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Electronic supplement analysis of multiple texts

Exploring discourses of UK poverty in Below the Line comments

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This paper adapts O'Halloran's (2010) electronic supplement analysis (ESA) to investigate debates about UK poverty in online newspaper articles and reader responses to those articles. While O'Halloran's method was originally conceived to facilitate close reading, this paper modifies ESA for corpus-based discourse analysis by scaling it up to include multiple texts. I analyse (key-)keywords and concordances to compare seven articles from the *Mail Online* (2010-2015) with their 2354 reader responses generated using the newspapers' Below the Line (BTL) comments feature. The analysis provides a snapshot of the discourses BTL commenters draw upon when writing about UK poverty. Unemployment, benefits receipt, and single parenthood were repeatedly referred to in the newspaper articles and their comments, but BTL commenters also drew on personal narratives and (fictional) anecdotes to index notions of flawed consumerism, scroungers, and the deserving and undeserving poor.

Keywords: poverty, BTL comments, electronic supplement analysis (ESA), indexicality, discourse

1. Introduction

This paper analyses reader responses to online newspaper articles about UK poverty. It adapts O'Halloran's (2010) method of "electronic supplement analysis" to compare seven *Mail Online* articles and their Below the Line (BTL) comments. BTL comments is the name given to public-authored comments that are appended to an online article. Branded as a form of 'participatory journalism' (Jewell, 2014) they appear immediately beneath an article (Figure 1), which acts as a stimulus to generate discussion. In O'Halloran's terms, they are the 'electronic supplement' to the original article.[1] Although not all online newspapers facilitate reader responses through BTL comments, and those that do may not enable this feature for all articles,

they are a useful source for scrutinising public reactions to a given topic. While BTL comments tend to be moderated (and posts can be removed if they do not abide by community guidelines) they are nevertheless a fruitful (and relatively novel) resource for gauging popular reactions to a particular story and can act as a window on wider debates.
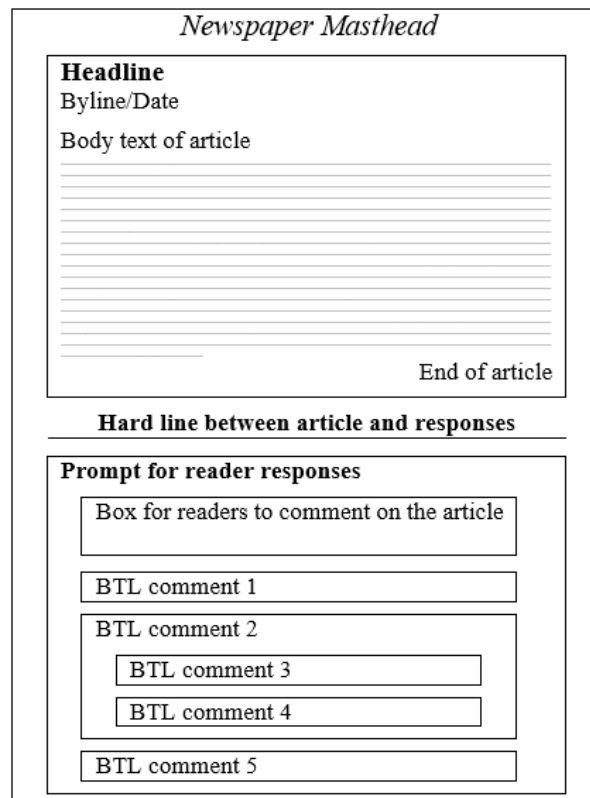
Figure 1: The location of BTL comments in relation to the stimulus article

This paper sits within the broad field of corpus-based critical discourse analysis and takes 'discourse' to refer to "language as [a form of] social practice determined by social structures" (Fairclough, 2001: 14). Considering the language used by members of the public makes it possible to see what aspects of the original articles (and debates about poverty more generally) commenters tend to challenge or accept. BTL comments are a good source for analysing the discourses employed and ideological positions indexed by the public when debating UK poverty. Their analysis can foreground the similarities and differences between institutionally-produced texts which represent certain political positions (i.e. *Mail Online* articles taking a right-of-centre stance) and individually-authored texts produced by a heterogeneous public. The BTL comments analysed here are similar in function to those appended to blogs, with Kehoe & Gee (2012) noting that analysing such comments is one way to determine the "aboutness" of a blog post.

My modified version of electronic supplement analysis compares (key-)keywords for the stimulus articles with (key-)keywords for their corresponding reader responses. I draw on 'indexicality' – the use of particular signs (linguistic or otherwise) to refer to aspects of identity (c.f. Ochs, 1992; see also section 3) – to interrogate those keywords which suggest negative stereotyping and/or are potential indices of social class (van der Bom et al., 2019). I show how the BTL commenters entextualise discourses of flawed consumerism (Bauman, 2004) and the undeserving poor (Katz, 2013) to index a particular construction of 21st century UK poverty, part of which denies that UK poverty exists. There is also evidence that poverty is gendered (insofar as mothers and fathers are evaluated differently). Ultimately, this paper adds to the growing body of research on media representations of 21st century UK poverty (Wood & Skeggs, 2011; Lundström, 2013; Paterson et al., 2016; van der Bom et al., 2018; Paterson & Gregory, 2019).

To contextualise this paper, section 2 provides an overview of scholarship concerning media representations of poverty, while section 3 sets out the core components of ESA. Section 4 includes information about data selection and details how I adapted ESA for multiple stimulus texts and thus for wider use in corpus-based discourse analysis. The analysis is split into three parts: section 5.1 analyses individual articles and their BTL comments, section 5.2 focuses on trends across the texts, and section 5.3 considers whether those reading the BTL comments accept or reject particular discourses. Data from the *Mail Online*'s comment voting system indicates that, while resistant readers exist (c.f. Baker & Ellece, 2011: 120), *Mail Online* commenters endorse conceptualisations of UK poverty which draw upon the negative evaluations of benefits recipients, the unemployed, and (single) parents.

2. Representing poverty and the poor

This paper focuses exclusively on written realisations of poverty discourses, but the mass media has multiple outlets for representing and evaluating poverty and the poor; see Paterson et al. (2016) and van der Bom et al. (2018) for an analysis of public reactions to the television programme *Benefits Street* and Wood & Skeggs' (2011) anthology for papers on televisual depictions of social class. However, written depictions of UK poverty are also an important site of study. For example, Paterson & Gregory (2019) use two corpora of the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* (2010-2015) to demonstrate how place-names are used strategically by each newspaper to foreground aspects of UK poverty that match their ideological stances. The

Guardian supports its pro-welfare position by focusing on large urban areas in England which had experienced cuts in government-funded council services. By contrast, the *Daily Mail* focuses on smaller urban areas to foreground private sector redundancies and to rank places by the number of benefits claimants, referring to towns in the north of England as "jobless ghettos" (Paterson & Gregory, 2019: 139).

Also focusing on newspapers, Lundström (2013) compares UK and Swedish newspaper articles with public-authored texts on welfare cheating. His analysis of 181 UK articles shows a focus on unemployment and criminality (although the latter was less important in the public-authored texts). Lundström (2013: 639) argues that a focus on the financial aspects of benefit receipt "legitimizes claims for more cutbacks and control, and […] limits the space available for articulating counter-arguments". He proposes that because poverty is "symbolically connected to negative characteristics of individual recipients", it becomes "more difficult to make political claims for certain groups of people" and can "change the conditions under which public support for the welfare state is created" (Lundström, 2013: 631). Further evidence for Lundström's position comes from an IPSOS Mori survey which showed that in 2013 "the British public believed 24% of benefits were fraudulently claimed" while the actual figure was around 0.8% (Paterson & Gregory, 2019: xxi). This overestimation of fraud can be linked to sensationalist media coverage, such as the *Sun* newspaper's "Beat the Cheat" campaign (Paterson & Gregory, 2019: xxi) and anti-fraud advertisements endorsed by the DWP (see Roberts, 2017).

While Lundström's (2013) work suggests that the UK press focus on individual benefit cheats, Cassiman's (2008: 1692) research on the characterisation of US welfare recipients shows a gendered-slant to poverty debates. She argues that "[s]tructural problems, most commonly associated with poverty, are reinvented as personal failings embodied by the 'welfare queen', discursively sending mothers receiving welfare to the margins of moral motherhood and personhood" (Cassiman, 2008: 1692). In the UK, McKenzie (2015) expresses similar sentiments in her sociological study of the St Ann's council estate in Nottingham. She concludes that the women on the estate "were acutely aware of 'never being good enough' […] they raged at how they were misrepresented within the media, ridiculed, laughed at and hated" (McKenzie, 2015: 204).

This negative characterisation of women is socially powerful. For example, Levitas et al. (2006: 406) discuss how media texts and government ministers claim a "culture of dependency" particularly among "young women getting pregnant in order to be allocated council housing". Rarely, if at all, is any hard evidence, such as statistics, used to support this

characterisation of young mothers. However, there is evidence that members of the UK public accept and reproduce this position. For example, in their analysis of focus group responses to the television programme *Benefits Street*, Paterson et al. (2016: 209) give an example where their participants collaboratively construct a fictionalised encounter where a "girl with a baby" demands a flat from the local council. Thus, poverty and gender collide and are linked to welfare dependency, with poor (single) mothers characterised as "*being* a problem" as opposed to "*having* problems as a result of their poverty" (Levitas et al., 2006: 406).

Lorenzo-Dus & Marsh (2012: 276) argue that institutions such as the media, banks, governments, and the criminal courts, construct a "macro-level (social) phenomenon of poverty" which is "(re)constructed through an array of micro-level practices of speaking, writing and/or visually showing" within spaces controlled by elite groups. They claim media texts draw on and regurgitate "(stereotyped) beliefs about who 'the poor' are and how they live" which "activates discriminatory practices of othering" (2012: 276). Newspaper articles focusing on poverty (and 'benefit cheats') serve the same purpose. When BTL comments are enabled on articles covering such topics, readers are invited to join in the judgement of the poor individual and, more generally, to judge those whom they believe are part of the same social category. Not all BTL commenters will agree with the position taken in an article, but identifying comments that are positively received by others (section 5.3) shows which positions are popular.

3. Electronic supplement analysis

To systematically analyse BTL comments, I adapt O'Halloran's (2010) method of electronic supplement analysis (ESA), a corpus-based method which directly compares a stimulus text to reader-produced responses to that text. In his exemplar analysis, O'Halloran demonstrates ESA using a single *Guardian* article on 'new atheism'. O'Halloran argues that comparing a stimulus text (the newspaper article) to its electronic supplement (BTL comments) can highlight sites of tension within the original text. BTL comments are not merely isolated responses to the stimulus text or produced in a vacuum; readers will draw on wider contextual knowledge, social norms, and prevalent ideologies to inform their responses.

O'Halloran's (2010: 210) central thesis is that all texts contain "concepts, persons, places, times, issues, perceptions, etc." which have been centralised (they are the core components of a text), while other potential concepts, persons, etc. have been pushed to the

margins or eliminated completely. Comparing a stimulus article to the comments it generates can bring the arguments which may have been marginalised into focus (O'Halloran, 2010: 212). ESA cannot determine why a text's author(s) chose to centralise certain concepts, etc. at the expense of others, but it can illuminate reader responses to the centralisation of those concepts, people, places, times, etc. The electronic supplement situates the stimulus article in its wider context, "showing its wider connections with a set of other related texts and meanings circulating at that particular moment" (O'Halloran, 2010: 214). As such, it is worth foregrounding that ESA is not restricted to newspaper articles; the core method can be applied whenever one text acts as a stimulus for multiple responses.

To interrogate the relationship between a stimulus text and its responses, O'Halloran argues that salience (calculated using keywords) is primary: "[s]hould certain repeated concepts be salient in an electronic supplement as a whole but absent from, or at best marginal in the text that is being responded to, this can offer insights into what the text might be said to repress or marginalise" (O'Halloran, 2010: 211). At its core, ESA is a three-step process. Step 1: Keywords are generated for the stimulus article and its electronic supplement. Step 2: The keywords are grouped semantically to highlight differences between the stimulus article and the readers' responses. Step 3: The stimulus article is recast, incorporating the results of the keyword analysis. The aim is to disrupt the stimulus article by foregrounding those elements which may have been marginalised in its original form. He highlights three particular types of keywords that are of interest (Table 1).

Table 1: Categories of ESA (adapted from O'Halloran, 2010: 215)

	Potentially indicated by	
Repressed concepts (*omitted)	⟶	Keywords in the BTL comments which are NOT in the stimulus article
Marginalised concepts		Keywords in the BTL comments which are INFREQUENT in the stimulus article
Misrepresented concepts	⟶	Keywords in the BTL comments which CHALLENGE their use in the stimulus article

While 'marginalised' – mentioned but not central to the stimulus article – and 'misrepresented' – a site of debate for BTL commenters – are used here, the term 'repressed' is replaced with 'omitted' as a more neutral term devoid of any implicit links to psychological repression. Thus, 'omitted' refers to keywords which only occur in the BTL comments and which may constitute evidence of what the commenters deemed significant but absent from the stimulus articles.

O'Halloran (2010) manually groups his keywords into semantic categories and treats these keyword sets as indicative of "traces" of marginalised concepts (persons, places, times,

etc.). An alternative interpretation of traces is 'indexicality' – the idea that the use of particular words or phrases can index (point to) identities and ideologies (Ochs, 1992). Following Kiesling (2009: 177), an "index is a type of linguistic (or other) sign that takes its meaning from the context of an utterance" which (often through repetition) is taken to refer to a particular social group. Kiesling (2009: 177) uses the term 'exterior indexicality' to define meaning which is "transportable from one speech event to another, and connects to social contexts that perdure from one speech event to another". The indices of UK poverty found here (section 5) are largely of this type, as the seven stimulus articles generated similar BTL comments. Thus, there is evidence that the discourses of poverty accepted by the BTL commenters are transportable across multiple sites of debate.

4. Adapting ESA and data selection

The present analysis deviates from O'Halloran's (2010) method of ESA in two major ways. First, I use seven stimulus articles and their BTL comments to demonstrate how ESA can be scaled-up for corpus-based discourse analysis. Second, the recasting component of ESA (step 3, noted above) is not performed. O'Halloran (2010) proposes ESA as a way of critically reading a single text. This paper is not concerned with critical reading per se, but rather uses ESA to identify similar ideas across multiple sites of debate. Rather than focusing on a single text, I identify repeated keywords and semantic fields to highlight exterior indexicality in texts about UK poverty. To this end, I also consider the importance of key-keywords (section 5.2). The analysis addresses the following research questions:

i. How do the keywords in the stimulus articles differ from those used in BTL comments?
ii. Do particular keywords suggest certain concepts, persons, etc. are marginalised or omitted?
iii. Do keywords index particular conceptualisations of UK poverty?
iv. Are particular discourses accepted/rejected BTL?

To investigate whether ESA can shed light on UK poverty discourses, seven stimulus articles were selected from the *Mail Online*, the UK's most-visited online newspaper (Jackson, 2016). The *Mail Online* was chosen for its right-of-centre political stance and its support for the Conservative Party, whose policies have included benefits cuts justified within a discourse of

austerity. The results of this analysis are therefore not generalisable to other newspapers, but can act as evidence that ESA can be adapted to multiple texts. Furthermore, the results show that analysing social phenomena (like poverty) using ESA is fruitful. The seven articles (Table 2) were sampled from January and June 2010-2015, which corresponds with the period of initial implementation of the UK Coalition government's Welfare Reform policies. To be selected for inclusion, articles had to include *poverty* in their headline and refer specifically to the UK. They also had to have over 100 BTL comments, indicating that they prompted many public comments . (No articles for January/June 2011, June 2013, January 2014, and June 2015 fulfilled all the selection criteria.)

Table 2: List of stimulus articles

	Date	Headline	No. words	No. BTL comments	No. words BTL
1	Jan 2010	Two million pensioners are living in poverty - with half unable to afford heating	365	125	9869
2	Jun 2010	'Idle fathers should be forced to work': Cameron's poverty guru targets feckless men	583	370	35907
3	Jan 2012	Generation of youngsters face retiring 'in poverty' because of pensions collapse	480	159	12217
4	Jun 2012	Jobs not handouts will drag families out of poverty, IDS to tell parents on the dole	976	263	18547
5	Jan 2013	Quarter of mothers forced to turn their heating off to afford food for their children: Survey warns of increase in 'fuel poverty'	443	559	41447
6	Jun 2014	More than 3.5million British children will live in poverty by 2020, report warns (and the government 'can't even define the word')	740	213	10559
7	Jan 2015	When poverty meant poverty: Impoverished Victorians revealed in photographs of workhouse residents eating their dinner and 'coffin beds' inside shelter	1485	675	27125
		Totals	5072	2364	155671

The articles discuss a range of different demographics (pensioners, idle fathers, the young, welfare recipients, children, mothers, and Victorians) and provide a snap-shot of the *Mail Online*'s coverage of UK poverty. While analysing additional articles or more newspapers would have expanded this research further, the goal here was to demonstrate that ESA can be scaled up and to encourage future research on larger, more varied, datasets.

5. Analysing poverty BTL

The first step in analysing the seven articles was to generate a keyword list for each article and each set of BTL comments using *Wordsmith Tools* (Scott, 2012). I used the BNC as a reference corpus[2] and log-likelihood to calculate keyness. In total, the keyword lists for each article included 103 keywords (min. keyness: 24.25) and the total for each set of BTL comments was 1050 (min. keyness: 23.97). A reference corpus was used to ensure that the keyword lists showed both differences and similarities between the stimulus articles and their BTL comments (c.f. Taylor, 2013). While my ultimate aim was to investigate which concepts, persons, places, issues, perceptions, etc. were drawn upon across sites of debate, it is important to have a detailed understanding of the texts under analysis. Thus, in line with O'Halloran's (2010) original method, the analysis begins with a closer look at individual articles and their BTL comments. Section 5.1 shows how BTL commenters draw upon flawed consumerism, scrounger discourses, and the idea of the welfare queen to debate the form and existence of UK poverty. Trends across the articles and comments are considered in section 5.2. Section 5.3 concludes by focusing on the comment voting system available on the *Mail Online*'s website to determine which comments (and ideological positions) were most popular.

5.1 Individual stimulus/response pairs

To give an overview, the top 20 keywords for each set of BTL comments are given in Table 3 alongside the top 20 keywords (where applicable) for the stimulus articles; not all stimulus articles generated 20 keywords.

Table 3: Keywords for each article/BTL set (keywords common to both sets are italicised)

	Article Keywords	BTL Keywords
1	cent, *income*, living, ONS, *pension*, *pensioners*, pensions, per, *poverty*, quintile	afford, allowance, Christine, don't, Durham, get, heating, *income*, mik, paid, *pension*, pensioner, *pensioners*, people, *poverty*, rent, Scotland, tax, week, winter
2	*benefits*, Cameron's, dads, *fathers*, *feckless*, millions, poverty, tough, *unemployed*, will, *work*	benefit, *benefits*, child, children, CSA, *fathers*, *feckless*, get, job, jobs, kids, men, mothers, pay, people, they, to, *unemployed*, week, *work*
3	annuity, collapse, defined, income, Mclean, *pension*, *pensions*, retiring, *salary*, today	boomers, don't, Egham, get, greedy, Hammond money, paid, pay, paying, *pension*, *pensions*, poverty, private, retire, retirement, *salary*, sector, tax, will

4	addiction, child, children, drug, *Duncan*, employment, family, income, parent, parents, pensions, *poverty*, Smith, welfare, will, *work*	are, benefit, benefits, dole, *Duncan*, get, IDS, job, jobs, minimum, people, poor, *poverty*, queendom scroungers, tax, Tories, unemployed, wage, *work*
5	*bills*, *blankets*, cent, children, double, *energy*, experts, families, *fuel*, *heating*, households, netmums, per, poverty, suffering, survey, their, using, warned, *winter*	afford, benefits, *bills*, *blankets*, cold, don't, *energy*, etc, *fuel*, gas, have, heat, *heating*, I, keep, pay, people, warm, we, *winter*
6	*child*, *children*, government's, measures, *Milburn*, obligation, *poverty*, strategy, targets	benefit, benefits, *child*, *children*, clothes, iPhone, Juniee, kids, living, *Milburn*, null, parents, poor, *poverty*, Repliessee, tax, to, UKIP, working, Xbox
7	bleak, bunks, coffin, exhibition, Fleming, Geffrey, homeless, homelessness, living, lodging, *London*, *poor*, *poverty*, shelter, shelters, shows, Victorian, Victorians, *workhouse*, *workhouses*	benefits, ids, *London*, people, *poor*, *poverty*, realworld, replies, Repliessee, Rooksby, scroungers, to, today, Tories, Tory, UKIP, welfare, *workhouse*, *workhouses*, workingclass

Article 1 is about pensioners in (fuel) poverty (see Table 2). Pensioner poverty is presented as unequivocally negative, and the article's headline emphasises the apparent scale of the problem: "Two million pensioners are living in poverty – with half unable to afford heating". The main claim of Article 1 is that pensioners are so poor they are unable to pay for fuel, despite the fact that UK pensioners are entitled to a winter fuel allowance. Even though the keywords *income*, *pension*, *pensioners* and *poverty* are common to both the article and its BTL comments (Table 3), there is evidence that pensioners' income is a site of debate. The BTL keywords also include *afford*, *allowance*, *paid*, *rent* and *tax*, which could suggest that *income* is used as a catch-all term in Article 1. By extension, its use may facilitate the omission of a detailed discussion of pensioners' finances. In O'Halloran's terms, *income* could be seen as a 'repressor'.

All but one of the 17 occurrences of *afford* in the BTL comments are premodified by *couldn't*, *cannot* or *can't*, with four occurrences being part of individual narratives (*I cannot afford*, *he can't afford*). Such narratives and strong collocational patterns show an acceptance that incomes are not high enough – thus agreeing with the general position of Article 1. However, pensioners are also characterised as frivolously spending what they do have – a position not considered in the stimulus article. Supplementing the keyword analysis with close reading of concordances (a necessary step when scaling up ESA to datasets too large to read in their entirety), the concordances for *allowance* in the BTL comments include claims that pensioners do not spend their fuel allowance on fuel; see Examples (1)–(4). Such

characterisations feed into a discourse of flawed consumerism, where "the poor of a consumer society are socially defined, and self-defined, first and foremost as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient – in other words, inadequate – consumers" (Bauman, 2004: 38).

(1)   My parents tell me that most of their pensionable friends dont use the £200 heating allowance to pay their bills but buy Christmas presents for their grandchildren instead[3]

(2)   My parents got their heating allowance and spent the money on bingo and the pub […] Ashamed of them? You bet I am, especially when there are pensioners in need

(3)   There is no child poverty in this country. People have to learn how to spend their money. Pensioner living next door to me goes to the bingo 3 times a week, £10 at a time then to the pub and betting shops. then they have the cheek to complain that they are poor. What do they do with their winter allowance? Watch the red arrows raining on my comment

(4)   Pensioner poverty is a con just like Child Poverty!

Here we see stereotypes, such as playing bingo and spoiling grandchildren, being used to index a particular construction of elderly people who are frivolous with their incomes, spending money on non-essentials. This depiction of pensioners is used to reject the notion that they are poor or their incomes are too low: 13 of the 125 BTL comments on Article 1 (10.4%) reference pensioners' flawed consumerism, suggesting a level of agreement between commenters.

        Debates about what pensioners do not need to spend money on are also evidenced by the use of the word *rent*: 8 out of 18 tokens are used to express the position that pensioners do not have any rent to pay. Similarly, *tax* occurs 29 times in comments about whether or not pensioners have to pay Council Tax.[4] BTL commenters propose that because pensioners' do not have these obligations their household bills are likely lower than others who pay Council Tax and/or rent. In contrast, the keyword *paid* is used to positively evaluate people who pay their household bills (*my dad*, *I* (2), *pensioners* (2), *elderly*, *working people*). Thus, when (concordances of) the BTL keywords are compared we start to see what commenters perceive to have been marginalised in the stimulus article: while pensioners may not have the highest incomes (as expressed in Article 1), they also do not have the highest outgoings. The absence of *rent*, *tax*, etc. in Article 1 is foregrounded by the BTL commenters to oppose the centralisation of pensioners' low incomes. In its strongest iteration, commenters' rejection of this centralisation takes the form of outright denials of pensioner poverty, see (3) and (4).

        Similar realisations of flawed consumerism occur in the BTL comments for Article 6, which concerns the rate of child poverty (as measured by the UK government). The article's keywords (Table 3) concern children and poverty measurement, which is a fair representation of the article, but the occurrence of *iPhone*, *clothes* and *Xbox* as BTL keywords suggest that

there are other factors associated with child poverty that Article 6 does not cover. Indeed, the top 100 BTL keywords for this article include several other expensive items, including *iPad* (keyword number 35), *TV* (56), *shoes* (58), *trainers* (59), and *sky* (72, as in *Sky TV*). The apparent choice of poor parents (in particular those parents receiving benefits) to spend money on these items *instead of taking care of their kids*, in Example (5), is evaluated on moral grounds: poor consumer choices equate to poor parenting.

(5) The problem comes when 1.. wayne and tracy have 4 kids to get benefits, then 2..spend the benefits on sky, flat screen and iphone instead of taking care of their kids
(6) Some will be less well off than other but not having sky TV, the latest games console and smart phone, designer clothes and a nice car to take the kids to school is not poverty
(7) Poverty is no shoes, no warm clothes in the winter, and always hungry. It's not when you haven't got the latest iPhone

The commenter's choice in (5) to name two fictional people shows that even names can be indexical, in the sense that they evoke particular identities linked to social class. McKenzie (2015: 129) recounts a BBC report claiming that UK teachers pre-judged pupils based on the names listed on their registers; names such as Bobbi-Jo, K'tee, and Wayne were associated with bad behaviour (implicitly linked to their perceived working class identities). By selecting similar names (Wayne and Tracy) the commenter in (5) is using the values attached to those names to index particular ideologies about benefits recipients. Examples (5)–(7) also indicate that material possessions are used to define what poverty is not (i.e. you are not in poverty just because you do not have *the latest iPhone*). Thus, the core concept of poverty is perceived by commenters to be misrepresented in Article 6 through the omission of indices of flawed consumerism, such as electronic goods and expensive clothing.

Article 4 reports on Universal Credit, a new benefit launched in 2013 to replace multiple other benefits. The keywords for the stimulus article include *drug* and *addiction* as links are made between benefits receipt and drug abuse: "Handouts help fuel drug addiction and welfare dependency" (Article 4). Yet despite the article's premise, commenters reject the centralisation of drug addiction, refuting the argument that drug use is central to discourses of UK poverty. Concordances for *drug** and *addiction** show that these are challenged concepts; while some accept that drug-use and welfare receipt are connected, as in Example (8), the majority reject this, see (9)-(10).

(8)   ..the government are so stupid…they give out money to unemployed and it's a waste because a large umber of parents who are on benefits are taking drugs and if they give them more money its just going to br extra money to buy drugs not to help their children..that is a fact!

(9)   Could be because only a small percentage those on benefits are drug addicts or that the majority of those claiming benefits are in fact in work

(10)   THEY ARE NOT ALL DRUG USERS ETC

Thus there is evidence that BTL commenters are not opposed to challenging the position set out in the stimulus article. In the responses to articles about child poverty and pensioner poverty some BTL comments claim that such poverty does not exist. In their responses to Article 6, some accept the posited relationship between drugs and benefits receipt while others are vehement that drug use was not a core component of poverty debates, see (10). It is clear that commenters are not homogenous in their opinions, with the topic of drug use being particularly divisive. The apparent popularity of particular arguments/positions is discussed in section 5.3.

Another example of the central tenet of a stimulus article being rejected occurs in the BTL comments below Article 2. The stimulus article begins with the stance that "Britain should stop its obsession with getting single mothers into work and pursue unemployed fathers", a claim that presupposes the gendered nature of welfare debates (c.f. Cassiman, 2008). The starting position of Article 2 thus serves to explicitly marginalise motherhood, a concept usually centralised in poverty debates (Skeggs, 1997; McKenzie, 2015). However, the article's focus on *idle fathers* and *feckless men* is rejected by the commenters, who choose instead to recentralise *mothers* (Figure 2), a word that only occurs twice in Article 2.

children does he not pursue the higher percentages of absent	MOTHERS	that do not work and pay child support. Or is it that
I'm tired of working to pay for my kids and Miss Career	Mother.	Time to get tough.
for my kid or anyone else but your tax goes to pay feckless	mothers	child benefits. I'm happy to work and pay for my kid
Should also include the idle	mothers	(not all) who are using their children as "meal" tickets
of divorces are initiated by women. Fact: very often	mothers	act as gate keepers to push fathers out of the lives of
with the family. The trouble is so many young girls see	motherhood	as a cop out of earning their own living and knowing
mothers were held to account. Unfortunately many single	mothers	are not bothered about the fathers of their children, as
should be made to work to pay for them. Too many single	mothers	are being forced to pay ridiculous childcare prices just
cannot work when children are at school. I agree single	mothers	with children under school age need help, but those
it was Labour that made it financially sound to be a single	mother	compared to being a couple. Labour took fathers out
growing number of "single" mothers to be SMBCs~ Single	Mothers	By Choice. Mr Cameron… It isn't only the Brits who
this every day. There is undoubtedly a problem with single	mothers,	but let's not overlook the grey, pasty faced, spineless
round £60 pw per child. Women claiming to be 'single	mothers'	frequently produce several more children once they
to get the council house, and accoutrements that single	mothers	crave. Looking at some of those women one wonders
and his Party that made it 'worth' more to be a single	mother	than to maintain a solid relationship with the father of
How convenient to find single	mothers	who never married to have 5 children with different
Finally someone has sense! It isn't just single	mothers	who claim all benefits – although they do make up
mugs like me) will pick up the tab. In the case of single	mothers	who have children by several different fathers, unless
There are a lot of teenage single	mothers	in my area and they want babies, benefits and free
trying to see their children but being stopped because the	mother	is vindictive and nasty. The mothers are usually on
Will the same be applied to the	mothers	who are just baby machines?

relationship with me. The taxpayers money wasted on these	mothers	must be astronomical.

Figure 2: 22 of 77 concordance lines for *mother** in BTL comments for Article 2

The top collocate for *mother** is *single* which occurs in 32 concordance lines (41.57%) alongside negatively-loaded words (*absent*, *feckless*, *idle*, *workshy*). Commenters focus on single mothers receiving high(er) benefits payments, being a *single mother by choice*, and having additional children while in receipt of benefits, as in Example (11). These practices are evaluated negatively, but commenters also show some support for mothers, see (12)-(13).

(11) Women claiming to be 'single mothers' frequently produce several more children once they are on benefit, and we just pay up

(12) It isn't just single mothers who claim all benefits

(13) Too many single mothers are being forced to pay ridiculous childcare prices just so they can go to work to make ends meet

(14) I know plenty single mothers through no fault of their own who have kicked out their work shy partners rather than have them scrounge off them and the state. Its about time we stopped harassing the mothers, who lets face it are better caregivers, and challenge the fathers!

Example (14) endorses the sentiment of Article 2 by focusing on (single) fathers, thus accepting the centralisation of fatherhood. A closer look at *father** shows there are six references to *absent father(s)* (including *absent father epidemic*), and the verb *to father* is used with negatively loaded labels, such as *deadbeats*.[5] However, some commenters take a sympathetic view of fathers, with six questioning how men are expected to find jobs in the current economy. Also, in line with the recentralisation of mothers, sympathy is expressed not by positively evaluating fathers but by villainising mothers: "It is not surprising some fathers don't want to work as they don't want their exs spending it on booze and drugs", and "where the father is not in a job, whats wrong with the mother going out and providing instead of feeding off the father". There is thus a gendered element to discourses of poverty and parenting; even though Article 2 marginalises the links between mothers and poverty, BTL commenters refuse this marginalisation and recentralised (single) motherhood.

The keywords for Article 7 (Table 3) suggest it is dissimilar to the other articles. Keywords including *workhouse*, *coffin*, and *Victorian(s)* relate to the fact that Article 7 reports on a museum exhibit. However, only five of the top 20 BTL keywords are shared with the stimulus article, while nine are shared with the BTL comments on Articles 1-6. This suggests that BTL commenters draw on overarching ideas about poverty, not just the historical aspects of poverty relevant to the museum exhibit. This finding aligns with the overarching aim to

interrogate not just how individual articles relate to their BTL comments, but how BTL comments draw upon ideas which are transported across sites of debate. To this end, the rest of the analysis shows how ESA can be adapted to multiple stimulus texts and their responses.

5.2 Trends across texts

The seven stimulus articles and the BTL comments were grouped into two corpora and each was compared to the BNC to generate keyword lists, again using *Wordsmith Tools*. There were 59 keywords for the articles (log-likelihood, min. keyness: 24.32) and 651 keywords for the BTL comments (min. keyness: 23.96). To focus on repetition across sites of debate, I thinned the lists to include only those keywords which occurred in four or more articles or sets of BTL comments. The analysis thus moves to key-keywords: "words that are key in all, or a large percentage, of the texts that are contained in the corpus under investigation" (Rayson, 2008: 523; see also Scott, 1997: 237).[6] There were 17 key-keywords for the articles[7] and 467 for the BTL comments. The key-keyword lists were semantically tagged using Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009. Most key-keywords were categorised appropriately, but manual corrections were made based on close reading of concordance lines; *benefit(s)*, for example, was tagged as <S8+ Helping> but this obscured the financial element of the *benefits* referred to in texts about poverty. The major semantic fields (determined by number of key-keywords in each field) are shown in Table 4. The BTL key-keywords which never occur in the stimulus articles are emboldened.

Table 4: Semantic groupings of key-keywords

Stimulus articles		**No.**
Money	benefits, income, pensions, poverty	4
Kinship	children, families	2

BTL Comments		**No.**
Money	afford, allowance, **bankers**, benefit, benefits, **bet**, bill, **bills**, **bonuses**, **buy**, **cheap**, **cheaper**, claim, claimants, cost, costs, credit, credits, **DLA**, dole, earn, economic, **expenses**, **expensive**, **financially**, income, **incomes**, money, **mortgage**, paid, pay, **payer**, **payers**, paying, payments, pays, penny, pension, **pensions**, **pittance**, poor, **poorer**, poverty, prices, rent, rents, **rich**, salary, save, saving, savings, spend, tax, **taxes**, taxpayer, **taxpayers**, **vouchers**, wage, wages, **wealthy**, welfare	61

Government and politics	**Blair**, **Brown**, **Cameron**, council, country, **Dave**, **EU**, **European_Union**, **Gordon**, government, governments, **govt**, labour, minister, MP, MPs, **nation**, **policy**, political, politicians, **Thatcher**, **Tories**, **Tory**, vote	25
Possessions	**cigarettes**, **cigs**, clothes, clothing, **consoles**, **electric**, **electricity**, get, **gets**, getting, had, have, having, keep, **mobile**, **phone**, **phones**, **scrounger**, **scroungers**, **Sky**, smoke, **trainers**, TV, **wearing**	24
Negative evaluation	**disgrace**, **disgraceful**, **disgusting**, **fat**, feckless, **greedy**, **idiot**, **idiots**, **lazy**, **mess**, **penalised**, **sad**, **shame**, stricken, struggling, **stupid**, **useless**, vulnerable	18
Employment	**companies**, **employ**, job, jobs, jobseekers, **JSA**, market, **redundant**, retire, retired, retirement, unemployed, unemployment, work, worked, workers, working	17
Kinship	child, children, **dad**, ex, families, family, fathers, **folks**, **kids**, men, mothers, Mr, **Mrs**, parents, people, women	16

Not all key-keywords corresponded to major semantic fields (hence Table 4 does not contain all 484 total key-keywords). Isolated key-keywords are not the focus of ESA (although this could be an avenue for future work). So, while *church*, for example, was a key-keyword in the BTL comments, it did not correspond to a larger semantic field concerning religion. Thus it is not a focal point of the analysis. Similarly, due to their short length, the stimulus articles yielded very few key-keywords which was insufficient for identifying major semantic fields. Using more stimulus texts could improve this, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Unsurprisingly, given the general conceptualisation of poverty as an economic phenomenon, there is a semantic field of money and pay in both sets of key-keywords, but 23 (out of 61, 37.7%) of the money-related BTL key-keywords – including *banker*, *bonuses*, *expenses*, *mortgage*, *rich*, *taxpayers*, *wealthy* – do not occur in the stimulus articles. It can thus be argued that the articles omit discussions about the contrast between rich and poor and, more specifically, bankers' expenditures. The BTL key-keywords suggest that readers consider the contrast between these social groups to be important; *bonuses* occurs in every set of BTL comments and *rich* occurs in six. Furthermore, the contrast between bankers and the poor was also found by Baker & McEnery (2015) in their analysis of tweets about UK benefits receipt, suggesting that these words could be exterior indices (Keisling, 2009) repeated across sites of debate when discussing UK poverty.

In the semantic field of government and politics, Table 4 shows that BTL commenters associate poverty particularly with ex-prime ministers (*Blair*, *Brown*, *Thatcher*), but only David Cameron (the sitting prime minister when the articles were published) is mentioned in the stimulus articles. Other omitted key-keywords refer to benefit recipients' assumed

possessions (*cigarettes*, *consoles*, *phone*, *Sky*, *TV*, etc.) which relate to discourses of flawed consumerism (see above).

The negative evaluation of those in poverty (and in receipt of benefits) is also noteworthy; the stimulus articles do not label anyone a *disgrace*, *fat*, *lazy*, *idiot*, *stupid* or *useless*, yet these are all BTL key-keywords. Again, this similar to Baker & McEnery's (2015) findings; they claim that negative evaluative lexis, like *fat* and *lazy*, suggest the presence of "scrounger" or "idle poor discourses" which have a long-standing history and posit that the poor are just feckless and undeserving (Baker & McEnery, 2015: 253; see also van der Bom et al., 2018: 40). This position is expressed clearly in the BTL comments for Article 4: "The welfare scroungers aren't poor… they are lazy". The directness of this negative evaluation likely relates to the relative freedom that BTL commenters have in comparison to journalists, who have to abide by press guidelines. However, rather than classifying such negative evaluations as omitted, as they do not occur in the stimulus articles, they are more accurately classed as marginalised, because comparable words, such as *feckless*, do occur in the stimulus articles and similar negative evaluations are implied, see (15)-(16).

(15)   Parents should get a job rather than rely on handouts if they want to lift their children out of poverty (Article 4)

(16)   […] millions of people on benefits will be forced to make daily efforts to find a job. Those who refuse will have their benefits stopped immediately (Article 2)

In (15), taken from Article 4, it is presupposed that parents think benefits receipt, not work, will relieve them of poverty, with *get a job* implicitly referring to laziness. Similarly, one reading of (16) is that millions of people on benefits do not make efforts to find employment, hence they must be *forced*. People who repeatedly *refuse* government mandates to perform job searches are labelled *the worst offenders* (Article 2), a phrase which alludes to criminality but does not actually relate to anything illegal.

To investigate what (if anything) is potentially misrepresented in the stimulus articles I explored whether any of the BTL key-keywords collocated with negative particles. This pattern occurred most for *poverty*, which collocates with *not* (27 times), *no* (22), *don't* (10), *cannot* (5), *can't* (4), *isn't* (3), *aren't* (2), and *didn't* (2). This pattern suggests disagreement about the how *poverty* is used. In its most extreme form, commenters deny that UK poverty exists – see (17) and Examples (3) and (4) – arguing that poverty is something that happens elsewhere, in Africa or South America, as in (18).

(17)   Families get a host of benefits associated with their children and they do NOT live in poverty. They choose a lifestyle that diverts food money into unnecessary luxuries. That is bad financial management. It is NOT poverty.

(18)   There is no such thing as poverty in this country. The welfare state picks everybody up that wants to be picked up. Go to África or parts of South America or the streets of Mumbai to see real poverty.

Commenters also question how poverty is measured. The stimulus articles draw on government statistics and standard measures. For example, Article 4 states that "If a family has less than 60 per cent of the median income it is said to be poor". But commenters dispute this definition: "How can poverty be defined as an income percentage anyway?". There are also criticisms of government policies (both Labour and Coalition, with the latter usually referred to as the Tory government) and individual politicians: "What IDS[8] knows about poverty you could write on a pinhead". While some commenters go against the grain and argue for the existence of UK poverty ("Poverty is all around us: benefits don't always get to those who need them"), others suggest that even if poverty might exist in the UK, it is not *real poverty* (a phrase which occurs 15 times) or *true poverty* (9 occurrences), nor is it the same as *absolute poverty* (4 occurrences) which exists elsewhere.

Thus *poverty* itself is a highly contested and potentially misrepresented concept. This is neatly expressed in (19), which was the second-most popular BTL comment overall:

(19)   Poverty nowadays is quite controversial. One one hand we do have extremely poor people and children starving and really in need of help. On the other hand we have a huge % of people who literally cheat benefits claiming in front of the TV cameras that they are poor and all of them have iPhone 5, women have acrylic nails and false eyelashes, flat screen TVs at home and iPads....and their bins are full of takeaway food boxes.. Not exactly the same definition. Forgot to mention that this % has no intention to go back to (or start to) work, EVER.

Poverty is deemed *controversial* and is set up as a false dichotomy between starving children, who are deserving of help, and benefits cheats who are lazy flawed consumers with no intention of working. It is erroneously claimed that there are *a huge % of people* committing benefit fraud, but according to DWP statistics, fraud was 0.8% of benefits expenditure in 2014/15 (Paterson & Gregory, 2019: xxi). There is no consideration of people who may be in poverty due to illness, disability, redundancy, etc. Example (19) characterises (all) benefits recipients as smokers with the latest smart phones and televisions; *all of them have iPhone 5*. These characteristics are similar to those identified by van der Bom et al. (2018) in their analysis of

audience responses to the television programme *Benefits Street*. They argue that repeated reference to smoking, drinking, and having a fake tan (akin to the *acrylic nails* and *false lashes* in 19) were "indices of social class" (van der Bom et al., 2018: 38). These references point to a particular negative characterisation of the poor, similar to the fictional Wayne and Tracy mentioned in Example (5), who embody the stereotype of the undeserving poor.

5.3 Acceptance and rejection among commenters

The popularity of Example (19) – it had 906 up-votes from commenters – is another measure which can potentially shed light on what BTL commenters collectively deemed important when discussing UK poverty. Many websites that support BTL comments offer readers the chance to like/dislike or up-/down-vote comments. Thus, to establish what was popular with *Mail Online* readers, the top ten BTL comments beneath each stimulus article were compared to the bottom ten comments beneath each article. The top ten comments had a total of 22803 up-votes and 2644 down-votes (average 325.8 up-votes, 37.8 down-votes per comment). The bottom ten comments totalled 2470 up-votes and 6996 down-votes (averages of 35.3 and 99.9).

While the figures indicate that people interacted with the comments, their importance should not be overstated; people may be more likely to up-vote a comment they agree with but write a comment in response to something they disagree with (although testing this hypothesis is beyond the scope of this paper). Nevertheless, the up-voting of comments indicates popular ideas agreed upon by a large number of readers: the most popular post (example 20, below) received 1253 up-votes and only 27 down-votes. Down-votes on a popular post indicate that resistant readers exist and thus BTL commenters are not homogenous. Indeed, the commenter in Example (3) shows awareness of such resistance in their mention of *the red arrows*, which refers to the down-vote icon on the *Mail Online*'s voting system. There is scope, therefore, to isolate those responses which received the down votes to determine whether they share common elements (i.e. are comments down-voted if they mention a particular concept or person). Furthermore, as it is possible for BTL commenters to respond directly to comments posted by others (see Figure 1) in an extreme case, where a BTL comment has generated a large number of responses, it may also be possible to take the original comment as a stimulus text and perform ESA using the responses it generated. Neither of these options can be taken up here and, in any case, the tendency towards up-voting and the sheer number of up-votes

suggest that the top posts express dominant ideologies about poverty acceptable to readers of the *Mail Online*.

Table 5: Keywords in top/bottom BTL comments

Top 10 BTL comments	Bottom 10 BTL comments
benefits, bills, feckless, Gordon, heating, IDS, jobs, kids, millions, our, paid, pension, pensioners, people, poverty, retire, tax, taxpayers, to, vouchers, warm, work, workhouse, year	allowance, are, benefit, benefits, bleating, boomers, brits, dole, fuel, get, heating, IDS, job, jobs, labour, live, living, minimum, MPs, pay, pension, pensioner, pensioners, people, poverty, UKIP, wage

Table 5 includes the keywords of the top ten and bottom ten BTL comments on each article (min. keyness for top comments = 23.98, min. keyness for bottom comments = 24.63). Although indices of flawed consumerism are not present in Table 5, the keywords support the position that two of the core concepts of UK poverty discourses are benefits receipt (*allowance*, *benefit(s)*, *IDS*, *dole*) and (un)employment (*job(s)*, *paid/pay*, *work*, *wage*). However, the most popular post of all, Example (20), does not explicitly reference any of these apparently core concepts:

(20)   Over the last few years, we have made a conscious effort to reduce our fuel consumption and have done so by wrapping up warm, reducing the room temperature and walking round in near darkness. However, have we seen a reduction in our bills? No. The price of fuel keeps rising, but our pay rises are as frozen as my feet. I despair.

This comment does not fit the pattern of linking poverty to (un)employment or benefits; keywords such as *benefit(s)* or *work* do not occur. Example (20) contains a personal narrative of someone who is both (presumably) employed and actively engaged in thinking about how they spend money; they are not a flawed consumer. Their lament that despite their efforts and sacrifices (*wrapping up* and *walking round in near darkness*) they still do not have enough money for energy, constructs them as an example of the deserving poor, who, despite their best efforts, are in economic hardship.

The absence of explicit references to benefits receipt in (20) could be problematic for the results presented so far, insofar as the top-rated comment does not include a high concentration of keywords. However, while its expression may differ, the position presented in (20) does not damage the analysis. The person depicted contrasts directly with the stereotypical benefits recipient, as in (19), and by implication endorses the negative evaluation of the undeserving poor and/or flawed consumer. Thus, the status quo of associating poverty

with (implied and undeserved) benefits receipt is not disturbed by the top-rated post, with (20) illustrating that there are many ways to use language to express the same underlying ideology. As such, the analysis of (key-)keywords alone does not ensure robust investigation of poverty discourses and their investigation – as shown here – is complemented by the close reading of electronic supplements to highlight nuances of expressions.

6. Discussion

The analysis shows that the BTL keywords differed from the stimulus articles' keywords, suggesting that many BTL commenters found certain concepts, persons, issues, perceptions, etc. to be marginalised, omitted, or misrepresented in the stimulus articles. For example, while motherhood was marginalised in Article 2, this concept was recentralised BTL: *idle fathers* acted as a repressor (in O'Halloran's terms). Pensioners' outgoings were omitted in Article 1, but BTL commenters used references to *rent* and *tax* to question the focus on *income* in the stimulus article. Furthermore, *allowance* was misrepresented, as pensioners were accused of frivolously spending their winter fuel allowance, and commenters similarly challenged the concept of *addiction* and the significance of (taking) *drugs* in Article 6. A theme that ran throughout the BTL comments was the omission of high-end goods from the stimulus articles, evidenced through reference to *consoles*, *phones*, *TVs*, etc. *Bankers* and the contrast between rich and poor were also omitted and links to politics were marginalised (more individual politicians, for example, were mentioned BTL than in the articles). Generally, the concept which appeared to be most up for debate was *poverty* itself; it collocated with negative particles and commenters denied its existence or stated it occurred elsewhere (see Example (18)).

Overall, it is clear that discourses of flawed consumerism and the undeserving poor, realised primarily through reference to benefits (recipients), dominate online debates about UK poverty. Alternative concerns, such as disability, migration status, caring responsibilities, etc. which can correlate with susceptibility to poverty were not brought into discussion in the same way, or with the same frequency. References to single mothers, some with *children to several different fathers* (see Figure 2), were also used to index particular characterisations of the poor. In line with Cassiman's (2008) claims, there is an observable gendering of poverty; the examples in Figure 2 contribute to the construction of a UK equivalent of a "welfare queen" where (single) mothers *are* the problem, rather than people who *have* problems because of their poverty (c.f. Levitas et al., 2006). Repeatedly linking flawed consumerism, single parenthood,

unemployment, and poverty facilitates the establishment of a stereotypical benefit recipient. Such stereotypes, where macro-level ideas are distilled into micro-level texts (c.f. Lorenzo-Dus and Marsh, 2012) are reinforced by extreme examples like (21); see also (19).

(21)   My neighbour is a single mum on benefits, in a huge detatched 3 bed house for just her and her son, she has huge tvs in every room, 2 iphone 5s, laptops, takeways twice a week and out drinking every week, she has just bought a puppy and boasted about how it cost 300 pounds.

Once the image of a scrounging single mother who chooses not to work and uses her benefits for alcohol, takeaway food, huge TVs, and an expensive dog is established, it can be used as an exterior index (Keisling, 2009) of scrounger discourse, which can, in turn, be used to support benefits cuts and/or background systematic structural inequalities.

Relatedly, and in contrast with Lundström's (2013) research, the stimulus articles did not include stories of individual benefits claimants. However, the BTL commenters often drew on personal narratives and narratives of friends and family: 37 out of 125 (29.6%) comments below Article 1 referred to an individual such as *my dad*, *I*, and *my 77-year old parent*. As shown in Example (20), narratives that portrayed the commenter as a hardworking, sacrifice-making member of the deserving poor were evaluated positively. While many narratives referred to real-world referents, such as parents or neighbours, some drew on a fictionalised version of the undeserving poor who were associated with van der Bom et al.'s (2018) indices of social class, as in Example (19) or Wayne and Tracy in (5). Despite referring to generic (fictional) benefits recipients, these narratives were not routinely questioned or down-voted by other commenters, but rather (cumulative) individual narratives or anecdotes helped to reinforce the negative characterisation of the undeserving poor held implicit in comments like Example (20). The focus on individuals (fictional or real) also draws attention away from wider structural inequality.

The apparent deviance of the undeserving poor and/or the flawed consumer is established through repeated uses of exterior indices of social class none of which relate to the discourses of criminality found by Lundström's (2013). Words such as *criminal*, *cheat*, *police*, *jail*, etc. did not occur as keywords (although alternative expressions such as *fiddled the state* were present). Even though such words did not occur in the stimulus articles, BTL commenters could have introduced them if they had been salient to their understanding of UK poverty. Thus, for these BTL commenters at least, crime is not an important aspect of UK poverty discourses. Whereas Lundström (2013: 636) argues that the deviance of the poor is constructed

"primarily through representations of the remarkable and extravagant nature of the reported cheating practice" such deviance is not alluded to through reference to criminality and (explicit) cheating in the texts analysed here. Instead, BTL commenters focused on flawed consumerism and the undeserving poor to undertake a moral and neoliberal evaluation of the poor which paints them as responsible for their own poverty.

7. Conclusions

The paper presents a relatively new type of evidence for understanding how readers interpret institutionally-produced texts. The evidence is indirect, as it is not possible to know exactly what each BTL commenter was thinking or why they chose the words they did, but it is nevertheless a type of evidence which has only become available fairly recently due to the affordances of web 2.0. While the BTL comments were not designed for linguistic analysis, the use of corpus tools can reveal patterns pertaining to how information circulates in the modern world. The generation of (key-)keywords and their grouping into semantic fields can indicate potential exterior indices, repeated across the language use of many hundreds of BTL commenters. BTL comments are a reliable source of audience responses, on a relatively large scale, given willingly by members of the public and unsolicited by researchers. While it is important to take into account the fact that people reading a particular newspaper are likely to share certain characteristics (i.e. the *Mail Online*'s target readership is likely right-leaning, Conservative), ESA does not deny the heterogeneity of people responding to a stimulus text.

This method can also help the researcher to systematically identify resistant readers across large datasets and highlight which elements of the original argument they take issue with. Although not the focus here, further work could address the dialogic nature of some of the BTL exchanges. While the set of keywords used here relate specifically to the *Mail Online*, it would also be interesting to compare different sets of keywords from different sources, thus adapting ESA further.

The conclusions about UK poverty discourses must be somewhat tentative as the BTL commenters were unlikely to represent a cross section or the UK's population (they may not even reside in the UK). However, the findings here are similar to other studies of media texts (Lundström, 2013; Paterson & Gregory, 2019) and public responses to media depictions of poverty (Baker & McEnery, 2015; Paterson et al., 2016), with van der Bom et al.'s (2018) examples of indices of social class mapping fairly closely to the (key-)keywords in the BTL

comments. What can be said about the BTL commenters is that they all chose to read at least one article on the *Mail Online* website, then signed up to the website to post their response. Thus the BTL commenters are a particle snapshot of *Mail Online* readers. While the commenters were not homogenous, they were all invested enough in the articles and debates about UK poverty to decide to share their views.

One thing that can be gleaned from the preceding analysis is that BTL commenters seem to have no problems voicing their opinions, even when those opinions contradict the central tenet of a stimulus article. In some cases, commenters present their positions as immutable facts – such as *a huge %* of benefits cheats in Example (19) – without supporting evidence and despite the fact that counterevidence exists. Furthermore, the use of individual narratives, and the acceptance of those narratives by at least some of the other commenters (as indicated by the number of up-votes on a comment) can tell us something about how readers evaluate evidence. For example, it was shown above that they question the measurement of poverty using official statistics, but the analysis did not indicate a tendency for querying the validity of people's stories, even when those stories related to a fictional benefits claimant.

Finally, this paper has used a novel method of corpus-based discourse analysis for analysing debates about UK poverty and demonstrated that modified ESA, using the generation of key-keywords combined with concordance analysis, can be scaled up from a single article for corpus-based discourse analysis. The method of ESA proposed by O'Halloran (2010) and adapted here to include multiple texts is a useful tool for corpus-based (critical) discourse analysts to have at their disposal. My modification of ESA is a systematic way to analyse how particular ideologies may be indexed within texts through the use of marginalisation, misrepresentation, and omission. One can use ESA to question why particular concepts (such as poverty), persons (single mothers), issues (benefit fraud), perceptions (negative evaluations of the idle poor), etc. – as located within specific temporal, social, political, and spatial contexts – are produced and reproduced in mass media texts and their public-authored responses.

Notes

1. O'Halloran's understanding of 'supplement' is based on Derrida's claim that a supplement has an "inside-outside" relationship to a text, acting not just as an addition to an existing text, but rather it "adds only to replace" (Derrida, 1976[1967]: 144-145 cited in O'Halloran, 2010: 213).

2. The BNC is a standard corpus of British English. While its age may influence the results (*iphones*, etc. do not occur in the BNC) it is used here merely as a baseline for the comparison of the

stimulus articles and the BTL comments. Testing other reference corpora is of merit, but is beyond the scope of the paper.

3. Comments reproduced verbatim. Non-continuous text, edited for brevity, is signified using […].

4. Council Tax is paid by households to local UK councils. Some occupants, such as people with disabilities and full-time students, may be exempt and Council Tax benefits are available for those on low incomes. Eligibility for full Council Tax benefit can be linked to receipt of Pension Credit.

5. *Dads* is key in the article but not BTL. References to *dads* in the article are premodified by *young* and *single.* BTL there is also personalisation (*I'm a single dad*), quantification (*any dad*, *so many single dads*), and binomials (*mums and dads*, *mummy and daddy*).

6. Scott's (1997) seminal work on key-keywords uses 5000 texts. This analysis uses seven articles and sets of BTL comments, so there are limitations to the use of key-keywords here. However, the basic understanding of key-keywords is useful for identifying potential indices of poverty.

7. *Poverty*, *income*, *their*, *today*, *will*, *pensions*, *families*, *benefits*, *children*, *living*, *households*, *work*, *updated*, *per cent*, *fuel*, *private*

8. Ex-Secretary of State for Department of Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith.

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