

Qualitative research stresses the social context of welfare reform, but this complexity has been ignored by policy makers.

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8/29/2013

*Welfare reform and the implementation of Universal Credit has been met with a high degree of scepticism, not least because previous research highlights the many flaws in the system. **Fran Bennett** looks at why, in this case, it has been hard to influence policy makers in terms of shaping the government's proposals. While the usual pitfalls of pre-conceived government objectives and assumptions are clearly at work, there may also be the problem of qualitative findings in general not carrying much weight.*



The UK government is introducing radical welfare reform, in the shape of universal credit. This merges most means-tested benefits and tax credits for those in and out of work into one lump sum, paid once a month – a 'super means-tested benefit'. Some extra income from any wages earned will be ignored, with the rest reducing universal credit by 65p for each (net) pound.

The government's main aims are to simplify benefits, and to make all work pay. But in addition, it prioritises getting one person in the household into work; universal credit will be jointly claimed, owned and assessed; and it will all be paid into one account each month (chosen by the couple). These changes have implications for gender relations, particularly for couples ([see briefings](#)). In a [newly published paper](#), Sirin Sung and I drew on the findings from our qualitative research with low-/moderate-income couples as part of the ESRC-funded [Gender Equality Network](#) to demonstrate these implications.



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We found, for example, that despite loyalty to coupledness, expressed frequently by men and women, access to independent income was valued particularly by women (some of whom also said it gave them more 'say' at home); yet this will be made harder to achieve for many 'second earners' in couples, who will see less benefit from their earnings under universal credit than now. We found that 'joint' choices made by couples often had differential impacts on men and women, and joint accounts do not always guarantee equal access by both partners; yet couples may 'choose' to have universal credit paid into a joint account. We confirmed that money is not neutral, but instead has social meanings: its labelling, who it 'belongs' to, and who is the payee may be important in how it is used and who benefits from it; yet universal credit will be one undifferentiated lump sum, paid monthly. We found women more likely to be responsible for the day to day household budget, and for spending on the children; yet there will be no guarantee that money for children (except child benefit) will be paid to the 'main carer', and the monthly budgeting envisaged does not fit with the realities of many women's lives in low-income families.

Qualitative research such as this could be seen as of particular relevance to the welfare reform proposals, as such research can explore attitudes, behaviours and motivations, and the government aims to bring about cultural and behavioural change through universal credit. However, we argue in our article that it has been hard to make headway by using findings from our own qualitative research and that of others to influence policy makers in terms of shaping the government's proposals; and we speculate about why this might be so.

First, we know from the substantial body of work on so-called evidence-based policy making that multiple factors in

practice affect the thrust and form of social policies – indeed, many would argue that this should be the case – and that it is more accurate to talk about ‘evidence-informed’ policy making. Secondly, in this particular case, the government (whatever the internal dissent within the coalition) had a very clear idea about its objectives and the way to achieve them; the Secretary of State responsible had brought the blueprint with him into government. It could be argued that the policy framing stage was therefore relatively closed to outsiders. And the reforms were being brought forward at a time when there was less room for manoeuvre, because of the government’s decisions about how to deal with the financial crisis and the longer-term administrative imperative of cutting costs in a mass means-tested scheme.

But the government also appeared to have its own assumptions about how families work, and about the desirable relationship between government and families. It argued that different households handle their money differently, so it is impossible to draw out general rules; and that governments should not intervene in how families do this (which is how the government saw giving money for children to the ‘main carer’, for example). In practice, however, there are common (often gendered) patterns in how low-income couples deal with money, as revealed in our qualitative research and that of others; and paying the whole of universal credit into one account may well affect how it is handled and spent, given the ‘social meanings’ of money discussed above.

In addition, a recent study of civil servants from the Department for Work and Pensions involved in policy making found that some said they tend to ‘filter’ evidence by methodology, with quantitative findings carrying much greater weight. In relation to universal credit, economic modelling carried out for the Centre for Social Justice (the think tank that pioneered the prototype for universal credit) highlighting the importance of ‘participation tax rates’ – broadly, the incentive to work at all – appears to have been highly influential with the government. And the way in which public projections for the impact of universal credit – unusually for government modelling – included its behavioural effects on the expected number of claimants who would get jobs, and the take-up rate for benefits, is also likely to have been a key factor in recommending it to policy makers.

But the ways in which those jobs and benefits are taken up (or not) in messy ‘real time’ also need to be considered. The fact that household units are made up of (gendered) individuals, with much in common but also with their own needs and interests, should be taken on board. And the way money is not neutral, but imbued with different ‘social meanings’ in different contexts, should be factored in. Qualitative research can reveal this richer and more complex picture. But perhaps if you have an image of families that is rooted in the past, and you also want to achieve cultural and behavioural change for the future, you do not tend to value highly detailed information about the ways in which low-income couples live their lives in the present.

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