


The Emotional Economy of Unemployment: A Re-Analysis of Testimony From a Sheppey Family, 1978-1983

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Abstract

Between May 1978 and December 1983, the sociologist Ray Pahl conducted seven extensive interviews with a couple from Sheppey that he called “Linda” and “Jim.” These not only informed a key chapter in Pahl’s classic book *Divisions of Labour* but also evolved into a uniquely intimate account of how a family used to “getting by” (though never “affluent”) coped with the hardships and indignities of long-term reliance on welfare benefits. Perhaps inevitably, fascinating aspects of Linda and Jim’s testimony were left unused in *Divisions of Labour*, primarily because they were marginal to Pahl’s principal aim of demonstrating how the state welfare system could trap a family in poverty. We deliberately retain the narrative, case study approach of Pahl’s treatment, but shift our focus to the strategies that Linda and Jim adopted to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of life at the sharp end of the early 1980s recession. How they retained a strong orientation toward the future, how they resisted internalizing the stigmatization associated with welfare dependency in 1980s Britain, and how their determination to fight “the system” ultimately led them to make choices in harmony with the logic of the New Right’s free market agenda.

Keywords

class, emotion, narrative identity, unemployment, work

Introduction

Between May 1978 and December 1983, the sociologist Ray Pahl conducted seven extended interviews with a couple from the Isle of Sheppey in Kent that he called “Linda” and “Jim.” Initially, they were just one of a number of couples introduced to Pahl by a local doctor who thought they would be willing to talk openly to a stranger.¹ But in October 1980, as the deflationary economic policies of the new Conservative Government began to bite, Jim lost his job and the interviews evolved into a profoundly human story of how a family used to “getting by” (though never “affluent”) coped with the hardships and indignities of long-term reliance on welfare benefits. The story of Linda and Jim features prominently in Pahl’s (1984) monograph *Divisions of Labour*, where the couple’s experience of insecurity and hardship is contrasted with the much easier lives of another couple, Beryl and George, who were doing well in the early Thatcher years. One of the central themes of Pahl’s influential book was that workers’ lives were becoming increasingly polarized in late 20th-century Britain, and the contrasting stories of the two households gave immediacy to this argument (Crow & Ellis, in press; Crow & Takeda, 2011; Pahl, 1984, chap. 11). But

perhaps inevitably, fascinating aspects of Linda and Jim’s testimony were left unused in *Divisions of Labour*, primarily because they were marginal to Pahl’s principal areas of interest such as work outside formal employment, the domestic division of labor, the welfare poverty trap, and social polarization in the context of rapid deindustrialization (Pahl, 1982, 1984; Pahl & Wallace, 1985).

The transcripts from Pahl’s first seven interviews with Linda and Jim survive with his papers at Essex University.² In all, they come to almost 90,000 words, and cover nearly 150 close-packed pages. Pahl’s chapter in *Divisions of Labour* draws on the first six interviews (the last of which was conducted in February 1983). His technique in the book was, as much as possible, to offer a chronicle of Linda and Jim’s lives organized around their own testimony. It is striking that Pahl devotes almost 5 times as much space to their

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story as to Beryl and George's. The reader is left in no doubt where his sympathies lay (and nor were Linda and Jim). However, Pahl's main aim in *Divisions of Labour* was to demonstrate how the welfare system failed the couple by trapping them in poverty despite their determination to provide for themselves. As Pahl would later acknowledge, in 1984, he concentrated on the immediate policy implications of his research, and rightly saw the human story of Linda and Jim's plight as a powerful way to indict the system's rigidities (Pahl, 1998, p. 108; 2009, p. 46). He was also determined to overthrow what he saw as out-dated, deterministic psychological models of the effects of unemployment rooted in the very different experiences of the 1930s (Pahl, 1982). This probably accounts for his limited interest in the more personal, psychological dimensions of Linda and Jim's story which we seek to restore in the discussion that follows. Pahl's focus is therefore squarely on the "big story" that structures Linda and Jim's accounts: the relation between their early lives, work histories, and current and future employment opportunities. He skillfully weaves their testimony with his own words to present a coherent picture of their broad life story. However, in so doing, he largely obscures the "small stories" that vividly describe their daily frustrations (and occasional triumphs), for example, the interactions between the couple and the officials in the benefit system, or their views about the long-term unemployed. Building on the work of Phoenix and Sparkes (2009), we seek to demonstrate the potential to add to the contribution made by the original case study by paying attention to *both* the "big stories" and the "small stories" that Pahl elicits from Linda and Jim.

Pahl (1984) himself stressed that this rich sequence of interviews offered scope for other treatments, commenting in *Divisions of Labour* that, "[t]here's so much more that could be said about Linda and Jim . . . in some ways they deserve a book to themselves" (p. 304).³ Arguably, the relationship that Pahl built with Linda and Jim over these 5 years gave them the chance to explain their situation, and narrate their lives, in a sustained and coherent manner that is almost without precedent for people who have not consciously set out to leave an ego-document for posterity (Stanley, 1992). Oral history can certainly be used to try and fill this gap, but it necessarily imposes a retrospective frame on testimony, generating complex interactions between personal and collective memories, especially when the experience in question has become mythologized in public history, as the mass unemployment of the 1980s undoubtedly has (Abrams, 2010; Portelli, 1997; Samuel & Thompson, 1990).

Our aim in this article is to revisit this remarkable contemporary testimony to offer a new perspective on the rich biographical narratives that Pahl collected from Linda and Jim. By attending to the "small stories" that Linda and Jim provide in their accounts, we focus more squarely than Pahl on what it meant to be unemployed in the early 1980s, and the everyday strategies available to those forced to survive

within the benefits system. But our purposes are also methodological. First, to establish that conceptualizing identity as narratively constructed and narratively performed provides a powerful lens through which to examine accounts of everyday life elicited in sociological interviews (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1990, 1993). Second, to demonstrate that the temporal distance between data collection and secondary analysis can generate new analytic possibilities that were not available to the original researcher (Bornat, 2010; Irwin & Winterton, 2011; also Crow, 2012; Savage, 2005a). We acknowledge that we do not have the benefit of Pahl's "first-hand" and repeated meetings with Linda and Jim. As the original researcher, he will have had memories from his visits to the household and implicit understandings that we cannot share (Hammersley, 2009). However, arguably this allows us more emotional distance and the opportunity to position Linda and Jim not just as trapped in a system but also as resourceful individuals whose resistance to the system involved forging identities which Pahl was not always comfortable acknowledging. For instance, Pahl is silent on Linda's angry outbursts against women taking men's jobs at a time of high unemployment, on her views about immigrants taking "White people's" jobs, and, as discussed below, on her harsh attitude toward other families on benefits (Interview 6: 12; Interview 7: 9). Indeed, it is precisely because they were more than a case study to Pahl that we have this remarkable testimony at all. Pahl conducted at least two further extended interviews over the following decade, and in later life, often spoke animatedly about his relationship with the couple (Elliott & Lawrence, in press; Pahl, 1998, p. 106; 2006, p. 8; 2009, p. 25).

Our approach to the re-analysis of this unique testimony is consciously inter-disciplinary, combining the historian's interest in the recovery of everyday experiences in subjects' own words, and the sociologist's interest in debates about the narrative construction of identity in the context of in-depth interviews (Chase, 1995; Ezzy, 1997; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). Throughout, we seek to avoid imposing analytical frameworks which would undermine the fragile coherence that Linda and Jim achieved through these interviews—as they were for Pahl, they must remain for us, first and foremost, a singular case. But at the same time, re-analysis of personal testimony three decades after the original interviews must necessarily draw on recent scholarly debates about subjectivity and the making of selfhood. Besides attention to the question of narrative identity, we are particularly interested to explore how Linda and Jim sought to cope with life on benefits by asserting a strong sense of themselves as hard-working and resourceful individuals. Informed by Ann Mische's work on the dynamic social potential of imagined future selves, we demonstrate how Linda in particular used future-orientated strategies to assert some measure of agency and control over the family's often perilous situation (Mische, 2009; also Bryant & Ellard, 2015 and the Sheppey re-study by Carabelli & Lyon, 2016).

But we are also keen to recover traces of the couple's emotional response to unemployment by paying close attention to the performative aspects of the interviews and the clues they offer to how it *felt* to be one of the unemployed in the early 1980s (Goffman, 1971; Reddy, 2001; Roper, 2005; Smart, 2007).

Our focus is therefore on questions of identity and emotion. By focusing on the narrative responses that Linda and Jim gave to Pahl's questions, we aim to illuminate the ways in which they sought to present themselves as active agents taking responsibility for their own and their children's well-being and future prospects. In doing so, we examine how, partly because their choices were radically constrained, they came to construct plans for escape which dovetailed with the Thatcherite ethos of the time, despite their own vehement rejection of Conservative politics. Our re-analysis also recognizes that at the time, there were some issues on which Pahl felt obliged to remain silent. In the early 1980s, Pahl had good reason to play down the couple's reliance on various forms of undeclared income to make ends meet (though he is not entirely silent on the question, Pahl, 1984). Here, the passing of time makes it possible to explore more fully Linda and Jim's perspectives both on "cheating" the system and, more broadly, on unemployment and the unemployed.⁴

Linda and Jim: Early Lives

Who were Linda and Jim? Ray Pahl tells their story over 24 pages in *Divisions of Labour*, so only a brief outline need be offered here. Linda came from a large family (there were eight siblings) that had always survived on a mix of welfare benefits and casual employment, especially seasonal work in agriculture. Linda's mother came from a traveler family, and Linda herself lived a semi-nomadic life in early childhood. She met Jim in the late 50s, when she was 15, and he was in his early 20s and a merchant seaman—by 16, she was married. They did not have children immediately, but by the time of the first interview in 1978, the couple had three children aged between 8 and 13.⁵ After leaving the navy, Jim, who was the son of a customs officer and had not grown up on Sheppey, set himself up in business as a general handyman. This venture failed when he got into difficulties with his paperwork and tax. Thereafter, Jim had a variety of jobs, including road building, construction, and working in local factories, until, in the early 1970s, he secured work back on the water with a firm servicing tankers at a nearby oil refinery. It was the loss of this job in late 1980 which saw the couple's fragile domestic economy fall apart. Earlier that year, they had been able to take the first holiday of their married lives, thanks to Linda taking part-time work as a home help (domestic carer) for the elderly (she had previously relied largely on seasonal work to boost the household income). Then, when Jim lost his job in a rationalization program which saw other men boost their take-home pay, everything changed. Jim's redundancy money, and then his

national insurance entitlement, ran out, and eventually, the family was forced on to means-tested benefits which initially prompted Linda to give up work, as the family was better off, if she too was unemployed. However, by late 1983, she was working as a part-time warden in an old people's home, even though everything she earned above £4 per week was deducted from Jim's benefits. She hoped that this would be a stepping-stone to a better-paid job. Jim did most of the shopping, child care, and cooking, and the eldest child, "Kim," (who had become unemployed herself on leaving school in 1981) did most of the washing and cleaning.

Pahl's Analytic Approach

Although it is not spelled out in the book, Ray Pahl did not interview Jim until October 1980, after Jim had been told that he would be one of two men to be made compulsorily redundant by his company. Indeed, their interview was set up specifically because Jim was about to be made unemployed; the previous two interviews had involved only Linda. Only from the fourth interview, in January 1981, did the project become one focused explicitly on how the couple *jointly* coped with life's hardships. It is clear from the archive that at their first meeting, Pahl was frank about the reasons for his interest, telling Jim that he saw him as "a kind of guinea pig that's going through the system." He stressed that he hoped Jim would find a new job quickly, but explained that the purpose of the interview was to "find out the sort of base from which we're starting, do you see what I mean, to see what changes" (Interview 3: 17). Over the coming months and years, Linda and Jim became all too aware of what it felt like to be part of "the system" as they struggled to find ways to return their lives to the relative security and comfort they had known in 1980.

In *Divisions of Labour*, Pahl stresses the *structural* nature of the inequalities that shaped the contrasting lives of his two couples. He is very explicit that "If anything, Jim and Linda have a broader range of qualities and aptitudes and appear to be more entrepreneurial and energetic. Yet British Society in the early 1980s does not apparently want these skills and aptitudes" (Pahl, 1984, p. 309). What is telling here is that Pahl wishes to foreground the agency of the couple, their aptitudes and motivations for work, to highlight the structural factors that are frustrating their attempts to make a better life for themselves. In this way, he provides a compelling counter-narrative to the contemporary orthodoxy that the entrepreneurial would necessarily succeed. However, as we will demonstrate below, although Pahl explicitly comments on Linda's articulateness and reflexivity, his published account largely removes our ability to hear Linda's perspectives on the individuals and groups with whom she interacts, and, just as importantly, on herself and her feelings: The psychological and emotional effects of unemployment take a backseat. This in turn makes it more difficult for us to understand Linda's agency in narrating an identity for herself that

is consistent both with her sense of powerlessness in the face of the bureaucratic state and her sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy in making the best of her situation, including continuing to play the role of “provider” for her family (an identity that seems to have been learnt from her mother, even though she makes much of her determination not to reproduce her mother’s life).

Pahl, therefore, could be said to stop short of offering a narrative analysis of the interviews he carried out with Linda and Jim (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1993). Although he provides the key details about their past history in order to place the interviews in context, he does not focus on the ways in which the dialogue between past and present helped shape their understanding of poverty and unemployment. By contrasting Linda and Jim with a more affluent couple, he emphasizes inequality at a single point in time. In addition, he does not attend to the way that they themselves recount the “small stories” that illuminate their frustrations with the benefits system and those employed to operate it (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). In short, what is perhaps most striking about the case study that Pahl constructs in *Divisions of Labour* is his focus on the events and circumstances that apparently shape Linda and Jim’s lives, rather than on the way they themselves narrate their life story. It is also striking that the other characters in the book’s narrative are relatively flat or one dimensional. Pahl appears keen to keep Linda and Jim central to the narrative and to reduce many of the other players to bit parts or abstractions (Elliott, 2005). Help from relatives was central to the family’s ability to survive, but it is only mentioned in passing (Pahl, 1984). Pahl (1984) talks of the household being “permanently embattled with the State” (p. 301), but Linda and Jim saw their battles with unhelpful officials in more individualized terms, and their anger sprang as much from how they perceived people to be treating them as from their structural situation. And though by revisiting the transcripts, we can see Pahl encouraging the couple to voice their anger, and also expressing anger on their behalf, the emotional economy of unemployment is not central to his original analysis in *Divisions of Labour* (Interview 3: 6; Interview 6: 5, also Pahl, 2009).

Finally, Pahl tends to elide Linda and Jim’s comments into a composite household viewpoint, although they often saw (and felt) things rather differently. For instance, he radically simplifies a discussion about their attitudes to undeclared earnings in 1981. Pahl quotes Jim saying,

What annoys me about it is, if you’re on the dole, if you’re on social security and you’re on x amount of pounds each week then you’re trapped. You can’t improve yourself because you haven’t got a job and they won’t let you do any part-time work, so what are you to do?

However, he then omits Jim’s important caveat: “I suppose if we were allowed to earn there would be abuse,” instead running the quotation on into Linda’s comment that “I’m

beginning to wonder if it does pay you to be honest when you declare everything” (Pahl, 1984, p. 299; Interview 4: 9). The effect is to present the couple as a single entity at war with “the system,” when in practice, they had rather different outlooks.

Re-Reading Linda and Jim’s Testimony

Navigating, Beating, or Cheating “the System”: Stories of Everyday Life on Benefits

When we turn to re-read Linda and Jim’s surviving testimony, it is evident that from the outset they found claiming welfare benefits baffling, degrading, and unacceptably intrusive. As Linda explained in January 1981,

We don’t seem to know what we can claim. It puts you off a bit going to find out because you don’t want to tell all your . . . because if you just go to enquire they still want to go into everything, to the last penny. (Interview 4: 1)⁶

At first, they were reluctant to apply for means-tested benefits such as rent rebate, but once Jim’s national insurance cover ran out they had no choice.

From the transcripts we see that it was Linda who generally dealt with benefits officers, and she came to pride herself on knowing when to stand up for her rights, and when to feign subservience (and pride, too, in naturally assuming the role of “head” of the household in such matters). When she decided to go back to work, despite the economic disincentives, she was scathing about an official who told her: “you know, you shouldn’t go to work like that—it’s not worth it,” she claimed to have told him: “If you can’t do the job, get somebody in that can—there’s plenty of people that can do the job.” The real issue, she explained, was that it was “just too much hassle” for them to have to adjust the claim each week when she would only end up with an extra £4 (Interview 7: 9). In fact, when she first started the new job, the social security office stopped Jim’s claim entirely—leaving them short by £31 a week. When she rang up to complain, the officials initially refused to discuss the case with her rather than Jim, and then claimed to have lost his files:

in the end, I did, I flipped me lid I said “Don’t tell me that once more, else I’ll come over there, I’ll find his files,” you know. All it means is, they’ve got to get off their seat, go and look in a cabinet—I mean, it’s all done alphabetically, look for his name and get his file out. But that was too much bother. (Interview 7: 10)

Here Linda not only provides the resolution to a narrative about how the system works against couples who, faced with redundancy, are both prepared to seek work but also underlines her competence and capability in understanding office processes, and her appetite for working hard in contrast to the benefits officials they encountered.

In contrast, earlier, when the couple had been threatened with eviction because their rent arrears had built up (and because Jim had been rude to an official sent round to investigate), Linda had taken a very different tack. This is how she related her exchange with the council's rent officer:

At first he wasn't very nice at all, I thought I'd better do a bit of crawling here. And then he said "your husband was very rude, which I think had put their backs up". I said, "Oh well, I have to apologise for him, he's suffering from depression." I had to do a bit of creeping here just to keep the roof over our heads. (Interview 6: 5)

Linda's reflexive coda to this "small story" demonstrates that she took pride in knowing when to act subserviently (and how to play on professional sensibilities about the vulnerabilities of the male unemployed). However, she left Pahl (and us) in no doubt that she resented having to do this, telling him, "They make us feel that they're giving it to you, you know, you've got to be forever grateful because you're getting it" (Interview 6: 5).

Both Linda and Jim were acutely conscious of the poverty trap created by means-tested benefits, which seemed designed to leave them no better off for working (unless they failed to declare their earnings). Attention to the original transcripts shows that their perspective on this incentive to cheat the system changed over time. As their frustrations grew, they became more willing to supplement their income with irregular cash-in-hand work. Linda suggested that she found it easier than most to adjust to the privations of near-subsistence benefits because she had grown up in poverty and had never become used to a comfortable lifestyle. However, it is clear that both she and Jim expected a minimum standard of living considerably above that possible on state benefits. The telephone which allowed Linda to fight her corner with welfare agencies was paid for by Jim's parents, and Linda's brother sometimes helped out with their high fuel bills. Even so, social interactions with family were also affected by lack of money as Linda explained: "Even with the family you're afraid to go out [. . .] you've got to buy your share and you just can't do it" (Interview 6: 7).

Jim, Linda, and their older daughter, Kim, all earned small amounts doing private, cash-in-hand jobs that they had heard about through word of mouth. Kim and Linda worked as unofficial home helps, and Jim used his woodworking skills to make advertisement boards, while also doing odd jobs for friends and family. Linda mostly used her earnings to improve the family's diet, and Jim let his accumulate so that they could be put toward household bills. Pahl asked them about this directly in March 1982:

Pahl: Course, you'd be much, much worse off if you weren't getting that little bit extra that they don't know about.

Jim: Well, we wouldn't survive. We've just had an £88 gas bill to start with. I mean it's impossible to pay it.

Linda: If he didn't do that, we wouldn't be able to pay our way, that's for sure. And up to now we've been able to do that, but only by what Jim's been getting. (Interview 5: 2)

But earning little extras to help pay the bills and keep meat on the table was risky. Linda and Jim believed that neighbors on their council estate would report them if they found out. As Linda explained, when Jim was doing jobs, she would keep an eye out for strange activity in the street: "If I saw a car parked . . . too long . . . You gotta think, oh now, now they've got us (laughs)" (Interview 7: 7). Nor was this caution unfounded. Jim gave up making advertising boards after someone visited the firm and started asking questions (Interview 7: 28). Nonetheless, as time passed, and their debts mounted, both Linda and Jim became bolder about the jobs they were willing to take. Linda started doing night-shifts at a local care home without declaring her earnings, and in the summer of 1983, Jim earned enough money doing building jobs for an acquaintance that he was able to clear all their debts, restock the freezer, and buy the children's Christmas presents (as we discuss below, Linda and Jim both took considerable pride in their ability to plan ahead in this way). Pahl was delighted to hear that they had managed to get themselves straight, but Jim was uncomfortable about the whole thing.

Pahl: That's wonderful.

Jim: But that's only through cheating isn't it? I've broke the law, 'aven't I? But it's got us out of a mess, you know.

Pahl: Because, that's one of the problems in doing the story for the book, because that's the kind of thing one can't really write about, you see, in that way. And it is important.

Linda: It is, yes. Because, I mean, really, a lot of people are only surviving on doing that, you know, on working like that. (Interview 7: 28)

His comment about the need for silence underscores the historical value of returning to original transcripts, rather than relying solely on published studies.

Linda was rather less apologetic about the "cheating" that Pahl felt obliged to gloss over, but she too hated being forced into clandestine strategies by the poverty trap of means-tested benefits and longed to be able to escape "the system." In February 1983, she told Pahl,

You feel that they've got you. You've got to get away and you don't want to rely on them. They've got you there and you've got to watch what you do because you've got to answer to them for every penny you get. But perhaps you shouldn't have it. And you feel you're looking over your shoulder all the time you are doing it on the side. You feel that if you could get out and get away from them, [so] they haven't got any hold on you, you'd be all right. (Interview 6: 13)

Taking bigger risks than ever with her undeclared earnings, she later told Pahl,

Well, you know, they're going to catch up with me . . . but when they do, the worst they can do is make me pay it back, you know, they're not going to get it all in one lump, are they? [. . .] And they're not going to put me in prison, or anything like that, for it. (Interview 7: 3)

What Linda wanted, more than anything, was to break free from “the system” altogether—this was why she encouraged Jim’s plans to set up his own business delivering meals to the elderly, even though she knew it meant risking the £2,000 they had been offered by Jim’s parents after they sold their house.

Unemployment, Work, and Selfhood

Linda and Jim’s testimony offers powerful insights into what it meant to be one of the “unemployed”—not just what it meant to have to make do with too little money, but what it meant to be defined by government agencies as “unemployed.” There can be no doubt that Linda and Jim both hated being labeled in this way almost as much as they hated the hardships that life on benefits dictated. In early 1983, Pahl asked whether it made things “better that there’s a lot more unemployed now.” Jim felt that it did, though not very enthusiastically, saying, “I suppose it makes you feel a bit better in yourself, you know.” But Linda was dismissive of the idea: “I don’t feel that, I feel the opposite. I don’t want to be the same as anyone else” (Interview 6: 1). It was a powerful re-assertion of her individuality against a “system” which seemed determined to crush it. Similar feelings probably lay behind Linda’s scathing views about what she called “the bums” who used the town’s unemployed center. She told Pahl,

the sort of people that go down and use that place, to me, are people that don’t want to work anyway—they’ve never worked. Call ’em what you like, bums, or whatever they are, but they’re the people on this island that have never done a day’s work—never wanted to go to work—lived off the State all their lives . . . but they’re the sort of people that go there, for what they can get ’anded out there, that’s all. [. . .] I wouldn’t go there because everyone will think I’m going up there, to that place where all the bums go [. . .]. (Interview 7: 26)

When Pahl challenged her, pointing out that there were no jobs on the island, Jim backed her up, confirming that “there are quite a few who ’ave never been to work.” Here then we see both Linda and Jim appealing to the “big story” of their lives (that they both had extensive experience of work) to create an identity distinct from those with a very different work history. When Linda tried to explain her views, her characteristic fluency evaporated; it became clear that her strong feelings about the center sprang from fears about what “ordinary people” thought about the unemployed, and, by implication, about her,

They’re looking at *them* as a different class of people, I think, now, you know, they’re not looking at *them* as, *ordinary people*—doing a decent day’s work and earning a living, they’re looking at *you* as *people that are out of work*, and the more you read in the paper, the more they turn it round to [be] that people don’t want to go to work. Well, it’s not the case, there are those that do want to go to work, but they’re all sort of being grouped together as if *you don’t want to go to work*. And especially some, I think, on the Island, you know, because it is a small place [. . .]. (Interview 7: 27, emphasis added)

The shift from “them” to “you” here underscores how Linda was trying, but failing, to distance herself from the unemployed because of her perception that they were routinely condemned as workshy by other islanders, as well as by the media. Her antipathy toward the center sprang from her sense that it reinforced stereotypically negative views about those without work (fueling the hostility which led her to believe that neighbors might report them to the authorities for working cash-in-hand).

Linda’s comments underscored just how much being classed with the unemployed (which of course technically *she* wasn’t) made her feel stripped of her full personhood. We see this clearly in comments she made about the contrast between the authorities’ generous support for the unemployed center and their refusal to back their scheme for a local meals-on-wheels service,

when you think what Jim’s asking for is not an awful lot of money . . . plus the fact that he’d be keeping us himself again, you know . . . plus, you get back all your pride and your confidence and everything, you know, ’cos you’re back to being *people* again, you know. You think, it’s not asking for so much, when you think, the money that they’re dishing out, and all the trouble they’ve had with that centre for the unemployed. (Interview 7: 25, emphasis added)

It is impossible to know exactly what Linda meant by “you’re back to being people again”—but there are clues in the discursive opposition she constructed between “ordinary people” and the unemployed. It was about not being a statistic—part of a social “problem.” Mike Savage (2005b, 2010) has made much of the importance of the claim to be “ordinary” as a defense against social stigmatization in working class culture, and we see here a strong suggestion that for Linda one of the vital elements of normative “ordinariness” was work itself.

But Linda’s story was about more than what other people might think of her. Linda’s fears were more personal; more intimately wrapped up with her identity. As Jim’s unemployment dragged on, Linda started to feel that fate was condemning her to reenact the life she had known as a child. Indeed, it seems to have been this fear which drove her determination to come up with schemes, like the meals-on-wheels service, which would make them “ordinary people” again. Speaking in 1982, she told Pahl,

I think if you don't try and do something, you're going to be just . . . the rest of your life . . . I keep saying to Jim I hate being on social security because I was brought up on it and ever since I got married I haven't been on it and to me it's like going back. I can see myself in years to come like my mum and that were sort of every week relying on the giro to come through the door, before you can go and get your shopping. (Interview 5: 9)

A year later, with their hopes of escaping benefits apparently more fragile than ever, Linda returned to the subject of her upbringing, and how she had hoped to ensure that her children would never know the hardships she had been used to. She told Pahl,

if you come from a family like mine, you want your own to have it completely different from what you had yourself. And yet, on the other hand, sometimes I think it might do them good to be like we were. But sometimes I feel so bad about it—that I'm going to live my mother's life over again. My father couldn't work and that was all we relied on, whether the social security money turned up and if it didn't . . . we went through it if it didn't come. (Interview 6: 6)

Selina Todd has written about the increased importance parents attached, by the mid-20th century, to being able to provide their children with lives that were better than those they themselves had known (Todd, 2005; Todd & Young, 2012). In her first interview, Linda had expressed this feeling strongly, explaining why she wanted her children to have better jobs than those provided in the local factories,

I'd like mine to have jobs where they can either go and meet different people and see different places and something a bit interesting. [. . .] we was always conditioned into doing domestic, like cleaning or washing up and working in cafes and things like that, you know. I don't want that, you know, I'd like them to do something a lot more interesting. (Interview 1: 12)

However, by 1983, she was desperate to see her older daughter, who had been unemployed for nearly 2 years, get any job at all. Worse than that, she was beginning to think that prolonged unemployment was sapping Kim's willingness to work. She told Pahl, "To be honest, I know she's my daughter, but they don't seem to want, even Kim, she don't seem to want to know" (Interview 6: 10). Both Linda and Jim worried that Kim was being socialized into worklessness rather than work. It was one of a number of occasions when they demonstrated their own powerful ability to think sociologically. When Pahl pointed out that it was "not entirely silly" for Kim to argue that there just weren't any jobs, Jim responded "I think this is going to be the trouble later on," before adding

I don't think they will go to work again . . . If they go to work when they leave school, like we did, then you accept work, don't you, you know you've got to go. But I don't think . . . they don't bother. (Interview 6: 10)

Linda and Jim repeatedly stressed the potential social and psychological benefits of work. Indeed, both said that they would be happy to work even if they were no better off than on the dole (and Linda eventually lived up to her words). Pahl (1984) quoted Linda at length on the affirming role of work in her life, including her comment that,

I think it gets you out the house, you know, and then you've got something else to talk about [. . .] Otherwise, you're stuck in from 9 o'clock when they go to school and when he's been away you just—well you feel you're wasted really, you think, what am I doing sitting here not doing myself or anybody else any good. (pp. 287-288)

There was also a deeply *personal* reason why Linda found her job as a home help affirming. She latched on to her supervisor's idea that she was good at the job because she came from a big family—something which Linda often felt was a source of social stigmatization as well as childhood privations. In short, it became something which affirmed her identity in very personal ways. She told Pahl,

We've got a supervisor. She's nice and she thinks we (Linda and her sister) took to the job well because we come from a big family, you know, you're more understanding if you come from a big family and you know you can cope with lots of things easier than if you was an only child or come from a small family sort of thing. So if anything I think it does help to come from a big family sometimes and other times I think it doesn't. (Interview 2: 12)

Jim's attitude to work was broadly similar, but he was clear that a good job was not simply a well-paid job. Ideally, he would always prefer to work on the water, but if this was not possible, then he wanted a job that was varied and satisfying. In 1980, when he was about to be laid off, he told Pahl that what he looked for in a job was

Something interesting—I don't like doing the same thing all the time—well the same as everyone, I don't think anybody likes doing repetitious work, assembly line or something like this [. . .] I like to be outside—I like to work on the water. I'd go on the water anywhere, even in winter, I'd sooner be out there than in a factory all the time. (Interview 3: 2)

Linda and Jim remained strongly invested not just in work but in the distinction between hard-working "ordinary people" and a workshy "other." Indeed, this distinction, achieved partly through situating Jim's current episode of unemployment in the context of his past work history and their aspirations for the future, helped them rationalize their willingness to "cheat" the system by taking cash-in-hand jobs within the informal economy. Like their determination to strategize about the future, which we discuss in the next section, it demonstrated that they were not willing passively to accept their fate.

Orientation to the Future

Speaking in late 1983, by which time Jim had been out of work for over 3 years, Linda voiced doubts about their continued refusal to reconcile themselves to life on benefits. She told Pahl,

sometimes we've felt what was the use of it all, why don't we just sit back. Then you think about it, you're just sitting there . . . you're using your fire all day. You don't even want to go out shopping, because you haven't got the money . . . you just sit there, you've got nothing to talk about any more. That's why I like working. (Interview 7: 36)

Delighted to be working again, Linda claimed to feel: "more confident in myself . . . I've got my confidence back," adding "you've just got to keep fighting, you know, until you get there" (Interview 7: 7-8). It was not just the satisfaction of once again being a "provider," Linda also rejoiced in the fact that the job was part of a long-term plan to get the whole family off benefits. Earlier, she had told Pahl that she was applying to be a part-time warden for an old people's home because it would be a stepping-stone to a full-time position where she could earn enough to be the family "breadwinner." She told Pahl,

That's why I wanted to get in here; [to] get a job as a full warden, apart from the fact that I would feel that it was a personal achievement for me to get.

Pahl: It seems like a good thing, even if you don't get the money in the short-term.

Linda: I would feel quite proud of myself and I would feel that I had achieved something. (Interview 6: 12)

Interestingly, this is consistent with recent work on the limitations of the "added worker effect" for understanding the labor market behavior of individuals in couple relationships following the unemployment of one partner (Gush, Scott, & Laurie, 2015). Analysis of in-depth interviews with a small subsample of members of the "Understanding Society" household panel study demonstrated that a decision to take a job immediately following unemployment may not seem economically rational in the short term, but may be rooted in an assessment of how this position will provide a career advantage in the longer term.

Linda's strategy—to take a job that didn't pay to improve her chances of securing one that did—underscored one of the defining features of her sense of selfhood: her self-conscious orientation toward the future. Linda commented that friends told her she should just live in the present, but she remained determined to maintain a broad time horizon. She took pride in the fact that, however difficult their situation might be, she was always planning. At the start of 1981, she told Pahl,

I'd like to look ahead so I'll be alright this year, sort of thing. If I could keep it alright for the rest of this year in advance all the time, but you just can't. But you've got to keep looking. You've got to worry about it before you get there. It's like other people I talk to, they say you don't want to worry about it, you've just got to live from day to day, but you don't just live from day to day, you've still got to be next week or next month all the time. (Interview 4: 10)

It was this logic which meant that she and Jim were always trying to think up new ways to get off benefits—her two-stage job strategy, his hope that casual jobs might eventually allow him to develop enough contacts to go self-employed, and of course their joint scheme to set up a private meals-on-wheels business for Sheppey. At the close of the seventh interview, in December 1983, Pahl observed "there's never a quiet moment in your lives," to which Linda replied, "No, there never is . . . but only because I think you've got to look for something all the time, and if you didn't, you'd have nothing to keep your brain going" (Interview 7: 44). She knew all too well that it would be easier to give up than "keep fighting," but she remained stubbornly determined not to relinquish her hold on imagined futures much rosier than the present. From a narrative perspective, her optimistic persistence in searching for a means of making money was a way to forestall "narrative foreclosure"—that is, the sense that one's life story has ceased to develop further, that there is now no hope of another chapter to life (Freeman, 2000).

But holding on to this vision of a better future would ultimately mean acting in ways that challenged other facets of their sense of self. Linda and Jim were both strongly anti-Conservative, and never wavered in their skepticism about the Thatcherite economic and social policies of the early 1980s. Although Jim blamed his workmates for doing too little to save his job, he remained a staunch supporter of trade unionism and the principle of solidarity. He was critical of local steel workers for crossing picket lines during a recent dispute, and he celebrated the fact that in the north, people were "more inclined to stick together" (Interview 3: 5-6, 22; Interview 4: 7). Linda joined the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), the public service union, at the first opportunity, and routinely portrayed herself as socially concerned and communitarian (despite her views on the unemployed center). For instance, she took pride in telling how, whenever a local farmer gave her free oranges from the docks, she chose to give most of them to a lone mother with eight children, rather than to her own family leading Jim to say she was "too soft" (Interview 1: 10). And later, when money was much tighter, she still liked to charge clients different amounts for private care, depending on their ability to pay (Interview 5: 13).

But Linda and Jim's cherished plans to set up a local meals-on-wheels service depended on Government incentives to small business creation (unlike Social Security, the Enterprise Allowance was not means-tested, allowing Linda

to keep working, Interview 7: 21-2). More troublingly, they also realized that if their plans succeeded, there was a real danger that other council employees would lose their jobs. As Jim explained, originally they had hoped that their scheme would enable the council to improve its home help service, but they now had doubts:

They can't go shopping, clean up, cook a meal, in an hour—you see. Well, I thought along the lines, well, perhaps, if I done the meal, then they, . . . give them time to do . . . But, the way things are going, it wouldn't be like that. (Interview 7: 22)

They both felt bad about this, but they were not prepared to abandon their plans. Not only had they become part of the privatization of social services but it seemed likely that getting Jim off social security could mean condemning others to his fate. The couple's tortured explanations underscore not only their conflicted feelings but also their determination not to abandon their dream of escape:

Jim: [. . .] I hate to say this, but er . . . the way I feel about losing jobs for other people, but . . . er . . . they've got home helps in, to cook old people a meal, and it costs them over £2, for an hour—I mean . . . I mean . . . this is the way things seem to be going, isn't it, I mean . . .

Linda: This is where you get that bit . . . before you think about taking somebody's bread and butter, more or less, don't you? But now you, you don't feel that way anymore, so much, you know . . . You're not so worried about taking someone else's work, are you? Any more. (Interview 7: 22)

It is possible that they simply thought that Pahl would disapprove of their new-found ruthlessness, but the hesitancy here feels more personal (Linda's inability to use the first person is suggestive). Also it was they, rather than Pahl, who raised the issue; this soul-searching was not simply a product of interview dynamics (Lawrence, 2014; Summerfield, 2000).⁷

Circumstances had forced them to bend toward new Thatcherite norms, even if their politics remained anti-Conservative. Choice was severely constrained at the sharp end of the 1980s' new economic order. Pahl notes, in a footnote, that as the book went to press in March 1984, Jim's scheme had finally got council backing and was going ahead. He tells us that "They are both eager that I follow their story into the better life that they can now see opening up in front of them" (Pahl, 1984, 304n). Apparently, their strong orientation toward the future had been rewarded.⁸

People rarely live out their lives according to the dictates of ideological principles, and we should not be surprised to find Linda and Jim displaying both individualistic and communitarian impulses faced by the challenges of long-term unemployment. Arguably, what made Thatcherism so successful in the 1980s (and beyond) was not that it changed minds (hence, its abject failure to weaken popular identification with the

egalitarian principles of the National Health Service [NHS]), but rather that it changed facts on the ground. The Enterprise Allowance grant, which helped Jim to imagine taking the risk of setting up in business, was one example. Another was the government's policy to sell council houses to tenants at heavily discounted prices. Although Jim's family had been home owners for many years, it was Linda who, despite her traveler roots, became most seized by the idea of property ownership. However, she did not simply imagine buying their current council house because this was mid-terrace. Instead, when Pahl met her in December 1983, Linda was trying to persuade the council that the family should be allowed to take on the tenancy of an end-terrace property in the same block. She liked the greater privacy this house offered—"you haven't got anybody looking in on you [. . .] it's still on a block of four, but it faces away" (Interview 7: 35). Linda was convinced that "if I keep on pushing it I would get that house," and that if she succeeded, they would then be able to exercise the "right to buy." It was another example of her strong orientation toward the future, but arguably also of the ways in which Thatcherite policies could capture the imagination of people still hostile to the party's broader political vision.

Conclusion

Focusing our attention on Linda and Jim's "small stories" has cast the big story of the impact on their lives of Thatcherite restructuring in a different light. Pahl (1984) chose to focus on how, unlike "affluent" workers George and Beryl, Linda and Jim were "oppressed by circumstances they could not control" so that despite displaying "more enterprise, initiative and determination to achieve" they remained trapped in poverty and dependency (p. 309). Pahl was less interested in the small stories they told about coping with unemployment, and his determination to reject deterministic psychological models of the effects of unemployment made him downplay questions of psychology and personal identity. Pahl (2009) chose to focus on the immediate public policy issues thrown up by the return of mass unemployment, including social polarization and the perverse consequences of the welfare poverty trap. Changing the lens through which we study Linda and Jim can offer different understandings of what it meant to be unemployed in Thatcher's Britain.

As outlined in the "Introduction" section, an aim of this article has been to demonstrate the value of returning to in-depth biographical interviews that were conducted several decades ago. Although some authors have suggested that the distance between the analyst/researcher and the interviewee is problematic for the secondary analysis of qualitative material (Mauthner, Parry, & Backett-Milburn, 1998), we turn this argument on its head. As we have demonstrated, there are three key advantages to analyzing qualitative material at temporal distance. First, the passage of time can make it possible to use material that might previously have compromised the respondents (e.g., the details of Linda and Jim's strategies for getting by, supplementing benefits with casual earnings). Second, the

distance created by time and the secondary nature of the analysis allows for a new perspective on the performative aspects of the interview encounter itself. The secondary analyst's distance from both the interviewer and interviewee is key here (Elliott & Lawrence, in press; Ewing, 2006; Lawrence, 2014; Manderson, Bennett, & Andajani-Sutjaho, 2006). Third, the historical and socio-cultural context framing the interviews can be easier to detect when researchers have both personal and temporal distance from the original interview.

This series of candid and often intimate interviews offers unique insights into the everyday lives of people who would otherwise have left little or no written record. We see how Linda recoiled from the prospect that she might be destined to re-live her mother's life on benefits, and how this in turn fed her harsh condemnation of people she believed to be reconciled to such a life. Similarly, once we recognize Linda's determination to transcend her past, it becomes easier to understand how she could view work and full personhood as wholly intertwined, and hence why she was always so determined to keep working (and why Jim, whose background was different, was always more hesitant about "cheating" the system). But, perhaps most unexpectedly, focusing on the strategies Linda and Jim pursued to resist being stigmatized as welfare recipients, including their strong orientation to both work and the future, helps us to understand how they ultimately came to act in ways which effectively aligned them with the New Right's economic agenda. Although politically they remained staunchly anti-Conservative, their determination to recover their "independence" in the context of radically constrained choices led them to embrace many of the norms of the emerging Thatcherite economic and political order.

Authors' Note

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Notes

1. Pahl Notebook, "Sheppey, January 1978-" (courtesy of Graham Crow).

2. R. Pahl, Social and political implications of household work strategies, 1978-1983. SN: 4876, U.K. Data Service (UKDS), University of Essex, Box 5. See Lyon, Morgan-Brett, and Crow (2012). The original recordings survive for the first six interviews, and for two subsequent interviews in 1989 and 1992, although sections are no longer audible or have been wiped entirely. The transcriptions appear very faithful although there is some "tidying up." It is unfortunate that the recording of the most intimate and emotional interview, the seventh, has not survived.
3. See also his 1998 interview, where he stresses how much remains to be done with the vast ethnographic field-notes collected on Sheppey (Pahl, 1998, pp. 113-115). A potential explored further in Lyon et al. (2012) and Lyon and Crow (2012).
4. The 1976 Supplementary Benefits Act, which was in force throughout this period, stipulated that proceedings in respect of social security fraud must be brought within 12 months from the commission of an offense (Section 26[3][b]). The 1992 Social Security Administration Act now in force specifies a maximum 7-year limitation for offenses.
5. All names are the pseudonyms originally assigned by Ray Pahl for publication. Some details of the case have been deliberately fictionalized, without distorting the key characteristics of the couple's wider family, to help preserve the anonymity of Linda and Jim as far as possible. It is also interesting to note that there are some minor discrepancies between Pahl's account of Linda and Jim's family and the materials in the archive, and it is not clear whether he made these adjustments deliberately in the interests of confidentiality.
6. Pauses in respondents' speech indicated in the transcripts are recorded thus "...". Ellipsis is indicated by the use of parentheses "[. . .]."
7. Unfortunately, the original tape for this interview has not survived so we cannot turn to audio evidence to assess the couple's emotionality.
8. But in an interview in 1998, Pahl suggested that the council later undermined the venture. He noted that the Council "didn't somehow give him a very modest subsidy, or the guarantee of the meals, to enable him to . . . and so, in fact, they broke him, even though they knew that he was far more efficient, cheaper, and effective than the other statutory services" (Pahl, 1998, p. 106).

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