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The trouble with ‘hard working families’

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‘If I’m Prime Minister I will put working families first ...’

Ed Miliband, former leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the Opposition Government, UK (Last efforts launched to seize election victory, 2015)

‘What we want to do is get behind families that work hard and do the right thing.’

David Cameron, Prime Minister, UK (Cameron and Clegg: We’ll back hard working families, n.d.)

Introduction

In this first in a new series of *Voices* pieces for the Journal, we set out to trouble the much-vaunted phrase ‘hard working families’. During the 2015 election campaign in the UK, we observed that politicians from across the political spectrum hardly ever used the word ‘families’ without prefacing it with two more words: ‘hard working’. While this may be a peculiarly global North turn of phrase, adopted by politicians in the UK, the USA and Australia, here we offer a critique of the term ‘hard working family’ that, we hope, speaks more generally to issues of community, work and family and to the global rise of neoliberal-ableism (Goodley, Lawthom, & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

‘Hard working families’

Under neoliberal-ableism, the rationality of the market is paramount; the ideal citizen is an adaptable citizen indeed *he* is an *able individual* (note the deliberate gendered/ableist positioning of the subject here) who is caught up in and complicit with the demands of late capitalism (Goodley et al., 2014). The ‘hard working family’ discourse conforms to the neoliberal-ableist trope; the ‘hard working family’ is independent, self-sufficient and, crucially, it does not rely on the state for its survival. As the British Prime Minister said, these are people who ‘do the right thing’ (Cameron and Clegg: We’ll back hard working families, n.d.). Implicit in the policy rhetoric is that the ‘hard working family’ is a ‘normal’ family, a nuclear family. In a time of austerity, ‘hard working families’ include two parents who are both expected to engage in

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paid work; under neoliberalism mothers are expected both to labour and to consume, and to mother and to care (de Benedictis, 2012) if they want to be judged to be ‘doing the right thing’.

As has been argued elsewhere, neoliberalism is premised upon the identification of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Ramilow, 2006; Runswick-Cole, 2014), and so the logic of neoliberal ideology demands that we sort the leaners from the lifters, or the scroungers from the strivers, in order to establish who will (and who will not) benefit from the redistributive practices of the welfare states (Stone, 1984). It is not, then, surprising that the appeal to ‘hard working families’ can also be seen as a not so subtle attempt to demarcate the ‘us’ from the ‘them’. In UK policy discourse, ‘hard working families’ are referenced both directly and indirectly in contrast to those families who have been constructed as their polar opposites: ‘troubled families’ (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2012).

‘Troubled families’

In a speech in 2011, Cameron, the British Prime Minister said:

... I want to talk about troubled families. Let me be clear what I mean by this phrase. Officialdom might call them ‘families with multiple disadvantages’.

Some in the press might call them ‘neighbours from hell’. Whatever you call them, we’ve known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. (Cameron, 2011)

In defining ‘hard working families’ Cameron appeals to the *implicit* assumption that they will to ‘do the right thing’ – work hard, care for their children and will not make a claim on the welfare state or be a drain their local communities. In contrast, in his account of ‘troubled families’, he makes an *explicit* appeal to popular understandings of ‘neighbours from hell’ in order to drive home the message that these families are not like ‘us’: they are firmly in the category of ‘them’; they don’t work, they claim benefits and they disrupt their local communities. In discussion of both ‘hard working families’ and ‘troubled families’, Cameron appeals to an unspoken assumption, that ‘we’ know who ‘these people’ are. It is this ‘common sense’ binary view of ‘hard working’ versus ‘troubled’ families that we need to, well, trouble (Butler, 1990)

Enter disability

As authors, we locate our work in the field of critical disability studies. Critical disability studies aim to understand and challenge exclusionary and oppressive practices associated with disablism and to consider the ways these intersect with other forms of marginalisation including hetero/sexism, racism, poverty and imperialism (Goodley, 2014). We have written elsewhere about the ways in which, when disability ‘enters the field, it queers the normative pitch’ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014, p. 1). Here we focus on the ways that disability troubles notions of the family, though we acknowledge that this analysis also intersects with issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race.

As part of a recent research project *Big Society? Disabled people with learning disabilities and civil society* (www.bigsocietydis.wordpress.com) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1), we worked in coproduction with people

with learning disabilities to ask how disabled people are faring in a time of austerity. Our project focused on their experiences of work, self-advocacy and community inclusion and, not surprisingly, these issues touch on matters of intimate and family life.

As part of our research we worked with a co-researcher, Valerie (pseudonym), a young woman who is paid as a trainer and advocate at a small self-advocacy organization in the north of England. In addition to her roles as advocate and trainer, Valerie works for the Care Quality Commission as an expert by experience and regularly inspects services for people with learning disabilities, including group homes and hospitals. Valerie has two daughters and she works hard to support her two children. Extended family, colleagues and friends at the self-advocacy group all support Valerie's family life. And yet the presence of disability disrupts any claim this family might have to being categorized as a 'hard working family'. The 'hard working family' is independent, self-sufficient and, crucially, it does not rely on the state for its survival, in contrast, Valerie's family is interdependent, relies on a network of support and on state benefits for its survival. That Valerie is 'hard working' may not be in dispute, but the family isn't 'hard working' enough to be categorized as a 'hard working family'. The systemic and structural disadvantages that persist in families sitting at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class and disability mean that many families will, like Valerie's, risk being categorised as 'them'. Despite the politicians' appeal to the 'hard working family', categorization as such has become the preserve of a privileged few.

And finally ...

The global reach of the term 'hard working families' reflects the powerful grip of neoliberal-ableist ideologies (Goodley et al., 2014). A critical disability studies perspective offers a powerful lens through which to trouble and to refuse the much repeated and seemingly 'common sense' appeals made to 'hard working families' that too often cloud analyses of community, work and family.

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