

Guiding principles for social security policy: outcomes from a bottom-up approach

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Abstract

Covid-19 has highlighted the inadequacy of UK social security but also the lack of consensus amongst progressive actors about what would be a better system. One way forward is to focus on the principles that should underpin social security. We present outcomes from a project in which principles were considered by a panel of Expert by Experience benefit claimants. We argue that while scholars often engage in descriptively identifying social security principles in existing policy, the bottom-up approach presented here offers a way of generating normative principles to guide an improved future system. We identify key contributions of this bottom-up approach relating to: the critical importance of principles as a guide to the fundamental purpose of social security, and policy making; the relationship between the treatment of claimants and benefit levels as co-dependent; and how a bottom-up process can produce results that engage with and contribute holistically to the debate.

1. Introduction

Covid-19 has highlighted the inadequacy of social security in the United Kingdom – in academic analyses of emergency income support measures (see Machin, 2021; Simpson, 2020); attention being drawn to low rates of benefits (e.g. TUC, 2020a); and public debate such as that generated by footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign around free school meals and child poverty.¹ What has also been highlighted is the lack of consensus amongst progressive actors as to what would be a better system. We use the term 'Progressive' to indicate not a particular political orientation but holding the broad ideals that social security policy should achieve (some degree of) poverty alleviation and reduce economic inequalities between groups. Such a view stands in contrast to the recent direction of travel for social security policy, which can be characterised as following a 'welfare reform'² agenda, pursuing a punitive approach to working-age benefits, marked by sanctions, conditionality and low(ered) payment levels (see Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Finch and Gardiner, 2018; Millar and Bennett, 2016). Recent 'welfare reform' is typified by the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which introduced Universal Credit as the UK's primary income replacement benefit.

Key progressive voices have been strongly critical of 'welfare reform'. To cite one example, Lister (2016) contends that the current UK system is not preventing poverty, relieves it inadequately and the growing reliance on food banks is the most visible of a multitude of unmet needs. Despite such criticism it was evident, even before the pandemic, that there was little consensus on an alternative direction for policy. As Batty and Orton (2018) note, on proximal policy issues such as housing, early childhood education and care, and minimum wage levels, there is considerable consensus (within civil society) as to what needs to be done and some detailed plans for how to implement change. However, on the issue of social security, consensus is lacking:

“There are strong advocates of an unconditional universal Basic or Citizen’s Income while others express preference for contribution-based entitlements or universal but means-tested benefits. There are different views on the importance that should be given to public services versus individual income support measures or whether to prioritise immediate issues such as the bedroom tax or longer-term changes to Universal Credit and the tax system more generally.” (ibid.)

We consider why there might be such a lack of consensus and suggest in this article that efforts in two main directions might offer a way forward: first is to focus on how to approach formulating the *principles* that underpin social security policy; second is to pursue *bottom-up* approaches to policymaking. By principles we mean implicit or explicit value statements that underpin and guide the content and direction of policy. This is in contrast to, for example, a ‘goal’ which expresses a desired outcome or end point; or an ‘ideal’ which expresses a broader normative position that might not so clearly relate to specific policy formulations.

The lack of current consensus is demonstrated by the plethora of competing progressive policy proposals on social security made since the onset of the pandemic. Examples include a Minimum Income Guarantee (New Economics Foundation, 2020), a Minimum Income Standard (Maqueen, 2020) and a Liveable Income Guarantee (Molloy, 2020). Universal Basic Income continues to attract both support (e.g. Lansley, 2020) and criticism (Coote and Percy, 2020) while some groups have focused on revisions to Universal Credit. For example, the Poverty Alliance (2020) suggests that the basic Universal Credit allowance be doubled, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) proposes increasing it to £150 per week (£260 for couples) and the TUC (2020b) also calls for the latter figure (£260) but per individual not couple. These proposals are all aimed at reducing poverty and economic inequality, but the proposed schemes also have fundamental differences. A Universal Basic Income would not be means tested whereas the Minimum/Guaranteed Income options would. Proposals for a Universal Basic Income suggest a variety of different models and the same applies to Minimum/Guaranteed Income ideas. Reforms to Universal Credit include suggestions for widely disparate benefit rates. It is lack of consensus that is most evident, rather than points of agreement.

Putting forward competing progressive proposals appears to some extent unproductive, as further options are generated but disagreement remains. An alternative approach is instead to focus on an issue raised previously in *Social Policy & Administration* (Patrick and Simpson, 2020): that of the principles that should underpin social security, and, we argue, *how* these principles might be generated. We suggest that the proposals noted above are marked by their lack of explicit principles. Some implicit principles can be deduced, for example Universal Basic Income rejects means-testing, but what is needed is the explicit formulation of social security principles.

Patrick and Simpson (2020) consider principles in their *Social Policy & Administration* article. They are concerned with dignity within social security and provide a compelling account of its importance. However, they locate dignity in the context of a broader interest in principles, exemplified by the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. Patrick

and Simpson consider in some detail how the principles developed by the Scottish Government open a broader debate beyond the principle of dignity. What is important here is how principles create a bridge between ideals and what might be practicably done, through making explicit what should underpin and guide action and practice. While progressives may share broad ideals around pursuing economic equality and anti-poverty goals, what is missing are explicit principles that provide the required bridge to policy development. Setting out guiding principles is therefore essential for identifying and working towards shared policy goals (for a broader discussion of issues around progressive principles see New Economics Foundation and Compass, 2015; Orton and Somra, 2018).

It is also important to consider *how* principles are formulated – this is the second central issue in this article. Patrick and Simpson’s research draws on what they describe as both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ perspectives. The interest in a bottom-up perspective reflects renewed and growing attention being given to what in broad terms can be called participatory research approaches in social policy (Patrick, 2019) and the role of ‘lived experience’ data (McIntosh and Wright, 2019). These sorts of data can provide insights and knowledge which might otherwise be absent in social policy debate (see also Summers and Young, 2020). Furthermore, participatory methods provide scope to upset or challenge taken for granted narratives or characterisations (Beresford, 2016; Patrick, 2019). Regarding social security specifically, what this means is foregrounding the personal, lived experiences of benefit claimants. A misapprehension in some current social security policy research is that ‘experiential ways of knowing’ (McIntosh and Wright, 2019: 462), that is, the type of knowledge accumulated from being a social security claimant, are only relevant to describing and understanding one’s own biographical situation. Instead, we argue, in line with strands of the participatory methodology literature (Bennett with Roberts, 2004: 6), experiential knowledge can be applied to explicitly deliberate and consider how social security *policy* can be formed and changed. Further, this approach to lived experience data repositions the role of the holders of such knowledge in the research process: moving from an extractive, backwards-looking focus on past experiences and problems, to a generative, forward-looking focus on policy solutions (Orton, 2019).

Following from the above discussion we seek to answer two questions in this article: what are the principles that should guide a progressive social security system; and how can a bottom-up approach be used to arrive at those principles? We address these two questions by examining findings from an innovative project which has both considered the issue of principles and placed emphasis on the importance of bottom-up participatory processes. The structure of the article is as follows. First (in section 2), we consider the status of existing social security principles, identifying ‘researcher-generated’ (section 2.1) and ‘policymaker-generated’ (section 2.2) principles. We suggest that part of the work of researchers tends to be to *identify* and *describe* the principles that are implicit in social security policy. On the other hand, policymakers sometimes engage in explicitly *expressing normative* principles that underpin policy (proposals). For the former we consider key examples of researcher-identified principles, and for the latter we focus on two key contrasting contemporary examples: the UK White Paper *21st Century Welfare* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010) which introduced Universal Credit, and; the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. In section 3 we highlight processes by which principles are generated, and in particular, the contrast between top down and bottom-up approaches. We then consider the

project and its methods (section 4) followed by (in section 5) presentation of the principles generated from the bottom-up approach alongside the principles identified in the first section of the paper. Finally (in section 6), we discuss the key implications of the bottom-up approach with a particular emphasis on: the importance of principles as a normative guide to the fundamental purpose of social security, and policy making; the relationship between the treatment of claimants and benefit levels, and; working holistically to generate principles. The article concludes by returning to, and answering, the two research questions.

2. Guiding principles of social security

We noted in our introduction that principles tended to be absent in contemporary progressive policy proposals. We turn now to consider the status of principles in social security policy(making), against which we can then compare the principles generated by the bottom-up approach. We consider two main ways in which principles have been identified or created to date. First, we look briefly at the work that academic researchers tend to do, which is to conduct analyses to *describe* the principles that underpin policy (although this may also then involve considering the normative status of these principles the central enterprise is a descriptive one). Second, we look at the work that policymakers sometimes do, which involves explicitly articulating the normative principles that guide their policy proposals. These exercises both tend to be ‘top-down’, although we consider the Social Security (Scotland) 2018 Act as a prominent case where policymakers also incorporated participatory approaches to generate their principles.

2.1. Researcher-identified principles

One of the objectives of academic research has been to analyse social security policy in order to identify and describe underpinning principles (e.g. Millar, 2018). Deducing and describing principles from policy developments provides understanding of policy trajectories over time. What follows is a short summary of some of the key researcher-identified principles that can be taken to characterise social security policy in the United Kingdom at important moments of development. Beginning with the Elizabethan Poor Laws of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, a central principle was a distinction between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor as a way of identifying those in ‘genuine’ need of relief. Officials were required to distinguish between those “impotent to serve and those able to serve or labour” (Stone, 1984: 35). Parish based Elizabethan Poor Laws were centralised in the new 1834 Poor Law whereby the ‘deserving versus undeserving’ principle was cemented, particularly in the operation of the workhouse. A second principle found in the Elizabethan Poor Laws, which became further embedded in the 1834 Poor Law, was the principle of ‘less eligibility’, that is, that anyone in receipt of relief (benefits) must not be better off than the worst paid labourer.

The establishment of the post 1945 welfare state aimed to eradicate Beveridge’s infamous so called ‘five giants’ of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. This provided the basis for policies of universal health care, free at the point of delivery; universal education; massively expanded public housing and full (male) employment. Marshall (1950: 69) theorised these reforms in his classic account of social citizenship as enabling people “to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a

civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society”. Principles of smoothing incomes across the life-course and protecting against unforeseen circumstances to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living underpinned the Beveridge model. While Beveridge’s system did indeed provide far greater social security, the primarily social insurance-based model assumed a male breadwinner (Lewis, 1992) and left gaps in income support and supplementary payments (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1966).

Indeed, principles implicit from Elizabethan times can be identified in present day social security policy. While contemporary language may differ – for example, ‘strivers versus skivers’ - the ‘deserving/undeserving’ principle remains evident in analyses of twenty first century policy (see, for example, Patrick, 2016; Edmiston and Humpage, 2018). The contemporary mantra that ‘work must pay’, and no one in receipt of modern benefits must be better off than someone in paid employment, plainly echoes the less eligibility principle of the Poor Law (Osborne, 2013). Alongside this, recent analyses have extended conceptualisations of deservingness and entitlement to capture how these function in contemporary social security policy. Specifically, the principle can be summarised as social rights being granted upon the fulfilment of responsibilities (Dwyer, 2004). Entitlement to social security becomes a conditional right to be earned. The suite of welfare reforms introduced through the 2010s further embedded this principle, whereby, “Universal Credit [saw] comprehensive conditionality become a founding principle of state financial support for people of working age in twenty-first century Britain.” (Dwyer and Wright, 2014: 33).

To establish a framework for comparison with the principles presented later in this article, we can organise these principles identified by researchers into the following categories:

- Deservingness: Those who are deserving should receive more help/support than those who are undeserving. Deservingness must, at times, be proven, including through the fulfilment of conditional criteria.
- Less eligibility: It should always be less appealing, and less well-paid, to be in receipt of benefits as opposed to being in the labour market.
- Security: The social security system should smooth income over the life course and offer protection against unforeseen life events.
- Dignity: The social security system should achieve a socially acceptable standard of living.

2.2. Policymaker generated principles

We now turn to consider two prominent examples of social security policy that evidence policymaker-generated principles. Here we draw on: *21st Century Welfare* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010) and the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. We select these as crucial cases typifying the direction of contemporary social security policy, that also offer a further point of comparison with the ‘bottom-up’ generated principles presented later in this article. *21st Century Welfare* is a White Paper published by the 2010-15 Coalition Government, setting out their ‘welfare reform’ trajectory and the introduction of Universal Credit. It included seven explicit principles.⁴ The second example, the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, forms part of Scottish government’s policy development under powers devolved from the UK

government. The scope for action by the Scottish government remains constrained with only around 15 per cent of benefits spending devolved. But the Scottish government is pursuing its own approach and the 2018 Act set out its underpinning principles.

We identify the manifest principles in these two documents and present them in Table 1, organised under the categories established in section 2.1. What emerges is the stark contrast between the two. The fundamental difference in approach is immediately evident in the two different titles of the documents, one using the term ‘welfare’ and the other ‘social security’. The titles set the tone for what follows. Thus, *21st Century Welfare* begins with two principles about work (meaning paid employment). The purpose of benefits here is to encourage, or enforce, movement ‘away’ from benefits and into paid employment. With the Scotland Act, work is not mentioned and its starting points are social security as an investment, human right and public service – terms which do not feature in *21st Century Welfare*. The Scotland Act’s principles express concern for the dignity of individuals while *21st Century Welfare* sets up a focus on ‘fairness’ between ‘recipients’ and ‘taxpayers’, thus creating a division between ‘we the people, the taxpayers, the givers’ against ‘them the poor, the takers, the undeserving’, a discourse that reinforces poverty and claiming benefits as something negative (Sinfield, 2018a). Further principles include the promotion of ‘positive behaviour’ and reinforcing conditionality. Reducing poverty is explicit in the Scotland principles whereas *21st Century Welfare* proposes that ‘basic needs’ are ‘considered’. Fundamental differences are evident throughout the two documents, which is clear when they are organised under the categories identified previously. We also add two further categories: ‘affordability’ and ‘claimant involvement’, to cover all of the principles. It is notable that there are shared principles in terms of the former, but only mention of ‘claimant involvement’ among the Scottish principles.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 illustrates the divergence between the two sets of principles, leading to very different policy trajectories. On the one hand is a ‘welfare’ system based on moving people into any work, a discourse that others social security recipients (Lister, 2021:90-98) an absence of emphasis on poverty alleviation⁵ and a focus on affordability. These principles animate specific policies such as the benefits cap, freezes to payment levels and increasing conditionality (see Hills, 2015; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). The alternative set of principles envisage a social security system that is an investment, a human right and public service that should reduce poverty and advances equality and non-discrimination.

The Scottish principles were developed in part through participatory means, where ‘experience panels’ fed into policy development. A bottom-up approach is partly in evidence. In seeking a progressive way forward for the UK, ‘copy Scotland’ is a tempting mantra. However, we suggest that the approach remains for the most part ‘top-down’ and policymaker driven. The experience panels were one component within an overarching top-down approach and were not the central mode of policy development. This becomes apparent when we consider the substance of the principles that are produced and what they might be expected to achieve. One such example in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 relates to the prevention of poverty. Sinfield (2018b) highlights the importance of prevention but notes this is not mentioned

at all in the Scottish principles. Sinfield (ibid.) also notes the statement in the *Poverty & Inequality Commission on Child Poverty Delivery Plan* that the Scottish Government: “In order to make a sustainable change to child poverty in Scotland must deliver an inclusive growth agenda that genuinely benefits all”. Sinfield argues that to be meaningful the words ‘and works to prevent poverty’ should be added.

A further issue is that the Scottish principles remain unclear as they relate to the core purpose of social security. In more detailed consideration of this, Sinfield (2019) draws on a number of suggested approaches. For example, the International Labour Office (ILO) contends that:

Social security...is the response to an aspiration for security in its widest sense. Its fundamental purpose is to give individuals and families the confidence that their level of living and quality of life will not, in so far as is possible, be greatly eroded by any social or economic eventuality. (International Labour Office, 1984)

In a similar vein, an objective of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) specifically sets out the duty of any government to:

take steps...to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights without discrimination of any kind. (United Nations, 1966, Article 2 (1))

The Scottish principles do not offer such an unambiguous expression of what social security is *for*.

In this section we have identified ‘top-down’ examples whereby researchers seek to identify and describe principles, and policymakers generate and express principles in social security policy. We now turn to consider what can be achieved when principles are generated using a ‘bottom-up’ approach.

3. The process of developing principles

The discussion so far has focused on identifying the content of principles that were generated ‘top-down’ by researchers and policymakers. We suggest that close attention should be paid to how principles are created. As has been identified, principles may be unstated (as with many contemporary progressive social security policy proposals); it may be possible to deduce principles in long term policy shifts or trends (as shown by considering examples of research on the Elizabethan Poor Laws, New Poor Laws, Beveridge and contemporary welfare state systems); or they may be more or less explicitly stated in policy documents (as with the examples of the Welfare Reform White Paper and Social Security Scotland Act).

An important additional layer in our argument is to delineate more clearly between *descriptive* and *normative* principles. Researchers examine policies to deduce and describe underpinning principles. However, this does not provide criteria for assessing whether – in our case from a progressive perspective – these are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ principles, and whether these principles *should* be applied to progressive policy development. There is, therefore, a need to think more clearly about how to formulate

normative principles. That is, there is a need to be clear in social policy making, and social security policy making specifically, about which principles *should* be applied. One way of doing this might be to decide, and apply, a specific philosophical perspective (see, for example, propositions for a eudaimonic ethic of social security – Dean, 2008). Alternatively, what is considered in this article, is the merits of bottom-up approaches for developing normative principles. From this perspective, the normative authority comes from those with lived-experience being placed at the centre of the process, allowing for their insights to take precedence (for a discussion of the importance of recognising ‘whose priorities’ are being listened to, see Chambers, 1983: 141-45).

Bottom-up approaches are often not incorporated into the policy process. One of the reasons the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 is notable is because of its use of ‘experience panels’ and other modes of engagement with those with personal experience of claiming social security benefits (The Scottish Government, 2018). Nevertheless, that engagement can be characterised as broadly consisting of consultation and information gathering exercises that sat alongside other modes of policy development. The research project presented in this article considers the merits of a more exclusive and wholesale bottom-up process for developing normative social security principles (i.e. the principles that *should* underpin progressive social security policymaking) with people with lived experience not simply being consulted but themselves determining principles, as will now be discussed.

4. The research project

The findings presented here are from a larger project in which a panel of people with lived experience of benefits sought to develop proposals for how the social security system can be improved, which included explicitly deliberating and deciding on underlying principles. To be clear, the concern of this article is the project’s outcomes concerning principles. While process forms a sub-component of our argument here, methodological issues related to the deliberative research process are given primary focus elsewhere (Morris, Morrison, Orton and Summers, forthcoming). The project was structured explicitly to recognise the knowledge and expertise of those with direct experience of the social security system (Bennett with Roberts, 2004). It is characteristic of other participatory approaches with its focus on facilitating group discussion and emphasis on people with lived experience discussing wider systemic policy issues and solutions, as opposed to only talking about their own personal experiences (Beresford et al., 1999).

By way of context, the project developed out of collaboration between an academic researcher, a claimant-led group in London and a Deaf and Disabled People’s Organisation, based on a shared interest in an idea of identifying proposals for improving the social security system led by people with lived experience of benefits. Funding for a project was obtained and the first step was creating a panel of people with lived experience. This was done using the project partners’ networks and a purposive sampling approach to ensure a range of experience of different benefits/elements of the social security system, and diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, and other personal characteristics. The result was a panel of 16 people in total, all either currently or recently in receipt of benefits. Participants determined that they wished to be referred to as ‘Experts by Experience’, reflecting the position of

authority they occupied. Summary characteristics of the participating Experts by Experience are presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Participants were supported by a three-person academic secretariat. The basic structure was that the panel met monthly, with the content and structure of discussion determined and led by the Experts by Experience. The members of the secretariat prepared briefing notes and other resources at the request of the panel to deliberate. Group dynamics were integral to how discussion developed (see for example, Belzile and Oberg, 2012, for further discussion on the importance of accounting for group interaction). We do not consider these methodological issues in detail here but note that the self-consciousness with which discussion proceeded was striking, with group members instating practices (for example, pre-meeting preparatory sessions, shared chairing duties) to ensure all members of the group were given the best opportunity to be heard. Throughout all stages of the project the emphasis was on being led by the Experts by Experience, with participants explicitly positioned as the decision makers. This places the research project towards the 'upper end' of a spectrum of possible approaches to participation (Bergold and Thomas, 2012), whereby the authority of Experts by Experience, founded on their experiential knowledge, is centred at each stage of the research process.

Turning to discussion of the social security principles specifically, some of the Experts by Experience had been involved in a previous civil society initiative in which principles had been discussed but where an outcome was not reached. As participants in the project discussed how to approach the task of identifying proposals for reforming the social security system, some referred to their experience in the earlier initiative. The panel considered various options and decided it would begin by seeking to produce a set of principles itself. Consideration was given to principles over three consecutive monthly (half day) meetings. This meant specific time was dedicated to collaborative discussion of principles but between meetings panel members had time to reflect and consult within their own networks. At the request of the panel of Experts by Experience, the secretariat produced briefing notes to support developing and deciding the principles. Materials included the principles from what at that point was the Scottish Social Security bill, the ILO and some gleaned from civil society organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group.³ Through ongoing discussion the Experts by Experience unpicked these various examples and generated their own five core principles. They then went through an iterative process, discussing each principle, its intent and meaning, until precise wording was agreed. Before presenting and discussing the outcome of that process, it is critical to emphasise that the principles were decided on by the Experts by Experience and not by the researchers. The analysis in this paper is ours, on which other scholars may have differing views, but the principles themselves are as identified by the Experts by Experience.

5. Five guiding principles for social security

The outcome of the process described above is that the Experts by Experience set out five principles that should underpin social security. The five principles are as follows.

1. Make sure everyone has enough money to live – and support extra costs e.g. to do with disability and children.
2. Treat everyone with dignity, respect and trust, and the belief that people should be able to choose for themselves.
3. Be a public service with rights and entitlements.
4. Be clear, simple, user friendly and accessible to all, involving people who have actual experience of the issues, including from all impairment groups, in creating and running the system as a whole.
5. Include access to free advice and support. Make sure people can access support to speak up, be heard or make a complaint.

We now consider these principles using the categories developed in section 3 of security, dignity, deservingness, less eligibility, claimant involvement and affordability. This structure allows us to compare these Expert by Experience generated principles with the existing ‘top-down’ principles that we identified earlier. The ‘bottom-up’ principles are presented alongside the ‘top-down’ principles in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The first principle identified by Experts by Experience in this project relates to security. In section 3.1 we presented principles stemming from the Beveridgean welfare state that social security should smooth income over the life course and protect against unforeseen events. The formulation reached by the Experts by Experience that we should ‘make sure everyone has enough money to live’ is powerful in its simple and accessible meaning. When compared to the contemporary policy examples presented in Table 1, it is notable that these come with caveats: Universal Credit commits to ensuring those *most* in need are provided for, and the Scottish principles aim to *contribute* to reducing poverty. The unequivocal nature of the Experts by Experience principle that *everyone* should have enough money to live stands in contrast.

Any set of principles begs questions of how they translate into actionable proposals. In relation to social security, other formulations of principles have appealed to ideas such as achieving ‘a decent standard of living’, a ‘basic level of income’ or the ‘ability to lead a full life’. Instead, having ‘enough money to live’, and acknowledgement that this differs depending on factors such as disability and household make-up, expresses a clear focus on ensuring adequacy of outcome. That is, that what matters is the achieved standard of living. There is also resonance with what is articulated by the label a ‘Living Wage’ (Ryan, 2004:15-19): payment levels should go beyond sustaining existence and be about ‘living’. The principle also communicates a clear departure from less eligibility, with the rationale focused on standard of living, as opposed to payment levels being primarily conceived of as a way to encourage or discipline people into the labour market.

The second principle places a strong emphasis on dignity. This provides support for Patrick and Simpson’s (2020) emphasis on dignity as a key element of social security. It is notable that dignity is placed alongside respect and trust as the qualities that should guide how people are treated within the social security system. We can in part understand this trio as a response by the Experts by Experience to having experienced indignity, disrespect and mistrust within the current system. Principles relating to dignity are notably absent among the Universal Credit principles, and notable for their

presence in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. Once Experts by Experience become involved in the formulation of principles, dignity and related concepts become of central importance.

Under the category of deservingness, the principles set out by the Experts by Experience sit in clear opposition to the current approach of social security benefits as conditional. As noted above, conditionality regimes have increasingly come to characterise Anglo-Saxon welfare states in recent years, with social security not guaranteed but dependent on the recipient fulfilling various obligations in order to receive it (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). The idea, captured in the third principle, that social security is a right, is a dramatically different approach. This aligns with the perspective taken by UN special rapporteur Phillip Alston (UN Human Rights Council – Office of the High Commissioner, 2018), including his argument that a rights-based approach should drive approaches to social security post-pandemic (UN Human Rights Council – Office of the High Commissioner, 2020). Further, we can also see that the category of less eligibility does not apply to the Expert by Experience generated principles, having been present historically and in the Universal Credit principles.

Principles four and five relate to the category of claimant involvement. This again demonstrates the very different approach put forward by the Experts by Experience compared to the Universal Credit principles where claimant involvement does not feature. While appearing closer to the Scottish participatory social security approach, they also go much further. The relevant Social Security (Scotland) Act principles are premised on being designed *with* the people of Scotland. Principles four and five here are not just stating that claimants should be consulted, but should instead be involved in creating and running the system as a whole, conveying a deeper more sustained form of participation. Note also that principles four and five place a heavy emphasis on accessibility, including to advice and support. This commitment recognises that successful claimant involvement can only be achieved if that involvement is actively facilitated in various ways. How that might work in practice goes beyond the scope of this article but debates around deliberative democracy, citizens' juries and a range of other participatory decision-making processes offer helpful starting points (e.g. see Smith and Wales, 2000).

Finally, none of the principles established by the Experts by Experience can be categorised under affordability. Affordability features prominently in the policymaker generated principles considered in section 3. It is not the case that affordability was absent from deliberations among the Experts by Experience. Concerns about how an improved social security system would be paid for and sustained surfaced multiple times in discussions, often with the concern that the public would be wary of proposals if they were not also convinced of their affordability. However, these concerns and discussions did not translate into affordability being conceptualised as an underpinning principle that should guide the content of social security policy. Affordability instead sat in parallel as an issue that might constrain the stated principles and related policies being realised.

6. Discussion and conclusion: principles, content and process

Having presented the Expert by Experience generated principles and compared them to existing ‘top-down’ principles, three further points merit particular emphasis, with the aim of advancing discussion in these areas. These are: 1) the importance of principles as a normative guide for developing social security policy; 2) the content of such principles and in particular, the relationship between the treatment of claimants and benefit levels; and 3) the process by which the principles were arrived at, supporting a holistic approach to social security policy. We consider these points in turn.

We want to make the point that principles, that is, clear value statements that can underpin and guide the content of policy, offer us a way of articulating the direction that social security policy should take. This focus addresses two current problems. The first is that recent progressive policy proposals have lacked underpinning principles. The second is that researchers are often involved in *descriptively* identifying principles. The ‘bottom-up’ approach presented in this article offers a way of generating normative principles to express how the social security system *should* be. The approach we present stands in contrast to the (predominantly) ‘top-down’ approaches that policymakers use to generate principles. The experiential knowledge (McIntosh and Wright, 2019) of Experts by Experience is what gives them the expertise and authority to formulate such principles and offers a possible way forward among the progressive actors identified at the beginning of this article.

We see, in turn, that this alternative approach arrives at principles that are radically different to those put forward in contemporary policy proposals. As shown in section 5, the principles envision a system that ensures adequacy and is delivered with dignity as part of a rights-based, accessible system in which claimants are involved and able to obtain advice if required. In contrast, the Universal Credit principles place a strong emphasis on social security that is conditional and a tool for encouraging or mandating labour market participation. The Social Security Scotland Act principles share more in common with the Expert by Experience generated ones. However, they are less unequivocal in their formulation, and less clearly state what social security is *for*.

What is particularly noteworthy, in terms of expressing what social security is for, is the interplay between the treatment of claimants and the level of benefit payments in the Expert by Experience generated principles. If a key principle underpinning the system is to ensure that those in receipt of social security payments are worse off than those in work (i.e. less eligibility), then this necessitates that payment levels will remain low, particularly in a country like the UK with stagnating wages and low minimum wage levels. A focus on labour market participation also gives rise to a system of conditionality. These features dictate the treatment of claimants, with low payment levels communicating disvalue, and conditionality communicating distrust. The Expert by Experience generated principles express the converse of this, where adequate payment levels go hand in hand with a system that values and trusts claimants.

In turn, the relationship between benefit payment levels and the treatment of claimants relate to the overarching goal of the social security system. The logic of the current system means that reducing the number of claimants becomes a primary measure of success. Low payment levels and conditionality form part of the architecture that ‘incentivise’ a transition away from claiming social security, including through labour market participation. In contrast, the Expert by Experience principles place a heavy

emphasis on adequacy of payment levels, placing the primary focus on standard of living. The goal under the latter set of principles, therefore, becomes the prevention and reduction of poverty, as opposed to the reduction in claimant numbers as under the current system.

Last, in terms of process, it is notable that the work of the Experts by Experience can be described as holistic. Crossley, Garthwaite and Patrick (2019) recently argued that representations of, and responses to, poverty in the UK are becoming increasingly fragmented. We see campaigns against period poverty, food poverty, fuel poverty, funeral poverty and so on. Crossley et al. (ibid.) contend that as the notion of poverty becomes increasingly segmented, wider determinants of the distribution of resources remain unproblematised and the scope to challenge them is therefore diminished. This concern with fragmentation also applies to how people might be categorised or divided up. Concern about poverty might be articulated with reference to one specific demographic such as older people, children, single parents and so on. We see this fragmentation reflected in the structure of civil society, where groups often represent a specific type of person or poverty, meaning that priorities and solutions will differ across organisations. The Experts by Experience avoided considering only one element of need or one demographic group, demonstrating the unifying potential of a bottom-up approach drawing on a range of participants with lived experience. The principles they put forward are instead articulated at a level that engage with the social security system in the round.

To conclude, this article began by noting that Covid-19 has highlighted the inadequacy of UK social security but also the lack of consensus amongst progressive actors as to what would be a better system. A choice was posited between continued (fruitless) debate about the rival merits of different proposals or instead focusing on principles which should underpin social security policy solutions. The outcome of the research project that has been presented demonstrates how a cogent expression of principles does indeed provide a guide and framework for policy design. Rather than debate about technical elements of rival policy proposals, consideration is reframed as to which idea best achieves the principles without undermining others. Principles thereby provide a bridge between ideals and policy solutions, making explicit what should underpin and guide action and practice. The next step in this research agenda is to trace how these principles translate into specific policy recommendations.

The second question we posed was whether a bottom-up approach can be taken to setting out social security principles? The answer to that is an emphatic 'yes'. The avoidance of fragmentation and instead clarity of focus and holistic approach is striking as is the explicit articulation of the relationship between the treatment of claimants and benefit levels as intertwined. We noted above that outcomes from participatory approaches can provide insights and knowledge which might otherwise be absent in social policy debate and upset or challenge taken for granted narratives or characterisations. The bottom-up approach we have discussed did exactly that. It empowered claimants, undoubtedly addressed a 'big question' in society and provides ways forward for policymakers and politicians alike. A bottom-up approach was not only possible but led to a distinct and cogent contribution to the social security policy debate.

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Notes

1. Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/21/marcus-rashford-in-despair-as-mps-reject-free-school-meal-plan>

2. Following the example of Hudson et al. (2016: 215-6), it is noted that the growing usage of the term 'welfare' has itself become part of pejorative political discourse, its usage implying social assistance for the poor, tied to the notion of 'dependency' and (quoting Lister, 2011) "This American import has not only besmirched the concept of welfare, but also displaced the term 'social security'". 'Welfare' may therefore have become the popular descriptor for social protection, mainstreamed in its usage by politicians, the media and, increasingly, academics, but it is a loaded and contested term. To reflect this, Hudson et al. (2016) adopt the convention of placing 'welfare' in inverted commas. The same approach is used in this article.

3. In seeking examples of principles beyond government efforts by civil society organisations are notable mainly for their absence. One exception is the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). CPAG's principles for social security are not reproduced here because of their length (in excess of seven hundred words) but are available at <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/secure-futures-children-and-families#Principles>. CPAG's principles are wide ranging. They begin with three overarching points: preventing and reducing poverty, providing income security and promoting social solidarity, each of which is defined and then supported by twelve principles (four per overarching point). A separate heading on how the social security system should work provides a further six principles, giving a total of eighteen. The breadth of points covered is extensive and includes social security as helping with additional lifetime costs, supporting people to be able to work (in a way that suits their circumstances), recognising the value of unpaid care work, acting as an automatic stabiliser in times of economic uncertainty, redistributing income between individuals and households in a way that reduces inequalities of income and power, promoting social integration, promoting individual autonomy and having the trust and support of the public. Principles under the how the social security system should work heading contain several points similar to the Scottish example. For example, CPAG's principles include the system being simple, flexible and timely, empowering people to make choices rather than prescribing certain behaviour, treating people with dignity, ensuring that the voices of those who use the system and those who work in the system are heard, a meaningful right to independent advice, advocacy and representation, be rights-based and upholds the UK's obligations under human rights law, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. On the core issue of the level of benefits, CPAG's principles are not necessarily definitive. They state that social security should at a minimum provide adequate resources to protect people from poverty and eliminate destitution. But there is then a slightly ambiguous principle

that social security should support people to achieve a decent level of income based on individual needs. Similarly, what recognising unpaid care work means could be more explicit. While many of CPAG's principles raise points of considerable interest in terms of broader understanding of social security (e.g. social solidarity, inequalities of income and power and so on) for the purposes of this article they do not necessarily provide the required bridge between values and guiding action.

4. Our concern is with the principles as set out in the Universal Credit White Paper. Other arguments were made in support of the introduction of Universal Credit, for example that it would provide a much simpler system. Simplicity might potentially be argued to be another underpinning principle but the concept is far from straightforward as discussed in detail by Summers and Young (2020).

5. Note also the interplay between a lack of commitment to poverty alleviation and a work-first approach. It is a common refrain that 'work provides the best route out of poverty' (see for example, Hansard, 2020). However, we have also observed long term wage stagnation and relatively low minimum wage levels, meaning that work does not offer a guaranteed exit from poverty (Cribb et al., 2021). Indeed, in-work poverty has risen in the UK (Bourquin et al., 2019).

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