



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

SPERI British Political Economy Brief No. 8

# Inequality and class prejudice in an age of austerity.

---

speri.

Sheffield Political Economy  
Research Institute.

This Brief looks at changing attitudes towards unemployed people in Britain in the context of austerity. Drawing from a European Research Council investigation into perceptions of poverty and unemployment conducted in Leeds, the research identifies a growing intolerance towards the unemployed in the aftermath of Britain's economic downturn. The research also highlights a worrying decline in empathy for the disabled and other disadvantaged social groups who were perceived to receive unmerited support from the state. The research suggests that, after a period of sustained economic stagnation, unemployment and poverty are increasingly seen as a personal failing, rather than as the result of entrenched socio-economic inequalities – a perception which is likely to legitimise further policies of welfare retrenchment in the future.

## Background

- A number of commentators – most notably Owen Jones – have identified and critiqued the growing use of the word 'chav' in Britain, arguing that it signifies a profound prejudice against poorer groups and 'the working class'.
- These analyses have often focused on the use of the term by the media and by politicians, rather than on the way these discourses are used in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.
- However, it is important to identify how dominant discourses about workless households and welfare recipients can filter down into the everyday understandings of citizens in a variety of social contexts.
- In the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 and the 'Great Recession', British workers have experienced an unprecedented decline in their living standards. This has been compounded by declining incomes and a rise in short-term contracts and insecurity in the workplace.
- These factors have all contributed to a greater sense of economic uncertainty amongst low and middle income households in Britain.
- In this context, the Coalition government has pursued a policy of swingeing welfare cuts. Key policies have included the so-called 'bedroom tax' which disproportionately affects disabled people, the newly introduced welfare cap of £23,000, and the indexing of many working-age benefits below the rate of inflation.
- As a result of government policy and popular misconceptions around welfare, there is a danger that misplaced fears and prejudices relating to welfare claimants may well become more pronounced. This presents a threat to social cohesion and potentially legitimises policies which might exacerbate, rather than alleviate, social inequality.

## Evidence

- This research identifies contemporary attitudes to the unemployed by drawing on a series of case-studies conducted in Leeds, in Northern England. The evidence presented here is based on 90 interviews which were conducted with participants from a variety of different social classes and ethnic backgrounds.
- One theme which emerged across the interviews was the sense that unemployment was caused by individuals' personal failings, rather than by structural problems in the economy.
- Many respondents claimed that work was plentiful and that unemployment was therefore a lifestyle choice, rather than an imposition. One respondent, for example, stated that 'you can walk into any job centre or any website and there are jobs there [sic] it's just that these people choose not to take the job... I don't think anybody can sit there and say I can't find work'. This perception meant that respondents were more likely to blame individuals for their worklessness. This in turn encouraged negative attitudes towards welfare provision.

- Some respondents also questioned the existence of poverty in Britain and attributed low living standards to personal mistakes and moral deficiencies of individuals. For example, one respondent stated: *'I don't think there is poverty in Britain, really. I think a lot of it is self-made... I think a lot of it is self-inflicted.'*
- Respondents who were employed in low-paid work also reported that their living standards had been significantly squeezed as a result of the recession. When they spoke of welfare recipients, they were often animated by a sense of injustice, as they felt that working did not necessarily make them better off, relative to a life 'on benefits'.
- The research also identified a worrying hostility and intolerance towards disabled people. For example, one respondent exclaimed: *'I have got a bit of prejudice when it comes to mental disability... they shouldn't be absolved from responsibility... I think it's like everything, as long as people don't get preferential treatment.'*
- The research also suggests that attitudes to immigration are not homogeneous across working and middle class communities. Respondents repeatedly made a distinction between immigrants who they perceived as coming to Britain to work, against those who they perceived as coming to Britain to claim benefits. Many recognised the contribution that immigrants who worked in Britain make to the economy, whilst expressing hostility to immigrants who were reliant on benefits.
- Many respondents referred negatively to those elements of the 'white working class' who did not work and suggested that this segment of society was in some way morally deficient.
- The research therefore demonstrated that there has been a re-alignment and fusion of different identities – whether rooted in class, race, ethnicity or gender – through which communities make moral assessments regarding the issue of welfare and worklessness.

## Analysis

- Negative attitudes to welfare provision were identified across a variety of social positions and were not exclusively reserved to individuals from either working class or middle class backgrounds.
- Rather, a moralised sense of poverty as the result of individual choice, rather than structural disadvantage and inequality, was in evidence across the majority of respondents.
- In particular, middle class respondents tended to identify and condemn 'chav' culture so as to validate and re-affirm their own superior social position. Working class respondents were more likely to identify and condemn 'chav' culture and worklessness in order to distinguish themselves from it.
- One of the key themes which emerged from the interviews was that poverty is a matter of choice and not of bad luck, social disadvantage or structural inequality. This was characteristically accompanied by a lack of empathy amongst the respondents for disadvantaged groups – including the physically disabled and mentally ill – who were dependent upon benefit receipt for their livelihoods.
- The attitudes and value systems identified in the research echoed the Victorian distinction between a deserving (industrious, disciplined) and undeserving (lazy, undisciplined, criminal) poor.
- This value system cut across ethnic and racial lines. This suggests that attitudes to unemployment are increasingly understood through the lens of 'individual responsibility', rather than through an ethnic/racial lens.
- Interestingly, the research suggests that, by understanding poverty as 'deserved' due to personal and/or moral shortcomings, many respondents were effectively seeking to re-assure themselves that they would not fall victim to unemployment themselves.

- 
- The Coalition government's welfare policies are in part a response to the kind of popular prejudices identified in the research. However, government rhetoric on welfare 'scroungers' and the 'undeserving poor' is likely to reinforce these attitudes – focusing blame for poverty on individuals, rather than on wider structural problems in Britain's increasingly low-pay, low-skill economy.
  - The research suggests that, in a context of austerity, social attitudes are becoming more individualised and less compassionate. In particular, a sense of a duty of care to our most vulnerable citizens – including the physically disabled and mentally ill – is steadily being eroded.

## Conclusion

The current period of austerity in Britain appears to be facilitating the re-emergence of traditional distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, associated with the Victorian era. These categories are not solely propagated by the media and politicians, but rather inform and resonate with the experiences of ordinary citizens in their everyday lives. As such, many people now attribute unemployment and poverty to the failings of individuals, rather than to structural weaknesses in the British economy and entrenched socio-economic inequalities. Worryingly, negative views around welfare were also extended to the physically disabled and mentally ill. The research therefore suggests that, in the aftermath of the recession, there has been a decline in empathy and understanding for some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in our society. The danger is that, by focusing on the moral failings or cultural worthlessness of individuals, we can obscure the real causes of inequality and socio-economic exclusion. This can potentially divide communities with shared political interests and might corrode compassion for those in society most in need of support.



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

October 2014

Research by Professor Gill Valentine

Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute  
Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences  
219 Portobello  
Sheffield S1 4DP

T: +44 (0)114 222 8346  
E: [speri@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:speri@sheffield.ac.uk)