

Voluntary unemployment and left-dominated social policy academia

The Coalition government has increased the number of conditions attached to receiving unemployment benefit (Jobseeker's Allowance/JSA, soon to be Universal Credit), and those who do not comply face the most severe financial penalties in UK welfare state history. This trend towards greater conditionality and sanctioning, which began in the 1980s, is underpinned by a view among policymakers that voluntary unemployment is widespread. Indeed, both Work and Pensions Minister [Iain Duncan Smith](#) (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newspnight/9116107.stm>) and [John Hutton](#) (one of Duncan Smith's Labour predecessors at the DWP) (<http://www.ukpolitics.org.uk/node/4449>) have expressed this view, and [it is widely shared by voters](#) (<http://www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/welfare/attitudes-to-benefit-recipients.aspx>). Yet academic researchers, who are mainly in social policy, often insist that the politicians and public have got it wrong, and that the tougher policies are unnecessary. These academics ([for example, Sharon Wright](#)) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASoVMCKwiCM>) point to a considerable body of evidence which demonstrates that unemployed benefit claimants possess the same work values as everyone else and that the overwhelming majority both want employment and actively search for it.

In this article I argue that left-dominated social policy academia has failed to answer some important questions. I criticise social policy writing about unemployed benefit claimants and present evidence from my four empirical research projects, which all delivered findings consistent with the view that many unemployed people prefer living on benefits to undertaking jobs that would increase their income, but which they consider unattractive.

Very few social policy academics are Conservatives. What Alan Deacon (1) called the 'Quasi-Titmuss school', with its *exclusively* structural explanations of social problems including poverty and unemployment, and its strong links to 'poverty lobby' organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group, has long dominated UK social policy. In this climate, research findings which might appear surprising to outside observers (for example, the unemployed having more positive attitudes towards employment than the employed) are accepted uncritically, while researchers have failed to address the sort of questions a Conservative might ask (for example, 'why didn't those long-term unemployed people apply for more low status jobs?'), and authors who focus *any* attention on the behaviour of individuals when explaining poverty and unemployment have been misrepresented, treated dismissively and castigated for 'blaming the victim'. Mainstream UK social policy authors have not only overlooked the fact that conservative authors, including former Thatcher aide David Marsland and the influential US commentator Larry Mead, have only ever claimed that unemployed people choose to avoid the *least attractive* category of jobs (i.e. badly paid, dead-end, boring jobs) in favour of benefits, but also that these conservatives tend to consider benefit claimants' testimonies a poor guide to their actual behaviour (they instead tend to base their conclusions on the views of people in the welfare-to-work industry and on policies' employment effects).

With these considerations in mind, my four research projects all looked at 'choosiness' (by which I mean being selective in the jobs one is willing to do to avoid living on benefits), and one project consisted of interviews with people in welfare-to-work organisations contracted by the DWP to help JSA claimants into employment. Two of my interview projects (one in

2001/2 with 20 employees and 30 unemployed JSA claimants, the other in 2011 with 30 employees and 40 unemployed JSA claimants) found that *all* unemployed JSA claimant respondents had been employed at some point, and that *all* were willing to undertake some jobs at present. However, my interviews' focus on respondents' attitudes towards (and actual choices between) the less attractive jobs and claiming JSA exposed not only widespread reluctance to undertake 'bad' jobs, but also a dramatic difference between determined job searchers or employees who saw employment as an imperative, and others who strongly favoured living on benefits over undertaking jobs they considered uninteresting or unpleasant. Until now, social policy authors have been able to say that this oft-supposed dramatic difference is a right-wing / tabloid 'myth' that would be dispelled easily if only their scientific evidence was afforded the attention it deserves.

All of the 40 employees of welfare-to-work organisations I interviewed in 2011 said that many of their long-term (i.e. over 6 months) JSA claimant clients remained unemployed because they were too 'choosy' in the jobs they were willing to do; most of the 40 said they believed that a majority of these clients would enter employment within two months if they applied for a range of relatively unattractive jobs; some said they were shocked by their clients' apparent preference for benefits over unattractive jobs which, they said, had led them to abandon the more favourable attitudes towards the long-term unemployed they held prior to entering the industry.

The only other UK study of welfare-to-work industry employees to focus specifically upon their clients' employment attitudes is Shildrick et al. (2012) (2), an archetypal 'quasi-Titmuss school' book which also includes interviews with unemployed and employed people about

their own employment attitudes. Shildrick et al. drew their firm conclusion that people 'love' being employed (p.8, 136) and 'loathe' claiming benefits (p.194) based on what unemployed and employed people told them; they completely dismissed their 13 welfare-to-work industry respondents' comments (which were very similar to what my 40 said) as biased! Shildrick et al.'s favouring of one form of interview research over the other is remarkable, as both clearly have strengths and limitations. After all, the professionals have vast experience of their clients' job search activity (my 40 had spent a combined estimated total of 147,000 hours in the presence of their long-term unemployed clients), while some unemployed people might not want to risk losing their income by telling a stranger they do not want a job, even if they believe their chances of being reported to the benefit authorities are tiny. Yet because conclusions like Shildrick et al.'s are pleasing to left-wing people's ears they receive virtually no critical scrutiny from other social policy academics. Indeed, glowing reviews of Shildrick et al.'s book (for example, [Hartley Dean's](#) (<http://csp.sagepub.com/content/34/2/289.full>)) have overlooked its inclusion of evidence of widespread voluntary unemployment.

My fourth project (with [Clare Saunders](#) [<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/esi/people/saunders/>] and [Maria T. Grasso](#)) (<http://www.shef.ac.uk/politics/staff/mariagrasso>) analysed attitude survey data. Previous quantitative studies have used questions which, I believe, are inappropriate for studying my topic because they do not offer respondents a choice between being employed and being unemployed. Studies have tended to use the 'lottery question' ('would you work if you had no financial need to?') or Protestant Work Ethic scales (featuring agree/disagree statements such as 'our society would have fewer problems if people had less leisure time'), and they have concluded that unemployed people's

commitment to employment is at least as strong as employed people's. We used the agree/disagree statement 'having almost any job is better than being unemployed' from the British Cohort Study (BCS) and National Child Development Study (NCDS), which each have large samples of about 10,000. Being 'unemployed and seeking work' associated strongly with 'disagreeing' with the statement in all four surveys we analysed (the most recent waves of the BCS [1996 and 2000] and NCDS [2000 and 2008]), even when relevant variables were controlled for.

Thus, all of my studies' findings are consistent with the view that large numbers of unemployed people remain on benefits because they are too choosy in the jobs they are willing to undertake. While the 'unemployment trap' (being unable to increase one's net income by entering employment) is well established empirically, people being reluctant to do jobs that would increase their net income, but which they consider unattractive, has not emerged to anything like the same extent before.

While it is perhaps inevitable that academics' political standpoints (whether left or right) influence their research and writing, UK social policy literature on unemployment is nevertheless striking in this regard, as the vast majority of authors lean in one direction - to the left. Yet this is rarely acknowledged when they present 'scientific evidence' to challenge so-called 'myths' perpetuated by mainstream politicians and tabloid newspapers. As Frank Field MP, who is *both* a mainstream politician *and* a social policy author, once put it, left-wing social policy authors sometimes imply that benefit claimants are 'immune from the faults of laziness or dishonesty' (3). When I first published findings from my 40 welfare-to-work industry interviews, [in an article that included the kind of criticisms of social policy](#)

writing I have made here

(<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8988782&fileId=S0047279413000317>), the *Journal of Social Policy* invited mainstream social policy

authors Sharon Wright

(<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8988850>) and

Greg Marston

(<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8988846>) to

write responses. While the pair made some interesting and intelligent points, they did not

tell me anything substantial that I did not already know, and they neither conceded ground

to me nor said anything to persuade me to change my mind. My hope is that my book's

([http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/rethinking-unemployment-and-the-work-ethic-](http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/rethinking-unemployment-and-the-work-ethic-andrew-dunn/?K=9781137032102)

[andrew-dunn/?K=9781137032102](http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/rethinking-unemployment-and-the-work-ethic-andrew-dunn/?K=9781137032102)) arguments and findings, which I have summarised here,

will provoke some more fruitful debate.

(1) Deacon, A. (2002) *Perspectives on Welfare*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

(2) Shildrick, T, MacDonald, R, Webster, C and Garthwaite, K. (2012) *Poverty and Insecurity: life in 'low pay, no pay' Britain*, Bristol: Policy Press.

(3) Field, F. (1997) 'Re-inventing welfare: a response to Lawrence Mead', in Deacon, A (ed.), *From Welfare to Work: lessons from America*, London: IEA, p.61.

Andrew Dunn is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Lincoln. He is the author of 'Rethinking Unemployment and the Work Ethic'

(<http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/rethinking-unemployment-and-the-work-ethic-andrew-dunn/?K=9781137032102>).