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# Re-conceptualising Welfare-To-Work for People with Multiple Problems and Needs

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## **Abstract**

One of the acknowledged limitations of British welfare-to-work policies has been that they do not necessarily succeed in assisting people with multiple problems and needs. This article will first examine conflicting aspects of welfare-to-work policies and the conflict between welfare-to-work and the concept of work–life balance, particularly as this may apply to people whose lives are especially difficult. Secondly, the article reports on the general findings of a small-scale qualitative study of the labour market experiences of people with multiple problems and needs and, more particularly, an analysis of the discursive strategies used by participants in the study. The article concludes with some observations about how welfare-to-work might be re-conceptualised to accommodate ontological as well as practical life needs.

The central tenet of the British government's 'welfare-to-work' policy – and the various New Deal initiatives that initially constituted its principal component – is that social inclusion is best achieved through paid employment. The principle upon which it seeks to rebuild the welfare state is 'Work for those who can; security for those who cannot' (DSS, 1998, 1999). One conclusion to be drawn from a recent overview of New Deal evaluation projects has been that many participants – including young and long-term unemployed people, the partners of unemployed people, disabled people and lone parents – have received meaningful individualised assistance, but the system has been 'less good at dealing with people with multiple problems and needs' (Millar, 2000: vi); or with people who, as the Social Security Advisory Committee have put it, 'do not – and may never – fit neatly into the category of "those who can" or "those who can't" work' (2002: 19).

## **A conflict of agendas?**

Comparative analysis of different welfare-to-work or active labour market policies, distinguish between the '*work-first*' model that characterises, for example, many schemes in the United States and the '*human capital*' model that characterises schemes in certain Nordic and continental European countries – most especially, that in France (for example, Peck and Theodore, 2000; Cousins and Michel, 2000; Lodemel and Trickey, 2001; Theodore and Peck, 2001).

Work-first approaches prioritise labour market attachment on the premise that any job is better than none. Human capital approaches prioritise the development of the social attitudes and marketable skills that will equip people to find and retain suitable jobs. The ideological justification for work-first approaches is that they discourage dependency, while promoting responsibility: the object is to 'hassle' welfare recipients into accepting an obligation to work. The approach characteristically entails at least some element of compulsion and the use of sanctions, such as the withdrawal of benefits from claimants who refuse employment or training or who fail to co-operate with benefits administrators. The justification for human capital approaches is that they prevent social exclusion by 'reinserting' those who have been marginalised from the labour market: their object is to help welfare recipients integrate themselves into the labour market, and thereby into society. The approach is characteristically (but not necessarily) predicated on voluntary participation, but may be strongly influenced by a normative commitment to securing individual conformity to social conventions.

The British model represents a compromise. Its welfare-to-work policies have included centrally directed national schemes that place considerable emphasis on moving young and long-term unemployed benefit recipients as rapidly as possible into jobs, but has also offered education options, training schemes and advice aimed at modestly enhancing the employability of various groups of claimants, including lone parents and disabled people. Lodemel and Trickey (2001) suggest that, in common with the Dutch Jobseekers' Employment and Danish activation schemes, the British arrangement epitomises what they call a 'European centralised workfare model'. The original New Deal initiatives have now been rolled out nationally to provide a 'permanent deal' for all working-age benefit recipients through the new Jobcentre Plus (which combines functions once separately performed by the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service). Unless specifically exempted, all claimants are required to attend compulsory 'work-focused' interviews as a condition of receiving benefits, but at this stage only certain groups of claimants will be sanctioned if they refuse to comply with the advice or directions of personal advisers. Caseloads for personal advisers are likely to become large and diverse and there is a likelihood that though Jobcentre Plus may be able to deliver an effective work-first approach for those who are easy to help, it will struggle to deliver the more flexible and intensive human capital approach that is required for those who are hardest to help. People who not only lack jobs, but may also be homeless, have health or substance dependency problems, have literacy or learning difficulties, who have experience of public care or custody and/or who may be disadvantaged because they belong to a minority ethnic group may require the kind of intensive casework support and co-ordinated specialist help that lies beyond the capacity of welfare-to-work initiatives as currently envisaged.

The ambiguity of the British welfare-to-work approach is a reflection of a deeper conflict. By focusing on work for those who can, even when there is an ostensibly benign emphasis on the need to develop human capital, the coincidental emphasis on work-first problematises security for those who are not able – or not yet ready – to work. The metaphor, ‘human *capital*’ – while affording a welcome emphasis on the things that disabled people, for example, *can* do – is narrowly construed in terms of the productive potential of workers as economic actors, rather than the broader human capacities of citizens as social actors. It is to the New Labour government’s credit that welfare-to-work has been concerned not just with promoting labour force participation, but with ‘making it easier for people to combine work and family life’ (for example, Home Office, 1998) and, more generally, enhancing the ‘work–life balance’. However, work–life balance is also narrowly construed – in terms of flexible working arrangements and how to accommodate caring responsibilities to economic imperatives and the business agenda (for example, DTI, 2001 and see Dean, 2002). It is not concerned with ontological needs or people with complex problems. Proponents of the establishment alongside the work ethic of an ethic of care have argued that the concept of work-life balance offers an opportunity to think in much broader terms about the links between people’s lives as interdependent beings on the one hand and the paid and unpaid work they perform on the other (Williams, 2001).

The New Labour project constructs welfare provision, life needs and paid work as if they were discrete and conflicting arenas. Attending to the welfare of people whose lives and relationships may be difficult or complex requires that we make connections between the security needs of those who can’t (for the present) work, and the life needs of those who (at least potentially) can. A more holistic approach might entail identifying not those ‘at risk’ of long-term dependency, but those ‘in need’ of long-term support if indeed they are to be enabled to engage with the labour market.

### **The ‘Different Deal’ study**

With a view to developing a more holistic conception of welfare-to-work the author has undertaken a qualitative study of the labour market experiences of people with multiple problems and needs. The study entailed 50 in-depth interviews, which were conducted in two urban locations, one in the South and one in the North of England. Participants were purposively selected with assistance from locally based voluntary sector projects working with people with multiple problems and needs. Of the 50 participants all had experienced or were experiencing unemployment; 40 had also experienced homelessness; 34 had experienced substance abuse problems; 33 had experience of the criminal justice system; 30 had experienced mental health problems; 22 had experienced physical

ill health (of whom 13 described themselves as disabled); eight acknowledged that they had experience of learning difficulties (although it is possible that this also applied to other participants). Additionally, it emerged that 44 participants had had experience of violent, abusive or disrupted family or personal relationships during the course of their lives. No member of the sample had experienced fewer than three such problems, most had experienced at least five, and some had experienced them all. The sample covered the full 'working age' range, it was evenly distributed between men and women, and almost half the participants were from minority ethnic groups. Three participants were refugees, single young men who had fled from political turmoil in their countries of origin and were now seeking to find homes and make a living in England: although their histories were quite different from other participants, many of their experiences since arriving in the UK did bear comparison with others in the sample.

The object of the study was not to evaluate New Deal initiatives, but to explore the context in which welfare-to-work policies in general are being extended. A fuller descriptive account of the study is provided elsewhere (Dean and MacNeill, 2002; Dean *et al.*, 2003). However, the nature of the sample was such that all the participants had complex, often chaotic, biographies, and the stories they told were often harrowing. Although some had had no employment since leaving school, most had a history of intermittent or temporary jobs. A few had had spells of stable employment in the past, albeit with interruptions, and a couple had been in stable employment until quite recently. Most participants had experience of applying for a great many jobs and much of the employment they had undertaken had been part-time, temporary or seasonal, or had entailed unsociable hours. By and large participants embraced a desire – often a strong desire – to access the labour market, though many were also conscious of the need to address their other problems and needs, including and particularly needs for housing, medical treatment or health care. At the time of their interviews about half the sample were receiving jobseeker's allowance and about a quarter were receiving disability or incapacity related benefits.

In the course of their lives, participants seemed generally to have found the help of relatives or friends and/or interventions by voluntary sector agencies to have been more useful than those by statutory agencies. Not all members of the sample had been eligible for participation in New Deal initiatives and some who had been were not necessarily aware whether the processes they had experienced fell under the New Deal rubric (cf. Bryson *et al.*, 2000). None the less, nearly half the sample had recollections of participating in New Deal schemes and several others appeared to have experienced interventions under the New Deal or under previous activation initiatives. Participants had generally found Employment Service personal advisers reasonably supportive, but were critical of the limited choice and quality of the options made available (cf. Legard *et al.*, 1998). Such limitations were accentuated because the system lacked the flexibility needed to

cope with unsettled life-styles and/or the fragile health status that participants had been or were now experiencing.

Initial findings tended to confirm observations and recommendations made in other studies that have pointed to the need for personalised, intensive and flexible forms of support for people with multiple problems and needs (for example, Lakey *et al.*, 2001) albeit that our study included older as well as younger people. Additionally, however, two major issues stood out. First, it was clear that the question of labour market attachment for our participants could not be addressed without also acknowledging that their multiple problems and needs were intimately bound up with the nature of the familial and social milieus that had shaped their lives. Most striking was that the lives of three-quarters of the participants in our study had been touched – sometimes repeatedly – by violence, whether at home during their childhood, at school, in the course of adult relationships, or in some other way. Their fundamental sense of identity and well-being had been quite literally assaulted. Second, the current policy regime is consistent with, if not actually conducive to, a culture of self-blame that could be so far as our participants were concerned potentially corrosive. It was striking that many participants already blamed themselves for the failures of their families, for educational failures and for their failure in the labour market. However, we do not need to characterise these participants as blameless victims (some indeed were guilty of quite serious crimes) to acknowledge that many of the factors that had objectively shaped their lives had been beyond their control. Allowing or encouraging them to blame themselves was de-motivating and counterproductive. It made it more difficult for them to attain their goals, and often it constrained their ability to assess whether they were physically, mentally and emotionally ready to work.

### **Discursive strategies**

To explore these issues an additional analysis of the discursive data was undertaken. The assumption informing that analysis was that holistic policy intervention should be about more than addressing social problems. It should also be about promoting well-being, where ‘well-being refers to the totality of an individual’s social relations’ (Hoggett, 2000: 145). I have already suggested that the intensely difficult social relations experienced by participants in our study could threaten the integrity of what Taylor (1998) might define as their ‘ontological identity’. We are concerned here, not only with the multiple categorical identities (such as, gender, ethnicity, age and class) by which individuals are defined, but with that aspect of identity – the sense of a coherent and unified ‘self’ – that is the prerequisite of well-being.

In this context, the two principal approaches to welfare-to-work that are outlined above bear upon individual identity in rather different ways. My premise

is that the human capital approach to welfare-to-work may on the one hand reinforce in the individual notions of self-blame, while on the other inducing compliance to a managerialist notion of 'personal development'. The work-first approach to welfare-to work may on the one hand compound the sense of dislocation that individuals experience, while on the other induce compliance with a Hobbesian view of social relations.

Analysis of the interview transcripts disclosed the presence of two principal discursive repertoires or strategies upon which most participants seemed to some extent to draw, albeit to varying degrees: a *self-development* strategy, that was implicitly commensurate with notions of personal progress and/or managerial doctrines of personal development; and a *self-assertion* strategy born out of an intolerance of authority and a drive for personal survival. There were also two marginal discursive strategies, drawn upon partially by only a few participants: a religious destiny strategy by which participants entrusted their future to God (or some spiritual force); and a philosophical resistance strategy by which participants would pit their own alternative view of the world against the established orthodoxy. In identifying these strategies, the research was seeking to examine the ways in which the participants made sense of their experiences and justified their own actions. The insights obtained may be challenged as the *post hoc* interpretations of the researcher, but they provide none the less a persuasive, empirically founded and systematic account of a kind that cannot be achieved by purely quantitative methods. It is important to record that there was little, if any, discernible pattern to the distribution of these discursive strategies by age, gender or ethnicity.

### **Self-development and the rise of the CV era**

The self-development strategy is best understood as a discursive repertoire in which the individual situates herself in relation to some normatively conceived process of progression. It represented the dominant discourse in at least 16 of our 50 interviews and a contributory discourse in all but a few of the others. It is a discourse defined by several features. It may call, for example, on metaphorical allusions to being on, or returning to, 'the right path' or 'the right track'; or it may call on assumptions about stages that are inherent to the life-cycle. It is precisely this kind of discourse that made it possible for participants to blame themselves for the things that had gone wrong in their lives and to attribute adversity to personal failure.

The unpredictability of the lives they had led could mean they were subject to irresolvable conflicts as to what indeed might constitute the 'right path'. A young woman who had been subject to physical abuse during her childhood and had recently attempted suicide after being 'chucked out' from home by her mother explained how 'with my mum I could never win. It's like when I had a job she used to like shout at me, "You need to go back to college"', but when she was

at college her mother would shout 'You need to get yourself a job'. Asked how this made her feel, the young woman replied 'I feel crap sometimes'. For some participants the 'right path' extended to the very nature of their life-style and identity. One young man with a chaotic housing and employment history said he couldn't be happy 'Because my life's not complete': he explained that the place he was living in – a house in multiple occupation that he shared with alcoholics – 'it's not, it is not who I am, that place really, just doesn't represent me at all'.

Several participants spoke of the dangers of being led astray by their dysfunctional families or by peer group pressures. A self-consciously dignified middle-aged man with a history of learning difficulties, homelessness and intermittent employment claimed he had come from what he called a 'disoriented' family and confided that 'whether it's your family or whatever, it depends on how they've been brought up and what company they hang round with. They hang around with a lot of people that are no good they're gonna think the way they're growing up is the right way of doing things.' A young man who had been sleeping rough, shop-lifting and taking drugs explained how at school, 'I got in with a bad group and I was just fighting all the time, not doing my work, just sitting there being, just joking about and then when I left school I felt guilty for it, 'cos I wanted to get better grades.'

The ideology of choice and opportunity had a central purchase within this discourse. The same young man, who had just been evicted from a hostel for sniffing solvents, frankly admitted 'it was my own fault because it was my choice whether I took it or not'. Some participants spoke of having 'squandered' opportunities or else would adopt entrepreneurial language, speaking for example about 'where the opportunities lie and how to go about getting them 'cos there's always like a, a procedure to get in the right opportunities and there's always, you gotta look for the breaks really.'

Perhaps the clearest implication of the self-development discourse is illustrated by the frequency with which participants mentioned the preparation and use of CVs (curriculum vitae). One participant, laughing as he did so, offered the comment – 'this is the rising of the CV era'. It has indeed been argued that 'the CV is one of the great confessional texts of our age, matching the diary, the psychoanalytical session and the religious confession in significance. The CV makes overt the confessional process involved in all job applications.' (Metcalfe, 1992: 620) The production of a CV requires a person to present herself in a particular way; to submit to a code that defines her achievements or deficiencies in relation to an imposed set of values; and to subordinate aspects of her own biography in anticipation of the judgements that others will make.

No fewer than 20 of the participants in our sample made at least some reference to 'their' CV. One of the services widely offered by agencies that provide support to job seekers is assistance with, or facilities for, the production of a CV. Some participants valued this and a few were clearly enthusiastic about the



process of producing a CV and the function the CV itself can perform. Thinking about their CV enabled them to 'start looking at the real issues' or to put their 'mindset onto the goals'. Preparing a CV required them to come to terms with their past and, for example, to demonstrate the extent of their rehabilitation and how they had 'moved on'. Possessing a CV and internalising its structure and presentation nourished their self-confidence and afforded them a sense of empowerment when facing employers or officialdom. The CV defined them as a competitive individual and as a potentially valuable commodity within the labour market. For these enthusiasts a certain mythology attached to the CV: the right CV, properly structured and nuanced and employing the correct terminology not only gives its subject a competitive advantage in the labour market, it redefines and invigorates the subject's identity.

Other participants, however, were more sceptical about the meaning of their CVs. Some were troubled by some of the unresolved issues that framing a CV could force them to confront. One young man with significant health problems and a criminal record was evidently uncomfortable about having in his CV to gloss over a difficult period in his life when 'I didn't do nothing . . . because I was like – basically I was in a stupid place, I couldn't get my mind working where to go'. Conversely, others were openly cynical, saying, for example, 'you gotta blag your CV': they acknowledged doing more than re-framing their past, but deliberately lying about it in order to get ahead in the competition for jobs. The prevalence of the CV as an administrative device had for some participants come almost to signify what was wrong with, and what was unfair about, the labour market. Asking job applicants for a CV enables employers to stall an applicant's enquiry or reject her without any face-to-face encounter. Alternatively, the CV becomes the very instrument of unscrupulous competition, compounding the inequalities that flow from what some regard as a spurious or capricious qualifications system:

I know people that do that now. They have a CV what's telling false lies and then they're getting employed. So it's all about paperwork. . . . You can get two people . . . one 'unskilled' and one that's very 'skilled'. The one unskilled will *do* the job better than the one's skilled. But you – he's got the paperwork now: it's that they're looking for.

The new symbolic and cultural significance of the CV was by no means lost on some of our older participants. One middle-aged man with a chaotic employment history recalled:

I mean I always knew I could work in hotels. . . . You don't need a CV or anything. . . . But all of a sudden the sort of jobs – because of what I was doing, because I was older – I'd had not really [any chance]. . . . The younger people . . . they can come in here and get something. . . . They don't know what to do with me.

To contemplate one's CV can as easily be self-destructive as self-affirming. The self-development strategy can as easily disempower as empower. To aspire

to self-development is to acknowledge past inadequacies and the possibility of future failure.

### **Self-assertion and the problem of 'attitude'**

The self-assertion strategy is best understood as a discursive repertoire in which the individual demands unconditional respect for her own identity and person. It represented the dominant discourse in at least 13 of our 50 interviews and a contributory discourse in many others. It is, once again, a discourse defined by several features. A central element, however, relates to expressions of anger or impatience with authority; with resentment or boredom. It is the discourse that made it possible for participants to ignore the advice or dictates of authority and to attempt to make their own way in the world.

Some participants exhibited a pronounced anti-authoritarianism. This had often emerged at school. One young man, who had experienced recurrent violence at home, explained:

before, [at] primary school, I loved going to school, because it meant I got out of the family environment. Then I started realising that I didn't like school because I've, I was trying to fight the system, and every time they would try and do something I would verbally abuse them or chuck a couple of chairs or something, because I don't like authority, I hate authority figures.

A middle-aged man with a criminal record and a history of alcoholism, illustrated how his resentment of authority became a fundamental impediment at work: 'I never wanted to become a manager. As soon as I became a manager I always left. . . . Because I used to hate management. I was always anti- sort of . . . maybe management to me was like my dad: sort of authoritarianism.'

Hatred – sometimes extreme hatred – could also be expressed by participants towards other figures of authority, such as the police or, in several instances, social services departments. Some of the strongest expressions of anger were voiced against social work authorities that had either taken participants from their parents or taken the participants' children away from them. Participants would sometimes acknowledge that anger itself was their problem: 'one of my main problems is my anger'; 'cos I'm just the type of person I don't really keep my temper really good'.

Attitudes to benefits administrators and/or the Employment Service could reflect the extent to which participants felt demeaned by authority ('they treat you like muck') or to which they did not trust the authorities. One of the refugees in the sample was so mistrustful of British officialdom that he would forego entitlements rather than engage further than was minimally required. None the less participants were often prepared to acknowledge, for example, that Employment Service advisers were trying to help, but this could in itself offend participants' sense of their own identity and desire for independence. The young

man already mentioned above (who had thrown chairs at school) exemplified the self-assertion strategy in the following exchanges:

*Respondent:* . . . but I really find it demeaning, going like [to the Job Centre]. I go there for a job search like, but that's about it. . . . They're quite helpful, but they – I would much prefer if they actually gave me the 'phone number of the people and let me ring [employers] myself . . . than ring them their selves because I can put myself across a lot better than they do. They say you know, [*mimicking*] 'I've got a young man with me . . .' [*laughter*]. . . . I see them as, again, a go-between, another authority that's trying to do things for me, and I would like to see myself, I'm not always, but I would like to see myself as highly independent. . . .

[Later – referring to contact with a local homelessness project] . . . just another people telling me where I'm going wrong; I know where I'm going wrong. . . . It's all self-preservation, you've got to get out there and do it yourself.

*Interviewer:* There's nothing that [the government] could do to help you do that?

*Respondent:* Not really. Not unless they had a course of making you wilful and strong, I don't think so.

*Interviewer:* You're not too keen on accepting help?

*Respondent:* No. I've had people govern my life, like.

Some participants struggled to reconcile their anger towards the establishment with their need for help. One woman with learning difficulties, now in her thirties, had had her children taken into local authority 'care' when she had been 'unable to cope' as a teenage lone parent: she now acknowledged that she needed help but remained resentful that over the years 'people were telling me what to do with my money and that, and I don't like it'.

Another source of resentment featuring within self-assertion discourse was boredom. Given the often terrifyingly eventful lives that our participants had led, the daily routines of education and employment could seem at best unexciting and at worst another form of oppression. One young and supremely disaffected woman when asked why she had never stuck at any of the several jobs she had briefly held candidly admitted, 'Sometimes it's my fault 'cos I'm just lazy and I can't be bothered to get up in the morning, but sometimes it's 'cos it's just long and boring and I have to do the same thing all day long'. A young man, banished from home by his adoptive parents, had turned from office work to drug dealing: 'To tell the truth, I did get bored of office work. It's like office work is nine to five every day and you know, I thought, you know, it was a bit boring and I wanted something different.' One young woman who had attempted suicide at the age of 13, had been in and out of local authority 'care' during her childhood, explained how she had found at school that 'I don't like people trying to learn me stuff. I don't like it. I don't know why – it's like I don't like listening to 'em. When they're trying to explain it to you, it just drives me mad.'

This same young woman accounted for her criminal record and her heavy drinking in terms of a need for 'summat to do'. A similarly street-wise young

woman acknowledged that shop-lifting was ‘exciting’, while one man summed it up in these terms:

I mean I always tried to get work and tried to do things but in the meantime I sort of still kept on thieving ’cos I sort of loved that ghetto sort of life . . . plenty of money . . . adrenaline rush, the feeling of no-one being able to tell me what to do and if I wanted something I could go and get it and sort of work the reputation, you know.

Of the participants who had engaged in substance abuse, some had been attempting, as one of them put it, ‘to shut out the past and ignore the future’, but others acknowledged that they had been seeking diversion or excitement.

While the identities forged through the self-assertion strategy could be founded upon such primal emotions as anger and boredom, participants were seldom without any self-awareness or insight. Often the discursive repertoire of self-assertion collided with that of self-development, resulting once again in a capacity for self-blame. Participants would acknowledge, for example, that ‘the most unhelpful person [in my life] has been me . . . if I’ve gone into a situation with a bad attitude, then I’ve really made a bed for myself.’ The confidence and self-belief necessary to sustain the self-assertion strategy was more than some could sustain. One young man, a drug user and rough sleeper, who was perceptibly emotionally distressed at the time of the interview, told us:

’cos people have told me so many bad things about myself [and] I started to believe it but some things I’m just too confident about. I think yeah I’m good looking. I look in the mirror every morning, yeah that’s me, that’s me, I’m happy. But I know my attitude stinks.

The ‘attitude’ that constitutes the self-assertion strategy may represent an inherent obstacle to self-development: it can become the very ‘problem’ against which policy interventions are aimed.

There is a paradox here. The human capital approach both requires and nourishes a self-development strategy, but it must necessarily suppress a self-assertion strategy. The work-first approach on the other hand is indifferent or even inimical to a self-development strategy, while fostering – albeit indirectly – a self-assertion strategy. In so far that British welfare-to-work policies make only a limited contribution to human capital development and err in many instances in favour of the promotion of work-first, one of its effects is to deter rather than reach out to those who may need most help if they are to engage effectively with the labour market. The approach may fit with, or speak to, the self-assertiveness of individuals who need none the less to be protected from experiences they are not best equipped to deal with. Several of our participants indicated that they preferred ‘do-it-yourself’ solutions to those administered by the Job Centre. Some participants would ‘sign off’ (i.e. withdraw their claims to benefit) rather than go through the New Deal process. Others simply avoided confrontation with statutory or officially sponsored services, preferring to find casual jobs on

their own. There was some evidence that participants were engaged illegally in the informal economy, but a great deal more evidence that they were engaged in the outer peripheries of the formal labour market.

The labour market histories of several participants were staggering in their complexity: sometimes they simply could not be documented, either because there was not enough time to do so during a single interview, or because participants themselves simply could not remember all the short-term jobs they might once have done. The prevailing assumption is that in a global economy the effect of economic growth is the proliferation of unskilled jobs in a peripheral service-sector labour market (Jordan, 1998), while the price of sustaining economic competitiveness and sound public finance is wage inequality (Iverson and Wren, 1998). Quantitative data sources for Britain have amply demonstrated the existence of a low pay–no pay cycle (Stewart, 1999): low paid jobs tend not to be stepping stones to higher paid jobs, but to intermittent spells of unemployment and further low paid jobs. Several participants illustrated precisely this. Their chaotic personal lives and housing histories in one sense qualified them for the most peripheral end of a highly flexible labour market.

This is the reality that the self-assertion strategy acknowledges. One 18 year old young man in spite of experiences of homelessness and youth custody had already had four different jobs (including, in this instance, two in the informal economy): he complained that the Job Centre ‘push a bit too much, ’cos they’re always writing you letters saying have you found work yet and stuff like that’; but he also described how, when it was necessary, he would find work himself by looking in the papers or speaking to relatives in the building trade. Similarly, the man who said he felt ‘degraded’ by his experiences in the Job Centre (see above) explained that, ‘I’d rather go and, I don’t know, do some cleaning than go and sign on.’ The self-assertion strategy, unlike the self-development strategy, does not require the person to draw the kernel of their self-identity from the nature of the transitory and menial jobs they might perform. Nor indeed does it matter if jobs are abandoned should they prove too uncongenial: two of the women in our sample had walked out of jobs – one in a supermarket, the other with a contract cleaner – at the point at which they had been directed to clean the toilets.

Much obviously depends on local labour market conditions, but in both interview locations participants claimed that there were jobs to be had. One man, whose criminal convictions made it difficult to obtain legitimate employment asserted:

you will always find work in (town). It might be a very mundane, very boring job, but it will get you going till you can find something better. . . . There’s always something there . . . I could go out and get a job and start tomorrow if I’m prepared to work for £5 an hour, possibly in a meat factory, possibly in a warehouse stacking boxes on top of each other, but if I wanna earn meself some money I can go out and earn it.

The rub, however, is that much of this employment is to be accessed, not through the Job Centre, but through private agencies, of which the same man said:

The employment agencies tend to be . . . I tend to stay away from them if I can, they use, 'cos they just use people, they just, and all they wanna do is get you in and out. How many can you get in a minibus? Oh, can we get an extra two on tonight's shift? Yeah. Go on sling 'em in. Get the money in, do you know what I mean? I can't stand that. They shouldn't be there.

Whether it is the intention of a work-first approach that people should be driven into this kind of employment, or whether this reflects the limitations of an ineffectual human capital approach, the reality is that several participants, in spite of their complex problems, were being exposed to predatory and exploitative labour market practices.

The point about the self-assertion strategy, however, is that it does not demand protection. Explicit within the discourse were some quite intolerant and sometimes right-wing attitudes. One woman in her thirties, who had once been a New Age Traveller, observed, 'I think there's a lot of, a victim kind of personalities wafting around the place and I think people lean on the Government too much'. Another man aired his prejudices in the following terms: 'You have to be in a certain class if you need help [from the government] I think . . . like you're mad or homosexual.' Our participants were not immune to anti-welfare prejudices and mythology and the self-assertion strategy is to be understood as an essentially individualistic, anti-welfare discourse.

### **Marginal strategies: spiritual and secular conviction**

Though the self-development and self-assertion strategies were dominant, there were others. Although these were marginal in the sense that they did not dominate within the sample as a whole, they were of more than incidental significance to those who did engage with them.

Religious background constituted an element of the personal identity of several participants, but there were seven for whom religious belief had a strategic significance that was at least as important as the secular doctrines implicit, for example, in the self-development strategy. The certainty offered by religious or spiritual conviction provided a counterbalance to an otherwise fatalistic acceptance of the vicissitudes of eventful and difficult lives. For some, religion was an established part of their thinking. One young Muslim, who had refrained from suicide because of the tenets of Islam asserted that 'If I ask something from him [God] I know I'll get it or I won't get it. That's all I need to know. If I get it, I know I got it because I asked him. Yeah?' A middle-aged Catholic woman told us 'every time I go to bed at night, I always say a few prayers, and I always pray to God for forgiveness for what I've done'. Another Catholic woman, who felt her regular attendance at church meant she didn't 'fit in with today's modern

society’, explained that, ‘I spoke to the priest and the priest said he’d pray for me that I’ll get a permanent job.’

Other participants had undergone a recent religious conversion. One man in his thirties claimed that as a result of a Christian experience it could be seen that ‘this life of this young man suddenly, you know, [whose gone] through drugs, prison, crime and all, all the sorts of ungodliness – and then all of a sudden he’s changed.’ A young woman who claimed to have become a Born Again Christian said this had given her ‘Confidence. It makes me feel happy.’ An African-Caribbean man, who had tentatively explored various religions, including Rastafarianism, appeared to be looking for a way in which he could mend his ways *without* submitting to any Earthly authority: he claimed his life had started changing since he discovered that:

I fear God, still. I just want to get totally right away, because I can still get a lot of money by doing nasty things as well. Because a lot of my friends are like . . . doing all sorts of things, like . . . all dodgy. . . . But when I do a lot of sly things as well, like – when I go and beat up people, you get me? Because it’s only now I know that what goes around comes around as well so that’s why I don’t like doing bad things because I know. You get me? I know it will come back on me anyway. You think someone else’s people can’t boss me around really, so I look at that as well.

The desire to be beyond the power of Earthly professional or political intervention seemed to inform the beliefs of other participants. One woman in her thirties, who was extremely hostile to all authority (and to the interviewer for this study), had been treated for mental health problems. She insisted she didn’t have a psychiatric illness, but that God spoke to her and all she needed to do to sort out her life and get the kind of job she wanted and was to pray to God: ‘God’ll sort that out.’

Other participants exhibited convictions of a more secular nature; a form of philosophical resistance to authority that was more radical and reflexive than that entailed in the self-assertion strategy. Flashes of such discourse appeared in several interviews, but three participants stood out in terms of the supreme self-confidence they seemed to have in their own wisdom and understanding. Given the circumstances in which these participants found themselves, it would be easy to dismiss such discourse as either arrogance or as delusional, but it could none the less be understood as constituting a certain strategy for dealing with those circumstances. Two of these participants claimed to be gifted in certain ways, but that the realisation of their abilities had been thwarted not merely by the nature of experiences (both had suffered devastatingly disruptive family relationships), but by the incompetence of the authorities. Both had been diagnosed as dyslexic, albeit, they claimed, too late to undo the ‘damage’ done by an inadequate education. One, a young woman of 20, asserted that she could read when she was 2, to have written novels when she was 9, to have artistic skills

far in advance of her peers, to be able to ‘do anything’ with a computer. She was contemptuous of the educational establishments and employers that refused to recognise her abilities and of the benefits authorities that didn’t understand the systems they were supposed to operate. The other dyslexic participant, a man in his thirties, believed he should sue the government for its neglect: ‘people like me, we should think about taking them to court’.

However, this kind of resistance could also take on a less litigious form. A man now in middle-age and sleeping rough, who had left home at the age of 13 and lived his life in and out of prison, hustling, squatting and organising raves, exhibited a certain world-weary street-wisdom. On the one hand he was an inveterate conspiracy theorist and believed the Blair government would eventually bring in the army to control the people. On the other he clearly believed he could subvert the system when it impinged on him: when he was called in by the Job Centre to participate in the New Deal, he claimed that ‘I just played – totally – I just played games with them all the time’. This kind of resistance is ‘philosophical’ in the sense that its proponents can deploy their own reflexive critique of the system in order to assert or, at best, preserve their sense of identity.

The conclusion to emerge is that those people who are the targets of welfare-to-work policies are likely to draw upon a range of discursive strategies in order to sustain their sense of ontological identity. And for those with multiple problems and needs this can be an especially difficult struggle.

### **Conclusion: towards a life-first approach**

There are several implications that flow from this. First, there are general policy issues:

- We have seen that those who are driven towards a self-development strategy may be unready – physically, mentally or emotionally – to sustain paid employment. The normative pressures to which they are subject may fuel a debilitating sense of self-blame that serves to compound the overwhelming nature of their unresolved problems. The services available to people with multiple problems and needs generally assume that clients are ‘job-ready’ or else services are only equipped to deal with those who are ‘job-ready’ (cf. Klee *et al.*, 2002). While the new Jobcentre Plus regime will be able to ‘defer’ or ‘waive’ the participation of those who are not job-ready, there is a danger that this will allow people with multiple problems and needs to ‘drift off’ without support (SSAC, 2002: 22). It is imperative that policy makers should begin to articulate and to promote a more sensitive and flexible definition of ‘job-readiness’.
- We have seen that those who are driven towards a self-assertion strategy may sidestep official intervention and engage directly with peripheral labour markets that are exploitative and predatory. Whereas the ‘decommodifying’



(Esping-Andersen, 1990) capacity of the classic welfare state provided some element of protection for vulnerable workers against the excesses of an unregulated labour market, Britain's New Labour government has declared a commitment to having 'the most lightly regulated labour market of any leading economy in the world' (DTI, 1998: 1). Rhetoric notwithstanding, the New Labour government has strengthened certain aspects of employment protection. However, measures that are calculated – whether by encouragement or deterrence – to promote labour market attachment must arguably be accompanied by labour market regulation that will more commensurately prevent unscrupulous employers and employment agencies from preying upon and exacerbating the insecurities of people with multiple problems and needs. While welfare-to-work may encourage people to be resourceful, it is necessary to ensure that they are also adequately protected.

- The participants in our study have illustrated, I contend, that what is required is neither a human capital nor a work-first approach, but a *life-first* approach. The concept of work–life balance has not yet been applied to people, such as those in our study, none of whom were in stable personal relationships and most of whom had experienced traumatic family relationships in the course of their lives. If it were possible to expand our understanding of what might be meant by work–life balance, then a life-first approach would prioritise the life needs of the individual above any obligation to work. In so doing it would recognise, none the less, that the need to work – though not necessarily to engage in paid employment – tends to be integral to human identity and should be supported. Work would need to be conceived of as more than the dull compulsion of labour market participation to which life must be accommodated, but as a part of life. For people with multiple problems and needs this must mean that any engagement with the labour market should be on terms that will allow them to resolve their problems and meet their needs. While a life-first approach might be construed as being consistent with the demands of those who advocate basic income provision and the right to say 'no' to a job one has not chosen (for example, Standing, 2002), it is also consistent with an approach that demands a right to work while calling upon existing policy discourses about work–life balance (cf. Dean *et al.*, forthcoming).

Secondly, it is possible to point to some more specific issues:

- People may need time to achieve job-readiness. The New Deals provided only a limited window of time in which participants could obtain training or work experience. Several of our participants, having obtained places on training courses or placements that they found interesting or worthwhile, failed to complete their programmes – sometimes for health reasons, sometimes because they had to move out of the area where the course or placement was running, sometimes because their volatile temperaments had led to spats with

trainers or supervisors. It was never possible for them to finish or repeat the programme. Schemes may need to be more accommodating and to give people the time they need to obtain training and experience.

- People may need space to deal with their problems and address their needs. Few, if any, of the participants in our study could be described as ideal employees. Some were precariously housed (or not housed at all), some had serious health problems (in one case a potentially terminal illness), some needed treatment for substance abuse or mental health problems, some were angry, misanthropic and unmalleable. If they were to be employed at all they would have to be permitted a margin of tolerance – or ‘space’ – that would allow them to work through their practical and personal troubles. Some form of protection could be offered for a few of our participants by the more effective enforcement of provisions within the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. But our findings confirmed the extent to which employers hesitate to employ people with physical impairments or mental health problems (cf. Bunt *et al.*, 2001) and actively discriminate against people with unspent criminal convictions (cf. Metcalf *et al.*, 2001). With many of our participants it was hard to see how employers could be persuaded to allow them the kind of latitude they would require without guaranteed support and some measure of compensation. There is evidence from North America that the availability of continuing casework support and, more particularly, financial incentives in the form of earnings supplements may improve employers’ willingness to retain employees with multiple problems and needs (Kellard *et al.*, 2002) and that British employers may be interested in such measures (Bunt *et al.*, 2001). To stand any chance of succeeding, however, these measures would need to be intensively resourced and extend possibly for years, rather than months.
- People with multiple problems and needs require continuing support, but it is not easy to identify what kind of support. There are already in Britain a variety of local projects that assist homeless people with employment problems, innovative supported employment projects for disabled people – often co-ordinated by local authority social services departments, a national scheme that supports ex-offenders and the government itself is committed to experimenting, for example, with the ‘progress2work’ pilot projects for people with substance misuse problems. There is evidence that job-coaching, mentoring and in-work casework support (for example for ‘disaffected’ young people, disabled people, ex-offenders and substance abusers) may have some effect (Kellard *et al.*, 2002). Another potential model is that of ‘key workers’ such as those employed in projects that work with rough sleepers and extremely marginalised social groups (for example, Fitzpatrick and Kennedy, 2000). Our findings suggest that in designing support services, the following criteria are important: first, support needs to be long-term and sustained; second, the workers who provide the service would need to be both ‘street-wise’ and highly

knowledgeable about the full-range of services and entitlements available and about the specific vagaries of local labour markets; third, though they would need to liaise closely with statutory agencies and employers, it is probably preferable that such workers should be independently based in adequately funded voluntary sector agencies; fourth, engagement with such support would have to be voluntary; but, finally, the nature of the service provided would have to be flexible and able sensitively to adapt itself to the very particular problems and needs of its clientele.

Most importantly, it is necessary to re-conceptualise welfare-to-work. In the light of the inherent limitations of both work-first and human capital models, a life-first model – premised on an extended understanding of work-life balance – represents a viable conceptual alternative. In the case of people with multiple problems and needs this would require that the British government should temper its abhorrence of long-term benefit dependency in order that it may deliver the kind of long-term support that a life-first approach to welfare-to-work might entail.

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