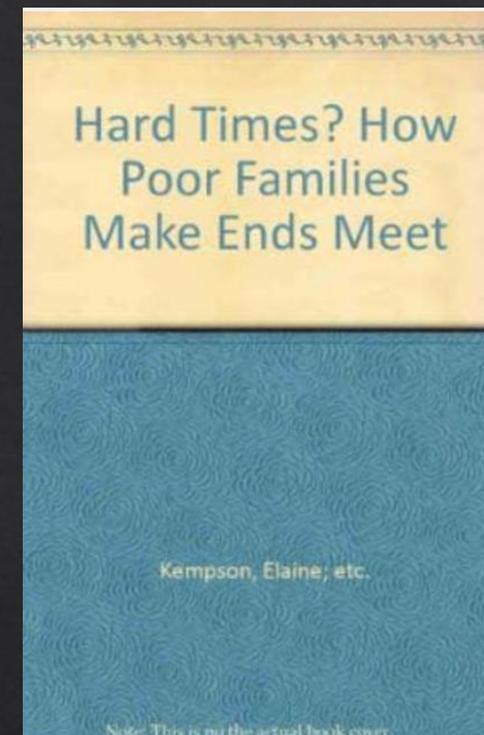
This ESRC project examines the ways couples with children make decisions about work, care & household finances in relation to changes under Universal Credit.

Research project *This project is in progress. The start date was 14 March 2018.*
[View more projects in Institute for Policy Research](#)



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Welfare Conditionality

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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Our major international academic conference Welfare Conditionality: Principles, Practices and Perspectives took place on 26-28 June 2018 at the University of York, UK.

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About our research

- WelCond International
- Sanctions, support and Service leavers
- About our research
- What is welfare conditionality?

Publications

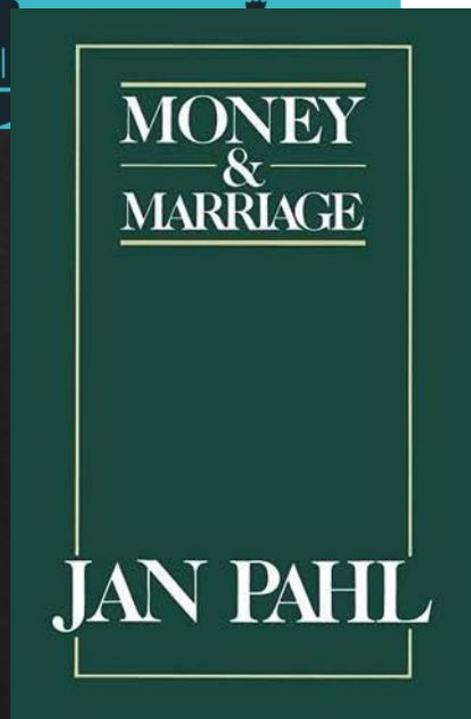
- Briefing papers
- Evidence to parliaments & inquiries
- Reports inc Final Findings
- Conferences & events

Who we are

- People
 - Investigators
 - Researchers
 - PhD students

Latest from Twitter

RT @D_KatyJones: @productivityNW @ESRC @WelCond @FIMTrust @EdResLancaster @LordsEconCom @mmu_decentwork @mcrmetibi @MMLL_Research @mmlh



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Accessing social security and employment support during the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath

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What are interviews good for?

- ◇ Rich, detailed data about individual experiences/ perspectives.
- ◇ Flexible
- ◇ Researcher control
- ◇ Accessible (ish)
- ◇ Can answer (to varying extents) 'how' and 'why'

BUT there are also limitations

'The radical critique'

“interviews have become the dominant and unthinking method of choice in qualitative studies, with an assumption that these data generating encounters somehow give access to the authentic interior of social actors’ motivations, experiences, perceptions, attitudes and feelings. Rather...**interviews are performed constructions. Interviewees are accounting for, constructing and warranting, in social research interviews**, and thus, for robustness, the content of interviews should be analysed as such.” ([Edwards and Holland, 2020](#))

- ◇ Need for greater clarity about *what* interview data gives us access to, and what it does not.
- ◇ Related epistemological claims in social policy/ security research often unspoken.

BUT there are also limitations

Technology and contemporary society

“Fifty years ago, academic social scientists might be seen as occupying the apex of the – generally limited – social science research ‘apparatus’. Now they occupy an increasingly marginal position in the huge research infrastructure that forms an integral feature of what Thrift (2005) characterizes as knowing capitalism; where **circuits of information proliferate and are embedded in numerous kinds of information technologies.**” ([Savage and Burrows, 2007](#))

(see also, [Flick, 2018](#))

- ❖ Do interviews provide us with the best window into the complexities of contemporary social life?

Interviews and Inclusion

Often put forward as a method to access ‘vulnerable’, ‘hard to reach’ groups.

BUT, assumptions about:

- ❖ Availability of resources – including time, privacy
- ❖ Desire for, and appropriateness of, verbal expression

(see e.g. [Hollomotz, 2017](#); [Teachman & Gibson, 2012](#))

This leads to methodological blind spots in social security qualitative research

Reliant on verbal accounts

Centres researcher priorities

Relies on assumptions of relationship between speech and action

Some groups disinclined to participate because of time commitment

Limited insight into 'systems'

Some groups disinclined to participate because of expectations of verbal expression

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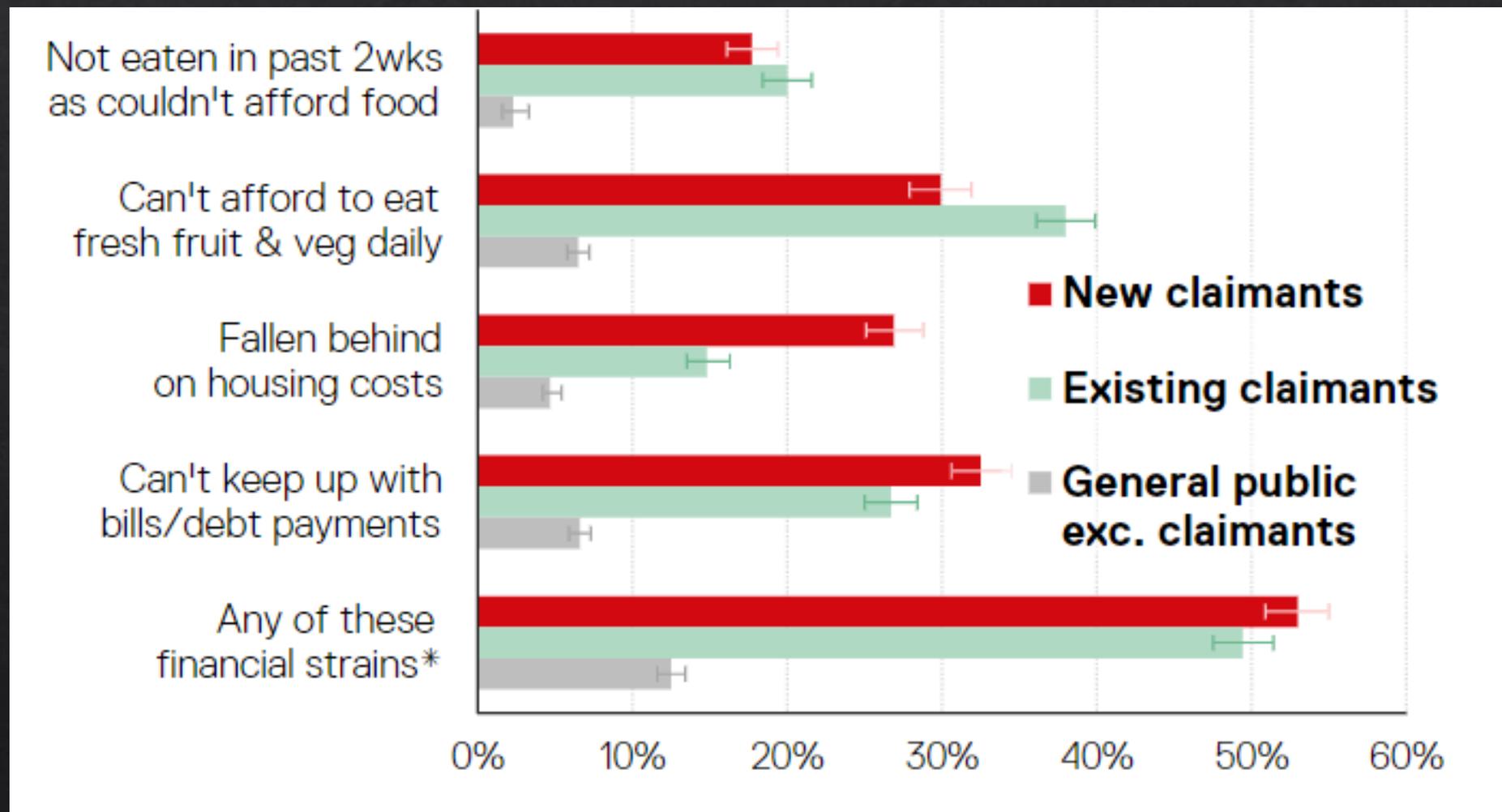
The pandemic context

❖ Presents constraints and opportunities...

“the virus has, in many ways, pushed us back into the armchair—both in a physical and metaphorical sense—and required us to utilize new methods to conduct research from our own homes. While it may have previously been more difficult to access participants in our field sites, advancements in technology have allowed for new armchair approaches to interact with our participants, and even glimpse into their daily lives, from afar.... *mediated approaches can generate valuable insight not otherwise available through the use of in person methods which may actually be richer and more insightful*, especially when discussing personal or sensitive topics” ([Howlett, 2021](#))

The social security system and COVID-19

The pandemic context and the social security system



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[Welfare at a Social Distance](#)

The pandemic, the social security system, and specific groups

Intersecting the methodological critiques set up earlier, with specific social security claimant groups.

Carers/ those with
caring responsibilities

Young people

Disabled people

The pandemic, the social security system, and specific groups

Intersecting the methodological critiques set up earlier, with specific social security claimant groups.

Carers/ those with
caring responsibilities

1/ Increased burden.

([Bergmann and Wagner, 2021](#))

2/ Longer run emphasis on work-first
approach.

([Miller and Ridge, 2013](#))

The pandemic, the social security system, and specific groups

Intersecting the methodological critiques set up earlier, with specific social security claimant groups.



Young people

1/ Scarring effects

([Bell and Blanchflower, 2011](#))

2/ Focus of flagship interventions –
Kickstart

The pandemic, the social security system, and specific groups

Intersecting the methodological critiques set up earlier, with specific social security claimant groups.



Disabled people

1/ Shielding, health vulnerabilities

2/ Long run increasing conditionality

([Garthwaite, 2014](#))

Bringing it together: implications for qualitative
methods

Why might these groups be particularly poorly served by traditional interview methods?

Carers/ those with
caring responsibilities

Young people

Disabled people

Interviews (in addition to previous issues raised):

- ◇ Time intensive
- ◇ Inaccessible
- ◇ Assume preference for/ suitability of verbal expression

Participatory turn

“there are particular possibilities that could be realised if more academics consider including participatory research principles within their research designs. At the same time, a greater role could be played by the academic community in creating and supporting opportunities for the voices of those with direct experiences of poverty to be better and more widely heard.”

(Patrick, 2019)

- ◇ Participation as a continuum
- ◇ Learning from other disciplines

(Challenge of upsetting expected research processes)

Proposed programme of work

RQs:

1. How is the working-age social security system functioning for, and meeting the needs of, key groups of recipients in a (post) pandemic context?
2. How can qualitative methodological tools be refined or designed in order to better access, capture and amplify the experiences of social security recipients in a (post) pandemic context?

Work package 1: Low and high resource multi-media data collection (carers & young people)

Work package 2: Adapted interviews (disabled people)

Work package 3: Participatory practices

Cross disciplinary learning

Outputs: academic (social policy), academic (methods, inc. training), policy.

Thank you

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