'Helping Workless Families': Cultural Poverty and the Family in Austerity and Anti-Welfare Discourse

Abstract

The notion of 'cultural poverty' has a long history in the UK. The argument that there is something *culturally distinct* about poor, working-class, and/or benefit recipient populations that sets them apart from the rest of society, and moreover, that these cultures are self-perpetuating, has tended to be deployed in the service of a politics that blames the cultures of the poor for poverty and economic disadvantage. The most recent resurgence of such arguments can be found in the austerity and anti-welfare agendas of the Coalition Government (2010-15) and the post-Coalition Conservative Government(s) (2015–). This article examines the 2017 Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policy paper 'Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families' that sets out the Government's vision for tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage, and argues, firstly, that the policy paper reproduces the cultural poverty argument. Secondly, I argue that the paper positions the family as the location in which the cultures of the poor and disadvantaged are reproduced, and consequently also as the proper site for government action to interrupt the cycle of reproduction, highlighting familial gender dynamics, reproductive arrangements, and parenting practices as key aspects of the discursive framing of poverty within austerity and anti-welfare politics.

Introduction

The notion that material poverty and economic disadvantage are cultural in nature, or have a cultural origin, has a long history in the UK. It is reflected, for example, in the long-standing notion of a separation between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and in the historical English 'Poor Laws' (Pemberton *et al.* 2016; MacDonald *et al.* 2014a; Wiggan 2012); in Eugenic thinking and particularly the notion of degeneracy (Gillies 2012; MacDonald *et al.* 2014a); as well as in the 1940s Beveridge Report that provided the blueprint for the welfare state in the UK (Pearson and Elson 2015; Wiggan 2012). The argument that there is something *culturally distinct* about poor, working-class, and/or benefit recipient populations that sets them apart from the rest of society, and moreover, that these cultures are self-perpetuating (Gillies 2012), has tended to be deployed in the service of a politics that blames the *cultures* of the poor for poverty and economic disadvantage, rather than highlighting the wider context of economic and social conditions and policy, such as labour market arrangements, as potential causes. In these explanations, poverty and unemployment are reframed as forms of individual failure and dysfunctional social behaviour, and the distinct behavioural patterns and value systems of poor populations, in turn, positioned as that which distinguishes them from the rest of society (Pemberton *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, social welfare itself tends to be recast as one of the causes of such dysfunction (Wiggan 2012). Both the most recent manifestation of such a politics, and the most recent resurgence of cultural poverty arguments, can be found in the austerity and anti-welfare agendas of the Coalition Government of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties (2010-15), and the post-Coalition Conservative Government(s) (2015–).

As a key example from the most recent wave of cultural poverty arguments, in 2015 the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) put forward a proposal to change the statutory indicators used to measure and monitor child poverty in the UK (HC Deb 1 July 2015: c1504-06) – from the internationally used relative income and other economic indicators, to ones measuring children's educational attainment and the prevalence of worklessness in households with children instead. The department had originally consulted on the proposal in 2012 (The Child Poverty Unit 2012), but it had been buried following the consultation, only to resurface again in 2015. The argument presented by the then Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith was that as

poverty was not financial *in origin*, it made more sense to measure the things that *caused* poverty, rather than poverty itself (HC Deb 1 July 2015: c1505). While the proposal did not become law in its original format, as the House of Lords voted in favour of an amendment that retained the statutory requirement for the government to continue reporting on the relative and absolute household income indicators, the child poverty *targets* set in the Child Poverty Act 2010 by the previous Labour Government were changed. Consequently, since the implementation of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, the UK government has had a duty to monitor and report on the number of children living in 'workless households' and 'long-term workless households', as well as on the educational attainment of all children and 'disadvantaged children' at the end of Key Stage 4.

Not long after the 2015 proposal and the resulting changes to the Child Poverty Act, a not dissimilar line of argument was put forward in the 2017 DWP policy paper 'Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families' that sets out the Government's vision for 'tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage' (2017a: 3). Although the document does not seek to replace the statutory child poverty indicators like the 2012 consultation and 2015 proposal did, the story it tells about poverty and disadvantage in the UK is strikingly similar to that found in the earlier documents. This policy paper, and in particular the story it tells about the nature and causes of, and the appropriate remedies for, poverty and disadvantage, is the target of this article. In what follows, I argue, firstly, that the policy paper reproduces the cultural poverty argument and, thus, fits squarely within the long line of such arguments in the UK, as well as perhaps represents an intensification of the discursive framing of poverty as cultural in nature or origin. Secondly, I argue that the paper positions the family as the location in which the cultures of poverty are reproduced, and consequently also as the proper site for government action to interrupt the cycle of reproduction. The discursive centering of the family as both the locus of the perpetuation of poverty and the target of government intervention, in turn, in significant ways highlights familial gender dynamics, reproductive arrangements, and parenting practices as key aspects of the discursive framing of poverty within austerity and anti-welfare politics.

This article begins with a short introductory section highlighting the political and discursive context in which the policy paper was published, as well as making the case for the importance of continued scholarly focus on examining the cultural, political, and discursive conditions in which anti-welfare politics are advanced. The following three sections each focus on a particular aspect of the discursive framing of (child) poverty presented in the policy paper, beginning with its focus on worklessness, and especially the relationship between worklessness and poverty, followed by its emphasis on the family as the site where poverty is reproduced, and ending with its framing of poverty as cultural.

Framing poverty in austerity and anti-welfare politics

The UK's turn towards a politics of austerity, first initiated by the Coalition Government of the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat parties in 2010, has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. The various social welfare cuts and 'reforms', implemented by the successive UK Governments since 2010, have continued to dominate the national political arena – despite the dwindling salience of their original rationale as a solution to the global financial crisis of 2007-8.[1] The social welfare cuts implemented by the Coalition Government, specifically, were both particularly deep in their nature and notably hasty in their execution, with Peter Taylor-Gooby arguing that they were 'the deepest and most precipitate cuts ever made in social provision' (2013: viii). At least partially as a result of the various cuts and 'reforms', the UK has come to experience exceedingly high levels of social and economic inequality, with women and people with disabilities particularly severely affected (Briant *et al.* 2013; Fawcett Society 2012; Pearson and Elson 2015).

As well as responding to the *policies* associated with austerity and anti-welfarism in the UK, scholarship has focused on the political and discursive context that has enabled mass consent to be procured for their implementation. While the use of 'austerity' itself by politicians and policy-makers as a discursive framework for welfare retrenchment has diminished in the last few years, the cultural and discursive mechanisms behind the anti-welfare and austerity agendas of the Coalition and Conservative Governments

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[1] For in-depth analyses of the different responses to the 2007-8 financial crisis in the UK and elsewhere, see Perrons and Plomien (2013), Clarke and Newman (2012), and Grimshaw and Rubery (2012).

warrant on-going attention, not in the least due to the continuation of the politics of cuts and 'reforms' to social welfare, housing, and other areas of state provision. As Wiggan has argued, policy-makers often 'expend considerable energy maintaining or challenging the discursive framing of policy issues' (2012: 384), and therefore paying attention to these discursive framings is a useful way of unpacking the wider ideological and political preferences of both individual politicians and governments. The ideological and policy preferences of particular administrations can, moreover, often be found embedded in policy papers, specifically. While unemployment, social welfare, and poverty continue to be salient and contested issues in the area of public policy, examining and untangling the discursive and political conditions in which they are discussed and produced as key issues, thus, remains an important task for scholars.

Poverty, and particularly child poverty, provides one key discursive battleground in which not just policy discourses but also the ideological and political preferences of governments are constructed, reinforced, and contested. Child poverty was a key issue for the Labour administration that preceded the Coalition Government, and the Child Poverty Act that set the target of eradicating child poverty from the UK by 2020 was the administration's flagship policy in the area. The developments outlined in the introduction to this article, by which the Coalition Government attempted to change the child poverty indicators that the UK government is statutorily obliged to report on (and succeeded in changing the official child poverty targets), illustrate well the continued attempt to shift the discursive framing around child poverty – away from material and economic understandings and towards individual and cultural ones. The policy paper that is the subject of this article continues this discursive battle, and apart from sustaining the focus on poverty as an individual and cultural affliction, it pushes the discursive framing of (child) poverty towards the family as the key site in and through which poverty is reproduced from one generation to the next. Thus, as is argued below, the paper transforms familial dynamics, arrangements, and practices into a scene in which the government can and should intervene in, in order to stop the reproduction of poverty, disadvantage, and worklessness.

The policy paper 'Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families' was published in April 2017, and is the first in a series of initiatives 'aimed at tackling the problems that

prevent families from getting on with life' (DWP 2017b). With a foreword by Damian Green, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the paper first outlines the 'case for change', mostly focusing on worklessness, followed by the 'next steps for action' – a series of policies and reforms aiming to 'help parents overcome their problems, reduce parental conflict, and have the opportunity to give their children the stability that work affords' (DWP 2017a: 15). The final substantial section titled 'Tracking progress' suggests a set of national indicators 'to track progress in tackling the disadvantages that affect families' and children's outcomes' (*ibid.*: 22). The indicators, which include the aforementioned statutory indicators in the areas of worklessness and educational attainment, are not dissimilar to the ones suggested in the 2015 proposal, thus reproducing its overwhelming focus on parental *behaviours and practices*, instead of the material conditions in which poor families live.[2] In what follows I examine the policy paper specifically in regards to the story it tells about (child) poverty in the UK, and about the role of the family in both reproducing and preventing it.

Worklessness – and poverty?

The political and societal context in which the policy paper intervenes is described as a work in progress, a kind of society-in-the-making: 'We have started to rebalance our society in favour of ordinary working people, but now need to do more to turn Britain into a Great Meritocracy where success is defined by work and talent, not birth or circumstance' (*ibid.*: 3). In order to realise this vision of a 'fairer Britain where success is based on merit, not privilege, and where everyone has the chance to go as far as their talents and hard work will take them' (*ibid.*), the Government now needs to 'develop a new approach to tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage' (*ibid.*). A new approach is needed because, while the Government has already taken many steps towards creating a 'fairer Britain' or a 'fairer society' (*ibid.*: 3, 7, 14, 21), this vision cannot be fully realised as long as some families remain stuck in a 'cycle of disadvantage' (*ibid.*: 8). 'Worklessness' is, in turn, highlighted as the key aspect of the cycle of disadvantage, and presented as the main target of government intervention in the paper: 'We want to help

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[2] The indicators published in the policy paper include measures on parental conflict, poor parental mental health, parental drug and alcohol dependency, problem debt, children living in temporary accommodation, early years development, and youth unemployment, together with the statutory indicators mentioned earlier.

workless families with complex problems so that they too can take advantage of the opportunities in a fairer Britain' (*ibid.*: 3).

The phrase 'for some families, worklessness, not employment, is the norm' (*ibid.*: 3, 4, 7), repeated three times in the policy paper, is succinct, but telling of the understanding of worklessness employed in the paper. In contrasting 'worklessness' – not unemployment – with 'employment', a tidy dichotomy is created between the two, suggestive of a society neatly divided into those who work and those who do not, regardless of the reason. As Nick Bailey has suggested, this dichotomising ignores and masks 'the high levels of movement between categories and the high level of benefits flowing to those in work without any apparent moral decline' (2016: 83). Moreover, and as argued by many others (Connor 2010; Pantazis 2016; Wiggan 2012), the discourse of worklessness has tended to be associated with a normative aim – the commodification of marginalised groups previously not considered under the rubric of 'unemployment', such as people with disabilities and lone parents. Here, 'workless', thus, functions as an expansion of the category 'unemployed', broadened to include anyone not in paid employment, whether actively seeking work or not.

In addition to the discursive work done by the category 'workless' itself, the phrase 'for some families, worklessness, not employment, is the norm' suggests that both worklessness and its counterpart, paid employment, can become *norms*. Another dichotomy is, thus, created between those for whom having a paid job is the norm, and those for whom worklessness is the norm, again suggestive of a population neatly divided into these two categories. Since worklessness can become normative and, thus, be intergenerationally reproduced in the family (as will be discussed in more detail later on), the policy paper's approach to tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage is designed to specifically intervene in the reproduction of the norm of worklessness. Traditional methods for dealing with poverty are considered insufficient in the paper precisely because worklessness is considered normative – and thus reproducible: 'Because the root causes are not financial, our approach goes beyond the safety net our welfare system provides' (DWP 2017a: 3).

Contrary to the earlier consultation and proposal, which explicitly set out to change the child poverty indicators, the indicators proposed in the 2017 policy paper – although strikingly similar to those in the earlier proposal – are meant to 'to track progress in tackling the *disadvantages* that affect families' and children's lives' (*ibid.*: 5, emphasis mine). Material or economic poverty is, in fact, only referenced in the policy paper fleetingly, and only in terms of its direct relationship to work and worklessness: in addition to discussing the need for 'a new approach to tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage', the paper only mentions poverty one other time when it claims that 'work is the best route out of poverty' (*ibid.*: 8). This claim has been refuted by many (Bailey 2016; Jensen 2012; Main and Bradshaw 2016) and, in actuality, a significant proportion of both children and adults living in poverty in the UK come from families where at least one adult is in paid employment. Overall then, material or economic poverty appears in the policy paper as a kind of afterthought – a negative consequence of worklessness that does not merit attention in its own right.

Instead of poverty, it is the ambiguous 'disadvantage' that is framed as a target of government intervention in the paper. 'Disadvantage' is repeated throughout the document as an important issue warranting attention, and it is clear that worklessness is the most significant disadvantage that needs to be addressed. In the section 'Parental worklessness and its overlap with other disadvantages', problem debt, poor health, homelessness, low qualifications, and 'other barriers and disadvantages' are presented as both 'causes and effects of worklessness' (DWP 2017a: 9). Each separate section on these various other disadvantages highlights their connection – and potential causal relationship to – worklessness as a key problem: for example, in relation to 'Poor parental mental health', the paper states that 'there is strong evidence that a person's employment status directly impacts their psychological wellbeing' (*ibid.*: 10). In presenting evidence for the link – and suggesting a causal one – between these 'disadvantages' and being in paid employment, the paper does not consider the possibility that they may, in fact, be as, or even more, clearly connected to material poverty, rather than just to worklessness. Nor does it consider the influence of other factors on the mental wellbeing of unemployed or poor individuals, such as stigma (Valentine and Harris 2014), shame (Jo 2016), or stress (Coleman 2016; Main and Bradshaw 2016).

Apart from its attempt to establish causality between worklessness and other issues, the document presents these 'other barriers and disadvantages' as having harmful consequences for children and their development: for example, in relation to homelessness and temporary housing it states that:

> insecure housing is strongly associated with poor child health and mental health problems [--]. Children who spend prolonged periods in temporary accommodation are more likely to demonstrate problems such as anxiety and depression than other children (DWP 2017a: 13).

The paper's discussion of issues such as homelessness, poor physical and mental health, problem debt, and substance abuse also lacks any mention of universally accessible governmental services designed to address them, although the increases in and intensification of some of these issues in recent years can, in fact, be attributed to the Coalition and Conservative Governments' cuts to local authority funding. For example the increase from 2011 to 2016 in the number of households with dependent children living in temporary accommodation quoted in the paper (*ibid.*) is, at least in significant part, a consequence of the recent changes to Local Housing Allowance rates and the introduction of the Benefit Cap (Rugg 2016). Similarly, while concern is expressed for children who have to change schools because of their families moving into temporary accommodation (DWP 2017a: 13), the practice of local authorities moving social housing clients far away from their homes – particularly from London into areas of the UK with lower housing costs – is rapidly increasing because of the combined effect of various governmental cuts and reforms.[3] Overall, the discursive effect of highlighting the harm these issues can cause to children, while at the same time not mentioning any potential structural or economic causes for – or, indeed, the effect of government policies on – them, is a highly individualising framing of not only the issues themselves, but also the potential solutions.

Generally, the term 'disadvantage' frequently appears in the policy paper together with the phrase 'being held back' – 'many workless families are held back by disadvantages'

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[3] See, for example, Halpin (2014) and The Independent (2015).

(*ibid.*: 7) – or in relation to the notion that workless families are disadvantaged because of the barriers they face *to work*, such as in the following excerpt:

> Without help, families who experience major barriers to work will struggle to overcome the problems they face. Parents will struggle to move back to work and stabilise their lives, children will struggle at school and into the future (*ibid.*: 14).

Consequently, 'disadvantage' seems mostly to denote disadvantage *in the labour market*. The policy paper, thus, presents poverty in the UK – in the to-be 'Great Meritocracy' (*ibid.*: 3) – as something that occurs because individuals are unable to *overcome their worklessness* and 'take advantage of the opportunities in a fairer Britain' (*ibid.*), rather than as related to changes in labour markets or other structural economic factors. This shift in framing from the earlier proposal, in which worklessness was presented as a *cause* of poverty, to the 2017 paper, in which it is presented as the *effect* of (various) disadvantage(s), works not only to move the discursive focus away from material or economic poverty, but also to further individualise the paper's framing of disadvantage, thus adding to the growing individualisation of poverty discourses in recent years (Connor 2010; Jensen 2012; Main and Bradshaw 2016; Valentine and Harris 2014; Wiggan 2012).

The policy paper's deployment of the discourse of worklessness, thus, not only firmly establishes worklessness – instead of material or economic poverty – as the key issue that needs to be tackled in order to help families take advantage of the opportunities on offer in a 'fairer Britain', but it also functions to individualise the causes of both poverty and worklessness. Furthermore, the use of the term 'worklessness' in the paper centres on its status as a *norm* (instead of a social or economic situation or condition) and, thus, highlights its reproducible nature. In the next section I discuss the policy paper's centring of the family both as the location of the reproduction of the norm of worklessness, and as the key target of government intervention to halt the cycle of reproduction.

The family in focus

The family is clearly positioned as the key site of the argument put forward in the policy paper – from the paper's subtitle – 'Helping Workless Families' – onwards. It is in the

family that the paper suggests the problems associated with worklessness and 'disadvantage' originate and are reproduced, as well as where the paper proposes to focus its intervention to tackle these issues. As the quote 'children in workless households are considerably more likely to repeat the poorer outcomes of their parents – an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage' (DWP 2017a: 8) highlights, the poor outcomes of parents can be reproduced in the family. This quote in the policy paper's section titled 'Parental worklessness and its impact on children', furthermore, suggests that it is worklessness in particular, together with the 'other disadvantages', that can be passed on to children via the family and its dynamics. However, as I argue below, the family is not just presented as the *location* in which these processes take place, but its internal dynamics, arrangements, and practices – particularly parenting – are, furthermore, centred as the locus of the problems the paper aims to tackle.

The section 'Parental worklessness and its overlap with other disadvantages' includes a separate subsection on the topic 'Parental conflict.' This section, despite its name, makes broad connections between parental conflict, parental separation, worklessness, and the abovementioned 'intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.' The section begins with the statement: 'for most of us, family is the bedrock of our lives' (*ibid.*: 9), which separates those for whom family provides a strong basis to build one's life on, from those who lack such a basis. The commonsensical tone of the sentence adds further weight to the suggestion that a distinct group of people exists in the UK who cannot rely on family as the bedrock of their lives. In the policy paper, it is 'acute parental conflict' that disturbs the family and, importantly, specifically children who suffer as a consequence. The paper states, 'children growing up with parents who have good-quality relationships (whether they are together or separated), tend to enjoy a wider range of better future outcomes' (*ibid.*), be it in terms of mental or physical health or educational attainment. While 'good-quality relationships' are not explicitly defined in the policy paper, it is clear from the section's discussion that such relationships, at the very least, do not involve 'acute parental conflict.'

While the policy paper goes to great lengths to assure the reader that 'relationship quality' is more important than whether parents stay together, there is, nonetheless, a

strong focus on two-parent families, or at least a strong preference for parenting to be undertaken by two parents – and, indeed, preferably by a mother and a father:

> There are benefits to having a good-quality relationship between the child and the non-resident parent (most commonly the father) for children. [--] We know that a child who has a supportive and close relationship with their father is more likely to do well in adulthood regardless of whether or not they live with him when they are growing up [--] (*ibid.*: 10).

The policy paper's approach to parenting, thus, reproduces heteronormative assumptions about what good parenting looks like, as illustrated, for example, by the above quote and the following sentence: 'We understand the importance of both mothers and fathers to children's future outcomes' (*ibid.*: 20). Although single mothers or parents are not explicitly mentioned in the policy paper, its emphasis on the importance of *fathering* – rather than just on the (at least ostensibly) gender-neutral *parenting* – does, however, highlight single mothering, and single parenting in general, as undesirable parenting arrangements. This emphasis, while seemingly about the important role fathers can and should play in their children's lives, furthermore, appears in a stark light given the increasing stigmatisation of lone parents, and particularly of single mothers who receive benefits, in the wider political and discursive context surrounding social welfare in recent years (Allen and Taylor 2012; De Benedictis 2012; Dermott and Pomati 2016; Gillies 2012; Jensen 2014). As many have highlighted (Jensen and Tyler 2015; Tyler 2008), the reproductive and parenting choices of single mothers – and especially those who are also young and/or receive benefits – have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, although at the same time the vilification of single mothers has a long history in UK politics (Carabine 2001).

'Parental conflict' is presented in entirely genderless terms in the policy paper, with worklessness highlighted as the only potential cause of such conflict: 'Our research has shown that workless families are considerably more likely to experience problems with their relationships. Relationship distress is almost three times as prevalent in workless couple-parent families compared to when both parents are working' (DWP 2017a: 9). Again, 'relationship distress' is not explicitly defined in the paper, and potential other causes for such distress, such as material poverty, stress, or gendered divisions of

labour, are not considered. Similarly, the paper states that worklessness *destabilises* the family: 'Worklessness damages lives. Not only does it reduce family income, it can also damage families' resilience, health and stability, and thus undermine child development' (*ibid.*: 7), and 'the strain caused by worklessness intensifies other problems, undermines relationships and destabilises the family' (*ibid.*: 3). While 'family instability' is, similarly to 'relationship distress', not explicitly defined, in the wider context of the paper that emphasises the importance of co-parenting, and particularly that of fathering, it is easy to associate family instability not just with parental conflict, but also with parenting arrangements that do not fit the traditional model of a mother and father parenting together. Thus, the paper's discussion of the ills of 'unstable' families adds to its general underlying assumptions about what 'good' parenting looks like – with a strong preference for a mother-father parent couple.

The paper's discussion of relationship distress continues with the following: 'Parents experiencing relationship distress are more likely to separate – and children whose parents have recently separated are eight times more likely to live in a workless family than those whose parents have stayed together' (*ibid.*). Thus, a curiously circular argument is created in the paper, whereby worklessness is presented as a potential cause of 'relationship distress', which, in turn, is presented as a factor leading to parental separation, which can, again, lead to worklessness. In line with the individualising nature of the paper's presentation of parental conflict and separation – similarly to its discussion of worklessness, as highlighted above – a suggested solution for breaking this cycle is to resolve the conflict, rather than for example to provide additional support for single parents, such as more affordable childcare, or to focus on preventing material poverty. This discussion of parental separation as one of the potential causes of worklessness, moreover, further undermines the paper's claim that parental 'relationship quality' is more important than whether parents stay together.

As with worklessness, parental conflict is presented in the policy paper as harmful for children's development:

> Exposure to parental conflict can have long-term negative impacts on children's early emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social development [--].Persistent and unresolved

parental conflict is likely to drain the emotional resources required to parent adequately, putting children at greater risk of emotional and social problems (*ibid.*: 10).

The linking of parenting practices, and particularly parental conflict, with children's emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social development places the responsibility for what happens to children later on in their lives squarely on the shoulders of parents, instead of considering the impact of schooling, the wider social environment, or, again, for instance that of material poverty. Tracey Jensen, for example, has argued that 'the relationship between children, parents and institutions has become increasingly politicised, with "good parenting" positioned in public, policy and popular culture as the principle means for securing good outcomes for children' (2012: 1). This increasing 'parental determinism' (Gillies 2012) in policy-making has the consequence of diverting attention away from material poverty, as well as from the – material and other – resources needed to parent 'well' (Jensen 2012). Moreover, the paper's inclusion of harm to children's *cognitive* development as one of the potential consequences of parental conflict echoes the recent trend of turning to brain science for evidence in social policy more widely, and in particular when arguing for the importance of early intervention policies. As Rosalind Edwards and her colleagues have highlighted, the notion that children's cognitive and neurological development is intrinsically linked to the kind of parenting they receive, especially during a 'crucial ante- and post-natal window of "1001 days"' (2015: 171) functions as a useful trope to push policy into a particular direction, rather than necessarily reflecting the scientific evidence for such a link.

The policy paper's centring of the family as the locus of its proposed interventions into 'cycles of disadvantage', thus, positions parents as the key actors in preventing the future reproduction of the cycle. Parenting, and particularly conflict-free parenting, is highlighted as the indispensable foundation for children's development. Furthermore, the paper positions what it views as 'good parenting' at some distance from single parenting and/or mothering, clearly marking two-parent families – or at least parenting by a mother and a father – as the preferred environment for raising children. The paper, thus, not only centres the family as the proper location in which poverty and

worklessness can and should be tackled, but also highlights familial dynamics, arrangements, and practices, especially parenting, as key to any such efforts.

Tackling cultural poverty

As the previous two sections have established, the policy paper squares in on the family as the focal point of governmental efforts to tackle poverty and disadvantage, while at the same time framing them as secondary issues to worklessness. The norm of worklessness can be reproduced in the family, both in itself, but also through the reproduction of the various other disadvantages discussed in the policy paper, such as parental conflict, mental and physical ill health, substance abuse, low educational qualifications, and homelessness. Since all of these other disadvantages are both causes and effects of worklessness, the policy paper positions any efforts to tackle the other issues also as potential remedies to worklessness, and vice versa. Breaking this 'intergenerational cycle of disadvantage' (DWP 2017a: 8), through the efforts to tackle worklessness, is the aim of the policy solutions suggested in the paper.

The paper explicitly states that 'children in workless households are considerably more likely to repeat the poorer outcomes of their parents' (*ibid.*). This repetition is not just about the repetition of material poverty, but specifically about the repetition of norms. It is argued that 'this Government wants the parents of these children to have the chance to earn a living, and to overcome the issues that hold them back' (*ibid.*: 4), but in order for this to be possible, children need to be able to 'benefit from the stability and good example of working parents' (*ibid.*: 3). This wording suggests that just *seeing* one's parents not engage in paid employment can disadvantage children. The paper, thus, gives the impression that not witnessing one's parents going to work can in itself lead to children absorbing the norm of worklessness from their parents, and consequently to the reproduction of the 'cycle of disadvantage' – a claim that is at least partially refuted by a study conducted by Robert MacDonald and his colleagues (2014a, 2014b) that found no evidence of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness' in the UK. Here poverty is, again, pushed further away from the paper's discursive framing, since a key aim seems to be that children live in families where parents are in paid employment, regardless of their material conditions, and not necessarily that children do not live in poverty.

The 'intergenerational cycle of disadvantage' referred to in the paper does not, however, just reflect the reproduction of worklessness from one generation to the next. The 'other disadvantages' discussed in the paper are part of the cycle: due to their causal relationship to worklessness, they form a part of the process by which children can acquire or absorb worklessness and disadvantage from their parents. The policy paper, furthermore, explicitly refers to the 'long-term impact on children's development' (DWP 2017a: 7) of issues such as poor parental mental health and parental conflict, thus highlighting that these issues can also be reflected in children's later lives, specifically in relation to their development and educational attainment. What is being reproduced here is not about material conditions, but instead about norms, values, and behavioural patterns – in short, about *culture*. The paper, thus, also implicitly suggests that poor parents have the *choice* to pass the *right* kind of cultural values and norms on to their children – instead of the dysfunctional norms and values associated with worklessness, low quality parental relationships, single parenting, and so on. Parents – their norms and values, the 'quality' of their relationship, whether they are together or not and, perhaps most importantly, whether they have paid jobs or not – are, thus, positioned at the very centre of the paper's approach to poverty and disadvantage, both discursively and in policy terms.

The policy paper's discussion of the proposed solutions to the issues it raises is peppered with references to the importance of paid employment for family stability and children's futures. The emphasis in the section 'Next steps for action' overall is on helping families tackle the issues they face that 'prevent [them] from getting back on their feet' (*ibid.*), so that they are able to 'take advantage of the opportunities in a fairer Britain' (*ibid.*); and 'move into work and go as far as their talents and hard work will take them' (*ibid.*). Here the focus is squarely on *work* as the best, and perhaps only, route out of the many disadvantages discussed earlier in the paper and, ultimately, out of the 'cycle of disadvantage.' The paper's list of suggested solutions includes the next phase of the controversial Troubled Families Programme[4], which will be used to

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[4] The programme has been criticised widely, with a wide variety of problems identified, ranging from the selection of participants (Hayden and Jenkins 2014; Levitas 2012) to the overall success of the programme (Hayden and Jenkins 2014).

'encourage a greater emphasis on tackling worklessness and issues associated with it' (*ibid.*: 16). Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants will have access to a Personal Support Package, 'which is tailored to people's individual needs to support them on a journey towards employment' (*ibid.*: 15). Similarly, 'Jobcentre Plus will go further to reflect the importance of work with all relevant local partners' and 'to support the renewed focus on worklessness [of Troubled Families]' (*ibid.*: 18), and employment is also to be placed 'at the centre of the recovery journey where work is assessed to be a good option as part of therapeutic treatment for [an] individual' experiencing drug or alcohol dependency (*ibid.*: 19). While the paper's earlier discussion of the 'other disadvantages' perhaps suggested that these issues are important to tackle in and of themselves, here the focus is almost exclusively on getting people back to work.

In addition to the overwhelming emphasis on work, the paper, importantly, also strongly prioritises *targeted* help for workless families over universal support services. The emphasis is on help that enables *particular* problem, or 'troubled', families to get back to work, which will, according to the framework offered in the policy paper, also enable them to tackle any other issues they may be facing – such as material poverty. Since questions of supply do not enter the equation, as for example the availability of work is not discussed, the solutions presented in the paper paint a highly individualising picture of social and economic problems, as well as of the measures to address them. Apart from the many practical issues that arise with the implementation of targeted support programmes, such as the Troubled Families Programme, the strong focus on certain poor and disadvantaged families, around whom a variety of social and economic problems supposedly coalesce, is also reminiscent of the notion of a not just poor, but also dysfunctional and criminal, 'underclass' (Hayden and Jenkins 2014; Jensen 2012; Pantazis 2016). It also raises questions in relation to those who fall outside of this narrowly defined group, such as those who are in work but poor – an increasingly large proportion of people living in poverty in the UK.

Overall, then, the paper frames poverty, disadvantage, and worklessness on the one hand as individual problems that need to be tackled on the individual level, rather than through universal support services; and on the other hand as *cultural* problems

pertaining to a particular subsection of society. In the families that are part of this subsection, the norm of worklessness, as well as the habits and behavioural patterns associated with various disadvantages, are reproduced from one generation to the next, in such a way that children can then absorb these behaviours and norms from their parents – not just through observing their parents engaging in these behaviours but also through their early cognitive, social, and emotional development. Material poverty, in turn, is presented as a consequence of this reproduction.

Conclusion

Despite the partial loss of the Coalition Government in changing the statutory indicators for measuring child poverty in 2015, arguments deploying the notion that poverty and worklessness are cultural in nature or origin are alive and well in the UK. Indeed, MacDonald and his colleagues have argued that the idea that '"workless families" are culpable for fostering and passing on to their working age children *cultures* of worklessness has become one of the dominant ideas of UK politics' (2014a: 200, emphasis in the original). The DWP policy paper examined in this article reproduces the 'cultural poverty' argument, thus pushing both discourse and policy towards an understanding of poverty that does not, in fact, have much to do with poverty at all. As many have argued before, there is very limited evidence that the much-circulated cultural understandings reflect either the composition, or the causes, of poverty (MacDonald *et al.* 2014a, 2014b; Main and Bradshaw 2016), and, if anything, the long-standing history of the culturalisation of poverty in the UK has illustrated that policy interventions that take this understanding as their evidence base do not tend to work (Edwards *et al.* 2015; Gillies 2012). The repeated attempts by the Coalition and Conservative Governments to shift the discourse around (child) poverty more and more towards individual and cultural explanations – at the expense of structural and material ones – stand in stark contrast to this lack of evidence.

The policy paper's positioning of the poor family as the locus of its intervention into 'cycles of disadvantage' and worklessness, furthermore, reflects a long-standing preoccupation in the UK, 'which has seen social ills addressed at the level of the child through intervening with and governing inadequate parents and families' (Edwards *et al.* 2015: 172). The practice of parenting – together with a whole host of parental norms,

values, and behaviours – is placed at the centre of the paper's approach, and children's poor early development and low educational attainment seen as signs of the failings of poor parents. The paper's centring of its approach to disadvantage and poverty on the notion that a specific subsection of the UK population is responsible for the intergenerational reproduction of the norm of worklessness, highlights the astonishing degree to which poverty discourses are individualised in the UK, as well as echoes the 'underclass' arguments of the nineties and beyond. Moreover, the positioning of individual parents as responsible for passing *the right kind of culture* on to their children reflects the continued – or perhaps intensifying – centring of the cultural and discursive mechanisms of austerity and anti-welfarism on the poor family, and on poor parents as a primary source of societal dysfunction and poor cultural values.

While the 2015 failure of the Coalition Government to remove the governmental obligation to track both absolute and relative household income was met with celebration from those opposing the culturalisation of poverty, the policy paper examined in this article, and particularly the solutions it offers to tackling poverty, presents a renewed cause for concern. Although the 'old' measures tracking household income are still available, the fact that the Government's strategy for tackling (child) poverty and disadvantage entirely bypasses those measures, and focuses instead on the norms and values it associates with worklessness, disadvantage, and poverty, is a worrying development. While the significant material consequences of such policy interventions for poor individuals and families warrant scholarly attention in their own right, examining the *discursive* framings of poverty reproduced in policy texts also remains an important task for scholars. Importantly, these framings increasingly do not just individualise explanations for poverty, but also deploy the poor family, and the values, norms, and behaviours of poor parents, as part of the discursive arsenal of anti-welfare politics. Thus, more analyses are needed, in particular, of the ways in which the parenting, reproductive, and sexual behaviours of poor, working-class, and/or benefit-receiving parents are stigmatised within the cultural and discursive mechanisms of austerity and anti-welfarism.

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