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WELFARE — AT A
SOCIAL DISTANCE

How UK social security claimants constructed ‘them’ and ‘us’ during Covid- 19

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Outline

- **The research puzzle**
- **Context: claiming during covid**
- **Analytic perspective**
- **Methods**
- **Findings: Work ethic; Class; Need; the Economic System**
- **Concluding comments**

Puzzle

➤ **'Them' and 'Us' within the benefits system**

- Taxpayer and Claimant (Hills, 2017)
- Among claimants: analytically and discursively

➤ **Analytically**

- Breakdowns by sociodemographics (e.g. Edmiston, 2022; Hills and Cooper, 2021, chpt.7)
- Heterogeneity of groups being served by policy (Millar and Bennett, 2017)

➤ **Discursively**

- Deservingness (van Oorschott, 2000)
- Othering (Lister, 2020)

The case: claiming during covid

- Considering covid as an *extreme case*.

“Our results suggest that **the pandemic has not engendered a meaningful increase in general solidarity with welfare claimants** in the UK. Welfare attitudes did appear to soften during the first and second waves of the pandemic – but attitudes rebounded following lockdowns, with only small changes being sustained.

....

Instead, **the most plausible explanation is what we term ‘COVID exceptionalism’** (Summers et al., 2021b), where COVID-19 claimants are seen as exceptional, and are mentally bracketed away from other benefit claimants.” (de Vries, Geiger et al., 2021)

Complementing focus on stigma & shame

“Taking up these structural and agentic dimensions of stigma and looking at the terrain of social policy, the treatment of stigma in this issue comes with a concern to understand and interrogate stigma in its totality in the context of the welfare state. This themed section therefore explores **how stigma is (re)produced, experienced and resisted** as three dimensions of the operation of welfare stigma.”
(Dukelow, Whelan and Bolton, 2022)

- Aim to identify and describe deeper underpinning discourses

Methods

- In-depth interviews with ‘new’ (35) and ‘existing’ claimants. 2 waves (Spring/Summer 2020 (74) and Spring/Summer 2021 (63)). Diverse socio-demographics.
- Topic guide questions include focus on feelings about claiming; views of self and others; effect and relevance of pandemic on claiming.
- Initial descriptive deductive thematic coding.
- Draw on tradition of critical discourse analysis.

“draw up a sociosemantic inventory **of the ways in which social actors can be represented** and establish the sociological and critical relevance of my categories before I turn to the question of how they are realized linguistically.”
(van Leeuwen. 2008:23)

Work ethic

“No, I'm the sort of person who would want to work as much as I can so I can save as much as I can.... So yes, I wouldn't be the type of person to just sit around and - even now I'm a little bit bored having no job.”

‘Megan’, new UC claimant

“I can't say the word but - I think a lot of people that, to my view, there are a lot of people that just sit on their laurels and claim for the sake of it. I don't want to be like that.”

‘Amber’, existing UC and PIP claimant

Class

“From a professional woman's point of view, going into somewhere like that, I think it was a bit of eye-opener for me. I know you can't treat people differently, but I feel that professional people should have perhaps had a different experience. [Whispers] God, that sounded snobby!

....

Do you think you're the sort of person that would usually claim benefits?

No, absolutely not.”

‘Veronica’, new UC claimant

Need

“Well, we were quite slow to want to claim because it's quite a strange moment to decide whether you classify as someone who needs to claim anything. Some of our friends were saying, 'You should have claimed by now already,' and some of them were saying, 'But that system is really for people who are really struggling.' We were having a hard time trying to analyse whether we fitted into that category.”

‘Teresa’, new UC claimant

Need

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‘Teresa’, new UC claimant

The economic system

“Yes, no, there has been a shift and I think even a lot of my friends who have good jobs and have managed to keep their jobs and working from home, even they're like, 'Go on to Universal Credit', and it was like - before we would discuss it and think, God, why is she signing on? Why doesn't she just go and work in Tesco's? Why doesn't she just go and work in Sainsbury's? You know, that kind of thing. Now we're like, you haven't got a choice in this! To be fair, I've been put in this situation, I could easily have gone out and worked, if corona wasn't - I would have got another contract, I had another contract, I was in the process of getting another contract, so.

‘Louise’, new UC claimant

The economic system

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“This is my preconception that I'm probably not the regular kind of person they would expect to see sitting in front of them. Here was somebody who is not a layabout, not somebody who's afraid of work and everything else, but a victim of circumstance. I think that's going to be everybody, isn't it? There's a lot of people, jobs being lost here, there and everywhere”

‘Samuel’, existing ESA claimant

Conclusion

- Aimed to show usefulness of paying attention to how social security claimants represent themselves as social actors.
- Despite predictions of increased social solidarity and wider shared understandings of claiming, what we find is that claimant as a social grouping is *fragmented* and *contingent* (for both existing and new claimants).
 - By *dissociation* with some social groupings and *association* with others through acts of *categorisation*.
- More clearly highlights intractability of challenge for (progressive) policy reform?

Thank you!

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