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‘Welfare worries’: mapping the directions of welfare futures in the contemporary UK

Gerry Mooney and Sarah Neal

Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University

The state of welfare

If you were to open and read any newspaper or switch on and watch television news or read-watch online news in any day at any given time in any given week there would be a story, incident or crisis about welfare in some shape or form. Often the presence of welfare within the busy overcrowded spaces of the public domain relates to an anxiety about and/or a failure of welfare delivery and service impact. Usually it is both combined. For example, at the time of writing there is, in England, a news headline scandal about the poor standards of cleanliness in some foundation hospitals being such that they are contributing to the further ill-health and death of those people receiving medical treatment and healthcare. The scandal is not just about the lack of hygiene in the hospitals. The scandal is amplified because some of the hospitals involved had been checked by the NHS inspection system and passed as being of good and satisfactory standard. This is the double anxiety – the failure of the service and the failure of the monitoring of the service.

The compacted and multiple natures of welfare challenges and welfare anxieties in the contemporary UK (although this is not a nationally bounded anxiety), relate to sets of connections and often entrenched lacunae. Another example: in North London, the death of ‘Baby P’ in 2007 and subsequent enquiry, trial and conviction is about the horrors of violence against and harm of a child within the private spaces of families. The gap or lacuna here is, of course, between the endangered child and child protection. Baby P is about the failure of

safeguarding systems but the connection is that the case has very direct implications in terms of the recruitment, training and retention of social workers (see Ferguson & Lavalette, 2009). For example, Ed Balls who, at the time of writing, is Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, argues that, in social work, there “are high referral rates [of children] very high vacancy rates [of social worker posts] and a lot of variation in performance” (The Guardian, November 28, 2009). In other words, the few remaining and overworked social workers are fearful of mistakenly allowing children to stay within families and disproportionately referring them to state care systems. Ed Balls sees this situation as a result of the quality of welfare professionals themselves: “in the end this is a profession [social work] that has not retained the best people at the frontline for fundamental reasons about training, employment, pay”. For the Minister, the answer to this welfare crisis appears to lie in creating more rigorous and higher status ‘Royal College’ professional training and ‘bundling’ social workers with teachers, doctors and the police.

The dirty hospitals and the Baby Peter scandal are two distinct crises of welfare narratives that demonstrate some of the worries, contradictions and complexities of welfare in late modern societies. The common thread through them is the failure to protect the vulnerable and at risk and the failure of the various welfare checking systems to see the welfare failure.

However, there is another recurring ideology which circulates around and works to shape crises of welfare narratives: an

explicit anti-welfare perspective that draws on a century and more-old distinction between a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor which, in the increasingly pervasive language of the early 21st century, talks of aspirational deficits, dysfunctional and deviant behaviours, an absence of social capital and a seemingly expanding range of moral and behavioural problems which have some of the poorest sections of contemporary UK society trapped in a, now rediscovered, culture of poverty.

If the Baby Peter case and stories of falling hospital standards speak to particular crises of welfare around service delivery and the failure of social services to provide care and security for the very young, the Karen Matthews episode speaks to other crises of welfare. Matthews' (and her partner's) conviction for the kidnapping of her nine year old daughter in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire in 2008, provoked a backlash which has all the hallmarks of a right-wing moral panic. Speaking shortly after their sentencing in December 2008, Conservative leader David Cameron commented that:

The verdict last week on Karen Matthews and her vile accomplice is also a verdict on our broken society. The details are damning. A fragmented family held together by drink, drugs and deception. An estate where decency fights a losing battle against degradation and despair. A community whose pillars are crime, unemployment and addiction. How can Gordon Brown argue that people who talk about a broken society are wrong? These children suffered at the very sharpest end of our broken society but all over the country are other young victims, too. Children whose toys are Dad's discarded drink bottles; whose role models are criminals, liars and layabouts; whose innocence is lost before their first milk tooth. What chance for these children? Raised without manners, morals or a decent education, they're caught up in the same destructive chain

as their parents. It's a chain that links unemployment, family breakdown, debt, drugs and crime'. (David Cameron, Daily Mail, December 8, 2008)

In the Charles Murray-esque landscape conjured up by Cameron a particular anti-welfare message is being invited. This invitation is that existing forms of welfare provision have not only failed to make any effective interruption in the 'destructive chain' but that they have been, more damningly, contributive and even causal of it. While Cameron's term the 'broken society' may be new, the state of the poor and the responsibility of poor people for the state they exist in is an old and persistent argument that has always been able to find a ready audience in sections of the popular media and among politicians across the political spectrum, and of course among some in policy-making and academic communities.

Such explanatory narratives are powerful. They offer an immediate and easy apparatus for making sense of inequality and human behaviour in complex social worlds. In the contemporary, intensely 24/7-mediated UK these narratives are particularly potent and work effectively precisely because the evidence that substantiates them – the Karen Matthews story for example – is so widely disseminated and deliberated on. In thinking about arguments about the future formations of welfare provision, what is clear is that the media will be involved and influential. Indeed, we suggest that it is important to acknowledge the media as a key policy player in social policy setting agendas and policy-making networks (Neal, 2003; McLaughlin & Neal, 2004). Given this, the future directions of welfare need to attend to the ways in which these media engagements inform, underpin, disseminate and challenge some of the dominant welfare narratives that are being valorised in Britain today.

Fear and distrust in early twenty-first century Britain

The three cases we have highlighted thus far all relate in different ways to a generalised sense that welfare is failing, and that the state is now failing to protect us from a seemingly growing and expanding range of social harms and risks in an increasingly precarious and uncertain time. Minton (2008; 2009) has talked of Britain as a 'distrustful and fearful society'. This modern 'social evil', she claims, results from growing social and geographical inequalities and from a media which has a vested commercial interest in promoting fear and insecurity. Minton is only one of a number of commentators who have highlighted the growing social and economic polarisation in contemporary Britain and the ways in which this corresponds with and contributes to rising levels of fear, distrust and anxiety (Young, 2007; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). For Minton, such inequalities are more and more visible, inscribed on the social landscape of Britain today. They are reflected in the twin and related processes of deepening social and economic segregation and homogenisation of communities. The Moorside estate where the Matthews kidnapping took place is not one, but many worlds apart, from the increasingly privatised and segregated enclaves of affluence that exist in parts of urban, suburban and rural Britain.

Minton is by no means the first commentator to suggest that late modernity is characterised by the failure of the modernist project. For Minton and others, there is a 'late modern relationship' which can be broadly aligned and understood in the following way: increasing social and economic polarisation = increasing social fear and mistrust = ontological insecurity = social retreat and individual securitisation. The failures of the welfare state in the modernist project are reflected and inflected in the shape that welfare's future forms are

likely to take. For example, in his seminal text *The Exclusive Society* (1999, p.4) the social theorist Jock Young reminds us that, for the modernist project, its 'ideal' intention was, "the greater and greater incorporation of the population into full citizenship ... of substantive incorporation into society ... of not only legal and political rights but social rights: a minimum of employment, income, education, health and housing". While this clearly was never part of its actual achievement, what Young reminds us of is the extent to which there was a moment of consensual politics as to the desirability of this. The passing of this intention and consensus in a haze of global economic restructuring, neo-liberalism, political dissolutions and realignments, migrations, new social movements, individualism, choice, consumerism, and so forth means that these intentions appear as far out of reach in the first decades of the 21st century as seemed within reach in the mid 20th century.

The failures and limitations of the 'Golden Age' welfare settlements became apparent as some groups were excluded from welfare entitlements, as welfare recipients became stigmatised and as social inequality, differentiation and poverty continued and, indeed, increased. It was in this context that modernist welfare intentions gave way to neo-liberalism. With its combined emphasis on less state provision, more markets, more individual responsibility, on pathologised poverty and 'difficult' populations, neo-liberalism became a key shaper of welfare approaches and transformations in Britain, the USA and other Anglophone countries from the late 1970s. The ascendancy of neo-liberalism and its successive discourses has meant that it has become increasingly popular to think of the end of state welfare or, at the very least, of an era of the decline of the welfare state. However, despite the influence of the neo-liberal agenda in welfare politics the 'end of welfare' is too general, too US/UK - and, perhaps, here with the latter case, maybe too England -

specific and too simplistic a rhetoric (especially when there is data evidencing the relatively consistent levels of state spending on social protection - see Clarke, 2008, for example). Rather than the *terminal decline* it is the nature of the strains and pressures for the *reformation* of welfare that we suggest require attention and explanation.

For us, and for other commentators, this reformation process has become shaped by the convergence between social protection concerns and crime control concerns in a development that Hughes (2009) refers to as 'hybrid policy making'. This hybrid relationship between the two sets of concerns emerges directly from the inevitable failure of the modernist cradle-to-grave welfarism to deliver full social citizenship. The problematisation of welfare recipients borrows directly from old notions of dangerous, unruly and deviant poor. The focus on an expanded and penalising criminal justice system and the juridification of civic interactions can be understood as a response to the (re)turn to the pathologisation and criminalisation of poverty. But the convergence also reflects the mood of social uncertainty and heightened risk which engenders less-forgiving and tolerant, and more defensive and fearful populations demanding penalties for, and protection from, those figures and populations who appear to threaten from the margins and outside. It is in this environment, in the Global North and in some parts of the Global South, where the correlations between increased material affluence, increased prison populations and increased residence within gated communities, all make a grim sort of sense. Not insignificantly, the convergence between the social welfare and crime control domains has also happened during a period of intense media-isation of politics and policy-making that we noted above. Future welfare policy has to contend with being generated in a fearful, mistrusting and non-consensual public domain. While the

media needs to be recognised as a key welfare policy actor, it is not a straightforwardly homogenised rightist and conservatively inclined blunt instrument. The media can work as an oppositional and exposing voice for social change too. What is clear, though, is that the media shapes welfare imaginations in entangled and multiple ways. For example, the idea that there are an increasing number of places in Britain today which resemble the crime- and drug-ridden world of Baltimore captured in the widely acclaimed and popular American TV drama *The Wire*, has been given political legitimacy by Shadow Conservative Home Secretary Chris Grayling:

The Wire used to be just a work of fiction for British viewers. But under this government, in many parts of British cities, The Wire has become a part of real life in this country too. Far too many of those features of what we have always seen as a US phenomenon are now to be found on the streets of Britain as well. ... It's a horrendous portrayal of the collapse of civilised life and of human despair. Neighbourhoods where drug dealing and deprivation is rife. A constant threat of robbery to fund drug dependency. Communities dogged by violence and by violent crime. (Cited in Watt & Oliver, 2009)

There is, arguably, some irony in the Conservatives drawing on *The Wire* given the programme's indictment of a racially polarised, impoverished, deeply divided urban United States characterised by an almost complete absence of welfare intervention and widespread corruption and compromise within the range of social governance systems. It is various characters' attempts to survive - and prosper - within a context of structural and social-spatial inequalities that are core to *The Wire's* storylines. We do not want to over-claim the way in which the popularity of *The Wire* reflects the wider 'real world' social

concerns with welfare and social division, social disorder and economic disadvantage but it is clear that such programmes do tap into anxieties and arguments about what constitutes effective and legitimate social provision and what effectively creates social stability and inclusion in worlds which are lived in globally and locally. The popularity of *The Wire* may also be seen to reflect the proximity (and sometimes strange relationships) between the crime control and social welfare worlds (Cochrane & Talbot, 2008). For example, in the world of *The Wire*, it is police officers who sometimes offer welfare care, attempt radical drugs policies and where drug dealing systems are more effectively dealt with by the Robin Hood-esque figure of a gay gangster. But, these fictional twists aside, expressions of concern as to the well-being and stability of a society, it is the levels of social deviancy and criminality that present particular cornerstones of welfare imaginings and pre-occupations as we shall see in the next section.

Britain as a 'broken society': old wine in new bottles?

First popularised by Iain Duncan Smith and the Conservatives' Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and regularly deployed by David Cameron, the sound bite label 'Broken Britain' and the broader notion of a 'broken society' has succeeded in entering wider and popular discourses about the social and moral state of the contemporary UK (Mooney, 2009). As with earlier anti-welfare narratives - such as Charles Murray's identification of a welfare-created and a welfare-dependent 'underclass' - part of the potency and pervasiveness of the broken society idea is that it is a very flexible notion, able to be deployed as an explanation of a range of social problems and popular social ills. It also speaks to the anxieties and fears highlighted above. In the hands of the Conservative Party, however, there is a clear argument that the broken society has its roots in 'broken families'.

Teenage pregnancies and increasing numbers of one-parent households caught, of course, in a 'dependency culture', feature prominently in this account. The institution of the family and approaches to families become a key site for political and policy argument and a target for policy formation. For example, while, for the CSJ, there are five poverty 'drivers': family breakdown, welfare dependency, educational failure, addiction to drugs and alcohol and serious personal debt, as is clear from the CSJ's report *Every Family Matters* (2009), marriage and a stable two-parent family life are key to mending Broken Britain and thereby reducing levels of poverty.

The idea that family life in Britain is increasingly dysfunctional provides the ground for a renewed familialism, with the Conservatives promising to bring back some recognition of marriage to the UK tax system if they win the 2010 general election. However, such familialism - that is, the idea that individual and public well-being are enabled through support for heterosexual nuclear families - are far from being a stock-in-trade of the Conservatives alone. New Labour has long made a distinction between 'hard working families' and others which are clearly not seen as such. More recently, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in his 2009 Labour Party Conference speech and thereafter, spoke of 'problem', 'chaotic' and 'dysfunctional' families, 50,000 of which are seemingly a primary source of anti-social and other assorted deviant behaviours across the UK. But such familialism is finding renewed echoes elsewhere within political and policy-making networks. For example, in late 2009, political think tank Demos announced its latest project, 'Building Character':

Demos is building the case for 'character' as the key to life chances. Rather than seeing character capabilities - like empathy, application, and self-regulation - as 'soft skills' to boost

young people's chances in the work place or build pro-social behaviour in our communities, we should see them as key, foundational capacities which underpin children's future development in every area. ... We find that a combination of warmth, responsiveness, and consistent discipline leads to the development of strong character capabilities in children and that these qualities are best measured through proximal, micro-level interactions between parent and child in the home. Children essentially learn empathy, self-regulation, and application through interaction with trusted, loving adults. We also find that while traditional disadvantage – poverty, family structure, and educational background – still impinges on parents' ability to parent well, these effects are mediated and knocked out when parents possess high levels of competence, confidence, and self-belief: parenting is as much about parents' perception of their own ability as it is about their different backgrounds, dis/advantages, and particular circumstances. (Demos, 2009: <http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/buildingcharactertwo>.)

At the subsequent launch of the Demos Commission on Character in January 2010, Labour MP and ever eager welfare reformer Frank Field commented:

The major reason why Britain is rougher and more uncivilised than it was in the early post-war period has been the collapse of the politics of character. These politics dominated the debate from the mid-Victorian period up until the middle of the last century. ... The politics of character were hugely successful. England was transformed from a rough, uncouth and often cruel nation, into the modern age where citizens treated other people as they wished to be treated themselves. ... Look at Geoffrey Gorer's classic work 'Explaining English

Character' that was published in 1955. I agree with his analysis. It is totally wrong to claim that we were always a civilised nation. Far from it. But we did become a nation transformed. ... How? Gorer sets out to explain how this dramatic transformation took place. There are many subtleties to his argument. But he stressed one influence above all others.

England fell in love with becoming a nation of good parents. Child rearing practices were transformed. ... English parents, in increasing numbers, learned the art of how to live together as a family. By this route we also learned those qualities necessary to negotiate successfully a life in the wider community. Awarding respect to others became intimately bound up with gaining our own self respect. ... There can be no serious discussion about character separate from the role of families. Families are the crucible within which – for good or ill – character is forged. (Frank Field, January 11, 2010: available at: [http://www.politics.co.uk/mps/press-releases/party-politics/labour/demos-of-launch-of-its-commission-on-character-\\$1352720.htm](http://www.politics.co.uk/mps/press-releases/party-politics/labour/demos-of-launch-of-its-commission-on-character-$1352720.htm).)

While the political positions and the terminology differ around 'broken societies' and 'problem populations', what is broadly shared here is an emphasis on individual and family responsibility but, importantly, there is talk too of a need to encourage a revival of community 'spirit', civic interaction and mutuality. The deliberations and arguments about the reformations of welfare are not about the ending of welfare or no welfare. Nor are they completely about individualisation. There is a concern with social cohesion and stability.

This means that welfare reformation is likely to continue to look to a set of principles and policy approaches in which welfare is highly conditional and aims for

social inclusion (primarily through various work activation schemes) and not social equality. Welfare policy formations and interventions are likely to continue to work around an agenda that is to enable those on the margins of societies to maximise their resources for self-reliance and care. They will intend to provide opportunities for improvement - rather than solutions - and, the efficacy of these initiatives will rely largely on punitivity as these two headlines illustrate: 'Get treatment or lose benefits, drug users told' (*The Guardian*, February 27, 2008) and 'Idle' jobless could be denied council home' (*The Telegraph*, February 2, 2008).

It is unlikely that there will be a return to a reliance on the centre to provide welfare in the UK. Welfare delivery providers will almost inevitably continue to work through decentralised systems and multi- and inter-agency approaches and public-private partnerships. In other words, the neo-liberalism of anti/state-based welfare remains. However, in the welfare reforming languages of both New Labour and the Conservatives, there is evidence of a collectivist sympathy in the shape of the calls made to (and for) more community-ness, the potential of the role of social capital and the necessity of civic citizenship. As we have argued elsewhere, the demands being made on the concept of community are many and wide and are likely to continue, as community becomes the modality through which social welfare provision and crime control strategies are to be conceived, designed and delivered (Mooney & Neal, 2009). While we have noted the strange paradox of identifying 'problem populations' through a notion of community - recall, for example, David Cameron's condemnation of the whole estate in which Karen Mathews lived - we agree with Graham Day (2006, p.233) that "there is no sign that the term community is going to go away either from the discourse of 'ordinary' people or from the rhetoric of

those who seek to govern and manage them".

If individualism, self-help and privatised welfare systems, family and community are to remain at the heart of welfare reformation agendas and flourish as the conceptual architecture for social security (in its broadest sense), we would like to finish with what the quote from Day highlights - the ways in which ordinary people imagine and work with notions of community, welfare, senses of entitlement, social care and mutuality.

Conclusion: welfare resistances in welfare reformation

We have argued that the directions of welfare provision in the future UK are likely to remain focused on social welfare defined by and delivered through a stable of regulative concepts such as individualism, responsibility and social order. We have also suggested that the convergent relationship that has emerged, in the UK and beyond, between social welfare and crime control worlds and which has resulted in hybrid welfare-crime policy-making and enabling-penalising welfare discourses is here to stay. The broken society discourse of welfare (in any of its guises) offers no sign of any alternative approaches to welfare reformation coming from Cameron's Conservative Party. In the UK and globally, existing high levels of social fear, division and corresponding forms of social retreat into defensible, surveilled territory such as gated residencies are likely to lead to an intensification of the search for security and greater social polarisation.

However, we have noted that we are not witnessing the terminal decline and end of welfare but, rather, complex and uncertain processes of shift and reformation. In these processes, an emphasis is being given to civic interaction, neighbourliness, and community. In other words, this is not a neo-liberalist, Thatcherite rejection of a

thing called ‘society’ but an attempt to call on the notion of society through very particular and managed modes of collective civic responsibility. Minton (2009) proposes, in her book *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City*, that disrupting the drift into social retreat and privatisation and challenging the ascendancy of cultures of control could be most effectively realised by less regulation and less control and the reintroduction of public space, and an emphasis on sociality and convivial interaction. Arguing against the privatisation of public spaces in American and some UK cities and towns under auspices of increasing safety and security Minton asks us to look elsewhere:

Imagine trying to privatize a piazza. So many genuinely public places in towns and cities all over southern and northern Europe, in Italy, Spain, Greece, France, Holland, Germany and Scandinavia are thriving. Families and groups of people stroll arm and arm taking the passeggiata, children run around and old people sit together on benches. These places do not follow the American Clean and Safe agenda of the shopping mall, but they are not dirty and dangerous as a result. Far from it, they are happy and healthier’ (2009, p.196)

Minton’s arguments for more public-ness and more public spaces through which to re/create this as a way of building trust and civic interaction and care are not unique – nor straightforwardly unproblematic. The deep and enduring structural divisions that create and sustain patterns of social inequalities may require more than reinvigorated senses and spaces of public-ness. Nevertheless, the need to find ways to counter and challenge spatial and social polarisation and segregations is clearly important and likely, we would contend, to be crucial for imagining different, less punitive and less regulatory forms of welfare provision.

These are agency-based processes that are taking place anyway. Social welfare workers continue to struggle for better service provision and more investment, or fight to defend provision which is under attack, at times alongside a range of social welfare movements (Mooney & Law, 2007; Annetts *et al.*, 2009). Social welfare across the UK is a key arena around which the market driven and punitive political projects of recent times come to be contested. Further, people are not passive subjects and recipients of welfare policy. Personal lives and stories and events interact in more iterative and non-linear ways than are sometimes imagined. In the often turbulent and contested worlds of policy-making and politics welfare policy reformations are not straightforwardly top-down nor hermetically sealed from political pressures and strains. The ordinary lives and everyday acts of social citizenship do impact on the ways in which welfare is experienced and lived. Whether these are unremarkable, everyday micro acts of kindness, social care and resourcefulness (that Power & Willmot, 2007, have found in their research in very different housing estates in Leeds and East London) or more organised community- or grassroots-based activism and lobbying for local social resources and/or services (Taylor, 2003) or more explicit forms of political organisation and campaigning on a range of environmental, social justice, social harm concerns and issues or, even more dramatically, outbreaks of social unrest (Benyon, 1987), all of them contribute to unpredictable and unfixed welfare worlds and thereby more open welfare futures.

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Notes on Contributors

Gerry Mooney and Sarah Neal are Senior Lecturers in Social Policy, Department of Social Policy and Criminology, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University.

Gerry Mooney has written widely on social policy, Scottish devolution and urban studies. Among other publications he is co-author with Jason Annetts, Alex Law and Wallace McNeish of *Understanding Social Welfare Movements* (Policy Press, 2009); co-editor with Gill Scott of *Exploring Social Policy in the 'New' Scotland* (Policy Press, 2005); co-editor with Alex Law of *New Labour/Hard Labour?* (Policy Press, 2007); co-editor with Hazel Croall and Mary Munro of *Criminal Justice in Scotland* (Willan, 2010) and co-editor with Gill Scott of *Social Justice and Social Welfare in Contemporary Scotland* (Policy Press forthcoming 2011).

Sarah Neal's publications include *Race, Multiculture and Social Policy* with John Solomos and Alice Bloch (Palgrave, forthcoming); *Rural Identities: Ethnicity and Community in the Contemporary English Countryside* (Ashgate, 2009); *Community: Welfare, Crime and Society* edited with Gerry Mooney (McGraw Hill, 2009) and *The New Countryside? Ethnicity, Nation and Exclusion in the UK* edited with Julian Agyeman (Policy Press, 2006). She has published widely in a range of peer reviewed journals, most recently 'Researching Up? Interviews, Emotionality and Policy Making Elites', *Journal of Social Policy*, 2009, **38**(4).

Address for Correspondence

Gerry Mooney
Faculty of Social Sciences
The Open University in Scotland
10 Drumsheugh Gardens
Edinburgh
EH3 7QJ

Email G.C.Mooney@open.ac.uk