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## Does Money Talk Equate to Class Talk? Audience Responses to Poverty Porn in Relation to Money and Debt

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## **Does money talk equate to class talk? Audience responses to poverty porn in relation to money and debt.**

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### **9.1. Introduction**

This chapter focuses on transcripts collected by a subset of researchers from the *Benefits Street* project, based at Sheffield Hallam University. It is one of a suite of research outputs focusing on language and class in Britain in the twenty-first century which utilise linguistic analysis to interrogate (reactions to) media representations of working class people. For the present paper we draw upon data from four focus groups designed to elicit audience responses to clips of the poverty porn programme *Benefits Street* (Channel 4/Love Productions, 2014). The programme followed the lives of residents on Birmingham's James Turner Street, many of whose sole source of income was government benefits. Regulatory watchdog Ofcom (2014) received 950 complaints about the programme, the majority of which claimed that it 'misrepresented and vilified benefits claimants'. The focus groups we organised were conducted across the north and Midlands of England (Batley, Burnley, Nottingham and Sheffield) and included self-selecting members of the public from different social backgrounds (see section 9.3). We have already written about how our focus group participants negotiate their relationships with one another and navigate their understandings of benefits claimants (Paterson, Peplow and Coffey-Glover, 2016) and are currently working on definitions of social class and audience interaction with *Benefits Street* using Twitter. In this paper, we focus specifically on whether the financial aspect of benefit receipt is fundamental to our participants' discussions of social class.

Using techniques from corpus linguistics and discourse analysis we focus on how our participants used terms associated with money and debt in order to analyse the following:

1. Do our participants draw on semantic fields associated with money and debt when evaluating the people they see on screen (and benefits recipients more generally)?

2. Does the use of money and debt terms correlate with reference to other indexes of social class (e.g. education, employment, image, language use)?
3. Are money and debt discussed explicitly (in relation to social class) or are references more implicit?

By addressing these three questions we consider how money talk is used within discourses of class, whether discussions of money are used to evaluate poverty porn participants, and ascertain whether talk of money in relation to benefits claimants actually equates to talk about their implied social class. We begin our analysis using corpus techniques to explore all of the focus group data, and then narrow our focus to provide analysed extracts from one group. Selecting one focus group for close analysis allows us to consider conceptualisations of money and debt within wider class-based discussions in detail, rather than decontextualising our examples. As the following analysis shows, the consideration of money and debt in relation to government benefits is not straight-forward and our participants have different views and positions. For example, whilst many of our participants proposed and/or accepted that there is a dichotomy between the very rich and the very poor, others problematized this notion through allusion to landowners who are unable to maintain their estates, and footballers from working class backgrounds who receive high wages. Therefore, throughout this chapter we endeavour to explore *how* our participants talked about money and class rather than simply focusing on *what* they discussed.

## **9.2. Poverty porn**

*Benefits Street* is an example of poverty porn – a televisual genre that follows the lives of real people who have been selected for inclusion based on their socioeconomic circumstances. The programme originally aired as five hour-long episodes on Channel 4 in early 2014 and was followed in 2015 by a second series set in Stockton-on-Tees. Our focus groups were reacting to clips from the first series – set in Birmingham – as the second series

had not aired at the time of data collection. At the core of poverty porn programming is a conflict between documenting the day-to-day lives of those in poverty and/or in receipt of government benefits and presenting those day-to-day experiences as mass media entertainment. In *Benefits Street* and other examples of poverty porn, such as *On Benefits and Proud* (Channel 5, 2013) and *Britain's Benefit Tenants* (Channel 4, 2014), the selection criteria which unites all participants is the fact that they have low incomes (and lack alternative economic resources, such as property ownership). They are likely to live in council-owned and/or subsidised accommodation and participants tend, in their majority, to be unemployed. Thus, the participants' relationships with money – how they obtain money, how they spend money, etc. – tend to be central to the narratives of poverty porn. Examples from *Benefits Street* include two participants searching (unsuccessfully) for jobs, and a participant selling small quantities of household essentials for fifty pence each.

Poverty porn appears designed to homogenise those on benefits and set them up for mockery, as their ways of life are evaluated negatively. Biressi (2011, p.145) notes that in programmes with a similar focus to *Benefits Street*, like *How the Other Half Live* – where a family with a high level of disposable income opts to assist a family living below the poverty line – those with higher socioeconomic status are called upon to 'review the progress of the family that they sponsor, debating on screen whether the money given over was wisely spent and whether further investment was merited'. This enforces a distinction between both sets of participants, with the recipients of sponsorship being held accountable to their sponsors. Biressi argues that the way sponsors evaluated their investments helped to 'produce accessible and diverting stories about citizenship, individual responsibility and welfare dependency in an era of restricted resources and limited sympathy for those who consistently draw on them' (2011, p.145). Members of the middle class, with their sense of 'natural distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984), are positioned here as able to judge the working class.

The notion that viewers too can judge those they see on screen is reinforced by the tendency for poverty porn to focus on non-typical benefits recipients. For example, *On Benefits and Proud* focused on a small group of individuals representing extreme stereotypes (a single mother of eleven in receipt of £900-per-week in benefits, and an adult couple who refused to work). Thus, the image presented in poverty porn is not an accurate economic depiction of benefit receipt in the UK. In the first instance, joint research between the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the New Policy Institute estimated that in 2012 4.3 million families receiving some form of government benefits were in paid employment (MacInnes, 2013). Secondly, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (2012), the ‘most prevalent benefit in payment is the Retirement Pension’, yet there are few, if any, poverty porn participants who are over retirement age. Thus, the image of benefits receipt presented in poverty porn is not an accurate reflection of the distribution of benefits payments across the UK population. As yet, no work on poverty porn has focused specifically upon how viewers evaluate the financial issues depicted in such programming, an issue we aim to address below.

### **9.3. Data and method**

Fairclough (2001, p.41) argues that the ‘power relations enacted’ in media discourse are often implicit and are worthy of close scrutiny. He claims that, as media producers cannot know exactly who will interact with their text (visual, written, or spoken), they must create content for an imagined ‘ideal subject’, a subject that ‘actual viewers or listeners or readers have to negotiate a relationship with’ (2001, p.41). Given that benefit receipt and government welfare reform are contentious issues,<sup>1</sup> we did not expect viewers of *Benefits Street* to passively consume the programme. However, nor did we assume that there would be a uniform (negative) reaction to the programme. It was our intention to gather a range of opinions about *Benefits*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the ESRC-funded Poverty and Social Exclusion project (<http://www.poverty.ac.uk>) has noted that ongoing cuts to benefits are disproportionately affecting people with disabilities.

*Street* with a focus on how the people who took part in the programme were represented. To this end we conducted focus groups and surveyed the views of people from different social backgrounds (care workers, university staff, retail workers, retired, and unemployed people).

In order to address Litosseliti's (2003, p.1-2) points that focus groups should be 'comfortable and enjoyable' and participants should 'not feel pressurized to make decisions or reach a consensus', each focus group was conducted in a setting familiar to each group. Though most of the participants knew each other, introductions were made at the start of the session to break the ice. This was also a chance for the researcher conducting the focus group to talk briefly about the project and what would be required of the participants. Where (perhaps inevitably) some speakers were more dominant than others, care was taken by the researchers to draw all participants into conversation using either direct address (verbal or gestural) and generic questions such as 'what do we think about that?'

The focus group method allowed us to work with self-selecting participants who were interested in talking about *Benefits Street*, although they did not all have the same perspectives on the programme or opinions on wider media representations of the working class. However, we are aware that focus groups are not the most natural settings for most participants. Indeed, Richardson (1994, p.93) discusses the pitfalls of using focus groups/interviews to ascertain respondents' interpretations of and views about topics such as poverty. In her study of the 1990 programme *Breadline Britain*, she notes that

people who do not normally talk at length and self-consciously about specific programmes are doing something slightly unnatural when they do so after a screening in a university seminar room or other "public" space. However it does not follow from this that the kinds of things they *say* are unnatural in the sense that they do not represent the actual thoughts of the speakers, from their various subject positions and drawing upon familiar, relevant discourses

(Richardson, 1994, p.95).

She continues '[u]ndoubtedly the comments made in these research settings are conditioned by the speech situation, which has its own interpersonal relations' (an issue we have addressed in Paterson, Peplow and Coffey-Glover, 2016), but suggests that 'it would be hard to argue that the speech situation can be held responsible for the *substance* of the comments, except in the sense that they may have an interest in coming across as concerned citizens, and will want to say the things that they believe such citizens out to say' (1994, p.95). That is, whilst the focus group setting may have an impact on how our participants interact with each other (and the researchers) it is not likely to have a huge impact on the topics that the participants bring into the discussion. Indeed, initial corpus-based analysis of the topics covered by the four focus groups indicated that, whilst participants may not all have the same viewpoints on a given topic, the topics discussed did not vary considerably between groups.

#### **9.4. Analysis**

Our analysis is split into two sections. In section 9.4.1 we draw on techniques from corpus linguistics (specifically the use of semantic tagging software) and discourse analysis to establish if, and how, our participants used the language of money and debt to talk about social class. Section 9.4.2 includes discourse-level analysis of our participants' negotiation of class and money terms. The results of our analyses are synthesised in section 9.5 where we consider our overarching question of whether money talk equals class talk.

##### **9.4.1 Semantic fields of money and debt**

In order to determine which semantic fields our participants drew upon in their discussions of *Benefits Street* and benefits receipt more generally, we used corpus software package Wmatrix (Rayson, 2008). Wmatrix assigns (tags) each word in a text to one of twenty-one broad categories – such as Time, Science and Technology, and Social Actions, States and

Processes – most of which are subdivided further; Government and Politics, for example includes the subfields of Crime, and General Ethics. The aim of the tagging process is to ascertain which semantic fields occur within a text and to highlight key themes and trends. We uploaded the transcript for each of our four focus groups into Wmatrix and compared them to each other. Table 9.1 shows the rankings of the top ten semantic fields our participants used. For the purpose of our analysis, categories relating to general language terms and grammatical terms were removed from calculations as they always occurred most frequently, but showed little information about the topics covered in a text; function words accounted for around 50% of all words used, but their analysis did not illuminate what our participants talked about.

**Table 9.1: Top 10 semantic fields per focus group**

	Batley	Burnley	Nottingham	Sheffield
Psychological actions, states & processes	1	1	1	1
Social actions, states & processes	2	3	2	2
Numbers & measurement	3	2	4	3
Movement, location, travel & transport	4	4	3	4
Money & commerce	5	5	6	5
Linguistic actions, states & processes	6	6	7	6
Time	7	7	5	7
Substances, materials, objects & equipment	8	9	8	8
Emotional actions, states & processes	9	8	9	9
Education	10	10	10	-
Government & the public domain	-	-	-	10

Table 9.1 shows that the most popular semantic field was Psychological Actions, States and Processes, which included terms such as *think, feel, want, attitudes* and *opinion*, and which indicates how participants expressed their own verbal/mental processes or assumed such processes on behalf of benefits claimants. For example, participants in our Nottingham focus group claimed ‘She *wanted them* to have a career; she *wanted them* to do well; but *she didn’t seem to be bothered* about her own career’ (Paterson, Coffey-Glover, and Peplow, 2016, p.202). The second most frequent semantic field was Social Actions, States and Processes, which covered general and kinship terms (such as *people, kids, daughter, father*), modal



markers, and actions, such as *helping*. The use of this semantic field indicates who our participants talked about, but gives little information about how they talked about people.

The semantic field of Money and Commerce was in the top ten semantic fields for each focus group, occurring in fifth place in the Burnley, Batley and Sheffield groups and sixth place in the Nottingham group. This indicates that money was a salient topic in our focus groups' considerations of *Benefits Street* and benefits receipt more widely. Figure 9.1 includes all the money and debt terms occurring in our transcripts.

**Figure 9.1: Semantic field of Money and Commerce**



For each focus group, the most frequent token in this category was the word *money*, occurring 119 times in total. Participant comments about money included the following repeating themes:

1. He knew every trick in the book and the more kids he got the more money he got (Nottingham)
2. ...we are letting rich bankers get away with multi-millions of pounds and people that live in offshore, put money in offshore accounts don't pay any tax, because they can afford solicitors or barristers or whatever (Sheffield)

3. I think they might need educating as to how to manage their money (Burnley)
4. Yes I think if you are working you are entitled to spend your money if you want to spend (Nottingham)

Example (1) is a realisation of scrounger discourses (c.f. Baker and McEnery 2015), where benefits recipients are seen to be actively taking advantage of and/or trying to manipulate the UK benefits system.<sup>2</sup> Across our focus groups, the term *money* was used in this way 11 times. The second example conceptualises *Benefits Street* (and benefits in general) as being in dichotomic opposition to the money made by ‘rich bankers’; there were 5 similar uses of *money* in our data. Alternatively, example (3) plays to the ‘flawed consumerism’ discourse (Bauman, 2004) which individualises poverty in the sense that it reduces it to poor money management, rather than acknowledging that wider societal structures can influence how much money people have. This use of *money* occurred 18 times in contrast to 18 occurrences where participants expressed the view that if you earned your own money, you could spend it how you wanted (example 4). Other uses of *money* noted that jobs did not pay enough (7 occurrences), people claiming benefits are unaware where their money is coming from (6 occurrences), and money and education are linked (3 occurrences). Additionally, there were 6 references to *Benefits Street* participant White Dee making money (see below), and the programme’s producers making money (4 occurrences). What is clear from these examples is that, although all the focus groups did talk about money (and less so about debt), they did not all talk about it in the same way.

The other key terms prominent in Figure 9.1 indicate the salience of topics relating to employment. *Job/s* occurred 146 times, 31 of which were in the cluster ‘get a/another job’. Analysis of the wider context of this phrase suggests that people want jobs (3 occurrences), but

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<sup>2</sup> The terms *scrounging* (1), *scrounger* (1), and *scroungers* (8) appeared in our data, but clustered in the Sheffield transcript and did not occur in the Batley or Nottingham data.

there are not enough jobs (4 occurrences), yet this position contrasts with those who claim that being on benefits pays more than jobs (5 occurrences) and those on benefits should get a job (6 occurrences). The occurrences of *work* also followed a similar pattern. The term *benefit/s* occurs 105 times, predominantly in the cluster ‘on benefits’ (44 tokens). In contrast, *Benefits Street* only occurred 15 times. References to people ‘on benefits’ were primarily of two types; benefits recipients were quantified, as in ‘they are all on benefits’ or ‘95% are on benefits’, and judged: ‘she loves being on benefits’, and ‘they just want to be on benefits, drink booze, take drugs’. Finally, Figure 9.1 illustrates that terms specifically associated with debt, such as *arrears* (1), *debt/s* (4), *loan/s* (2), etc. were not prominent in our focus groups.

To investigate how our participants used money and debt terms in more detail, we chose to focus closely on one of our focus groups to analyse the use of such terms within their wider context. To select one of our transcripts, we again compared the texts using Wmatrix. Proportionally, the Batley group used the highest percentage value of money and commerce terms (9.88% of their talk, expressed as 274 raw tokens, was assigned to this category) followed closely by the Nottingham focus group (9.59% and 328 raw tokens). We discuss the transcript from the Nottingham focus group in detail in Paterson, Peplow and Coffey-Glover (2016) and so, for the purpose of this paper, we focus our close analysis on the Batley transcript.

Further justification for focusing on the Batley data is that this focus group included the most participants in receipt of benefits. There were nine participants in this group, six of whom were unemployed, two who were retired, and one who was employed as a care worker. The group comprised five men and four women, aged between 26 and 60 years old. Seven of the participants were in receipt of (or had been in receipt of) government benefits, including Employment Support Allowance, Job Seekers’ Allowance, and Disability Living Allowance. This group were unique in our study because they represented the evaluation *of* (media depictions of) benefits recipients *by* benefits recipients. By focusing on the responses of this

group in particular, rather than generalising from the responses of all four focus groups, we are specifically providing a voice to some of those people who *Benefits Street* (and poverty porn more widely) claims to represent, although, as the discussion shows, our participants did not tend to associate themselves with the people they saw on screen.

In particular, the group used money terms to negatively evaluate *Benefits Street* participant White Dee. They question ‘why would you give White Dee all that money and all that fame, she is no good’ and allude to scrounger discourses when they say ‘It is probably her style that she has run for so many years...’ and ‘she loves being on benefits’. They suggest that White Dee has ‘fame and fortune’, ask whether or not ‘she had more money all the time’, and claim that she is ‘getting free holidays’ that, by implication, she is not entitled to. One participant argues that White Dee has ‘gone to Spain, partied with all the young lads and they have shoved her in [the] pool and she is going to sue them now [...] they pushed her in and hurt her ribs and she is trying to claim money’. The rest of the focus group are unsympathetic about this, suggesting ‘she shouldn’t have gone there then should she’. Even though White Dee was in receipt of benefits at the time she appeared on *Benefits Street*, and most of the Batley participants have also received benefits at some point, none of the focus group associated themselves with White Dee; she does not represent them on screen, implicitly because of her attitude to money.

#### **9.4.2 Defining class: money, debt and markers of class**

In this section we focus on how the group defined ‘class’ and how their discussions of money and debt correlated with other indices of a stratified class system. The approach here moves away from a quantitative analysis and towards a qualitative discourse analysis. Our argument is that, although the participants found class difficult to define explicitly, in an abstract sense they were able to draw on rich discursive resources, linking certain expected behaviours with the different classes within UK society. As the group were asked questions

about class by a facilitator it is not surprising that there was some explicit discussion of social class, specifically focusing on how economic resources (and thus capital, c.f. Bourdieu 2010) are directly connected to class. For example, M1 made the following comments, linking class and wealth:

**Extract 9.1 - 'there's class in wealth'**

- 1 M1 if there's class (.) there's class in WEALTH (0.5) there's the super-rich (0.5) the wealthy (1.0) the middle class if you want to say people who're professionals who earn well (.) those who don't earn much
- 2 F2 =yeah
- 3 M1 =and those who don't earn anything really (.) and that is the old way (.) there is no way (.) it is just strata (1.0) set about by money and earning (.) their income and work (.) work and income (1.5)
- 4 Fac and that is the most sort of imp- most [important
- 5 M1 [and that dictates everything

M1 links class with 'money and earning' and 'income and work' (turn 3), seeing social class as inextricably connected to economic status. His comment that 'there is class in wealth' (turn 1) is ambiguous: it is uncertain whether M1 is simply connecting money with social class or saying that those with money have class and so are 'classy', in the sense of being culturally and socially refined.<sup>3</sup> This implies that those without wealth lack class, whether that means standing outside the objective class system, not being 'classy', or perhaps both of these things. Regardless of specific interpretation however, M1's comment at turn 1 conveys a sense that money is a highly important factor in defining and distinguishing the classes.

As Extract 9.1 illustrates, social class tended not to be discussed in terms of the traditional categories of 'working', 'middle', and 'upper' but, rather, in terms of rich and poor,

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<sup>3</sup> Drawing on data from *The Great British Class Survey*, Savage similarly found that respondents associated wealth with being 'classy', an association that is paradoxically maintained even if a once wealthy individual has lost their money (Savage et al., 2015, p.88) - see also Extract 9.3 in the present chapter.

having money and not having money. Throughout the discussion, there was a recurring theme contrasting rich and poor, and this discussion focused particularly on government policies that were seen as to blame for this inequality. Extract 9.2 illustrates this:

### **Extract 9.2 - rich, poor, and the government**

- 1 F3 do you think the gap is getting wider between
- 2 M2 =oh yea::ah (.) I've got books at home y'know (.) division since the start of the Thatcher era has been increasing at a rapid rate and every government that's been in since including the Labour (.) you scratch off the (.) you scratch the red on the top of the Labour Party and it's blue underneath (0.5) it's no difference you know (1.5) and they have the same idea (0.5) rich get richer (.) poor get poorer

In this extract, successive UK governments, both Conservative and Labour, are held responsible for growing inequalities in society, whilst another participant claimed that 'it's a Tory policy' to have 'rich richer poor poorer'.

While members of the focus group were happy to make some explicit connections between economic capital and class, and specifically between having money and having class, the group as a whole found class hard to define. This is not to say that class as a concept was beyond our participants' comprehension, but rather that they had an understanding that the nuances of (contemporary) social class make it difficult to define. Particular aspects of modern life were seen as leading to this difficulty, and class boundaries were reported as being more clearly delineated in the past than today. Indeed, two participants agreed that class boundaries today were 'blurred': 'I think the boundaries are much more blurred than they've ever been' and 'class as such isn't a definable thing really any more', with the former being reinforced by M2 stating 'definitely'.<sup>4</sup> At one point in the conversation, the participants explicitly made a

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the fact that *The Great British Class Survey* led Savage et al. (2015) to propose seven new classes suggest an acceptance that the existing class labels (upper, middle, lower, etc.) were insufficient for modern UK society.

link between social class and housing, saying that because house ownership is changing, so too is the concept of class membership:

### **Extract 9.3 - class and property**

- 1 F2 I think a lot people have elements of what used to be classes
- 2 M1 =yeah
- 3 F2 =I think a lot of people have elements out of [XXXX
- 4 M1 [well in the sixties (.) seventy odd percent (.) in the sixties seventy odd percent of the people out there RENTED property
- 5 M2 =yeah
- 6 M1 =that's a big change [a big development
- 7 F1 [XXXX
- 8 M1 AND (.) government (.) the nationalised industries were like up to two or three hundred thousand people in EACH industry
- 9 M3 that's happening that now isn't it renting (.) people can't afford mortgages
- 10 M1 =yeah

These remarks, and others besides, suggest that whereas in the past social class could be defined and was fixed, perhaps to economic capital, nowadays the situation is more complex, with factors such as social ties, education, property, family, and behaviour all contributing to class formation. This is not to say such factors were not previously part of social class, but the relationship between economic capital and education, etc. may have been more linear. For example, the expansion of higher education in the UK and the provision of grants and mass student loans means that it is less connected (although not completely unrelated) to economic capital than it once was. Although there was an acceptance within the group that money is connected to class, there was also a sense that class went beyond the economic, an idea captured in M4's question whether 'if a person has a massive house [and] it belongs to

them, it's been handed down, it's been inherited, but they're millions of pounds in debt, does that mean they're upper class?'. This question suggests that class identity today goes beyond objective and quantifiable factors, such as annual income, and that class is instead, as Bourdieu (2010) argues, a product of accumulated and inherited forms of capital.<sup>5</sup> M4's question raises the issue of debt, but money and debt tend to be treated separately in the speakers' responses. Discussions of debt were, in fact, rare and when they did occur, tended to be in connection either with landowners with large mortgages or with student debt (Extract 9.4):

#### **Extract 9.4 - student debt**

- 1 M1 I used to work every s- every break (.) every holiday to put  
in for that (0.5) nowadays students [are on
- 2 M3 [XXXX
- 3 M1 =a big [debt
- 4 F1 [coming out on the dole
- 5 M1 so haha I mean (.) you know (0.5) you get parents who buy a  
flat for them (.) for the kids (.) so you haven't got to (.)  
and a new car in there and everything
- ...
- 6 M3 what kind of pressure on a student racking up all them debts  
(.) thinking how am I gonna pay that off when I'm fully  
qualified

Although there seems to be sympathy for the student debtors, there does not appear to be an assumption that poverty, or being in a low social class, accompanies debt. Indeed, one could say that debt is associated with having an education and with more privileged members of society. M1's comments in turn 5 of Extract 9.4 illustrate a paradox surrounding debt: although many middle class and upper class graduates may accumulate large personal debts from their education, their families are still in a position to provide financially, buying them

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<sup>5</sup> Reflecting Bourdieu's work, the combination of different forms of capital – social, cultural, and economic – form the backbone of Savage et al.'s (2015) *The Great British Class Survey*, which asked respondents questions about their networks, hobbies, and income.



flats and cars (for statistics on current levels of financial support for graduates, see Hills et al., 2013, p.113).

Other groups in society were seen as representing the ambiguity of class, money and debt but in a rather different way. While landowners and (middle class) students have personal debts but are rich in other forms of capital and have accumulated wealth, footballers were given as an example of a group that is 'paid a lot of money' but does not have the other trappings associated with the higher classes: 'just because they're a great footballer you know, doesn't automatically bestow what at one time what we'd have perceived as class upon them'. The implication here is that certain groups of people, such as footballers, have substantial earnings but may not identify as belonging to a different class from that of their upbringing. This group also may not have the cultural and social capital associated with the upper classes, and so occupy an ambiguous class position.

Interestingly, while rich people may be seen as having 'class' (see Extract 9.1), the group's discussion also suggested that unemployment is associated with those who are so marginal that they do not belong to a class:

#### **Extract 9.5 - the underclass**

- 1 Fac do you think it tells you anything about social class (1.0)
- 2 M1 well I think that last one [[video clip]] gave a perfect example (0.5) the underclass (.) there is an underclass (.) definitively (.) social underclass as I've said before has been around for decades (.) it's always there (.) the ones that don't (.) fit

Here M1 refers to this marginalised group as 'the underclass', a group that does not 'fit' within typical society. Elsewhere in the discussion this social group was referred to as having 'no class', in the sense of being outside the class system altogether. In response to a question about the existence of an underclass, there was a reference to hopelessness, particularly in connection with young people, and this in turn was connected to unemployment:

### **Extract 9.6 - the younger generation and hopelessness**

- 1 F4 and it's worrying when it's
- 2 FX XXXX
- 3 F4 =young people (0.5) you know the young people (.) younger generation are (.) feeling that help- (.) helplessness you know that hopelessness (0.5) you know it's passing down to [to the next generation
- 4 M4 [the next generation yeah
- 5 M3 I think there is people genuinely wanting jobs

The assumption here seems to be that the underclass must consist of people without jobs, although the 'underclass' is never explicitly linked to money. Rather, the discourse of the underclass was predominantly one of sympathy and even pity. This is perhaps because of the particular participants in the Batley focus group and their relationship to, and experience of, benefits. The group also responded with sympathy after they were shown a clip of Fungi from *Benefits Street*, who claims to have experienced abuse and had subsequently struggled with mental illness and addiction to prescription drugs. Extract 9.7 shows how the group responded to Fungi's situation and how they blamed 'the system' for not helping him and effectively condemning him to a life on benefits:

### **Extract 9.7 - 'the system has let them down'**

- 1 M1 this is a social underclass that we don't hear a lot about but they are there (.) all the time
- ...
- people where the system has let them down seriously
- 2 F1 ((sighs))
- 3 M1 they haven't been able to fit into the system (0.5) and they've lived a life where that's been the case for mos- for decades
- ...
- 4 F1 well you don't fit into society (.) you think oh my god I've got all these problems (.) I'm not like the rest

5 M5 and nobody's pi- picked [up on this  
6 M2 [XXXX  
7 F1 =they don't they don't [so at school they get behind  
8 M5 [er er er  
...  
9 F1 you can't pigeonhole people (.) they're not all the same (.)  
we're not all the same are we

Fungi's situation is generalised out to 'people' (in turns 1 and 9) and to 'they' (in turns 3 and 9), suggesting that, for the participants, Fungi's situation is seen as representative of a condition that they know exists more widely. At some points in the extract the discussion is made even more personal, with speakers suggesting that elements of Fungi's life bear on their own through their use of first and second person pronouns, suggesting a degree of identification with Fungi that could come from their own personal circumstances, as in turn 4 - 'you don't fit into society' - and turn 9 'we're not all the same'.

These excerpts and the discussion so far suggest that the focus group saw class as consisting of various factors, with money being one important element but certainly not its defining feature. Class was described as being difficult to define and the boundaries of class identity were regarded as porous; at the same time, however, implicit comments were made about landowners, middle class students, and footballers which suggest that class is regarded as inherited and rather fixed. There was an 'underclass' identified who are, to a certain extent, the victims of a powerful and wealthy elite. This is a complex picture, where class is seen as simultaneously tied to economic capital while in other ways beyond it. The moral standing of various social groups also features in the discussion of class, further demonstrating a complex view of the indicators and values associated with social class.

Although in Extract 9.7 Fungi is to be pitied for his addictions (the focus group participants had been shown a clip where Fungi discusses taking diazepam), a less sympathetic

attitude to drug-taking was also expressed by the group. In Extract 9.8, for instance, members of the group discuss right and wrong ways for those on benefits to spend their money:

### **Extract 9.8 - spending money on drugs, not food**

- 1 M5 some of them are spending money on drugs and stuff like that
- 2 MX Mmm
- 3 M5 rather than on food
- 4 F3 yeah see the married couple round the back of me come out  
(.) and I'm amazed XXXX with four carrier bags XXXX taking  
it off the people who really need it

Spending money is judged in moral terms, with M5 criticising those on benefits for buying drugs rather than food (turns 1 and 3). There is a suggestion here that drug addicts are part of the undeserving poor (see King 2000, Katz 2013), since they spend their benefits on drugs and so have to resort to attending a food bank. Drawing on her own experience, F3 explicitly contrasts those in genuine need with others who immorally use the foodbank system.

Discussion of the *Benefits Street* participant White Dee is also framed in explicitly moral terms. White Dee is the somewhat matriarchal member of *Benefits Street* who is pictured in one of the video clips we showed the focus groups giving advice and help to her neighbours. White Dee has achieved a certain amount of notoriety because of her prominent role in the programme and due to media reports of her behaviour away from the show. In Extract 9 the group has just been shown a video clip in which White Dee discusses her hopes that her children will have different experiences from her, getting an education and having careers:

### **Extract 9.9 - 'she should get a job'**

- 1 Fac I just wondered what you thought about erm (1.0) what your perception is of White Dee and her daughter in this clip (1.0)
- 2 F1 she should get a job White Dee with her daughter or summat  
(.) get her motivated and her get a job or summat (.)  
something you enjoy because she's on about it (.) she's on  
about her kids (.) so why not take her kid off somewhere

XXXX something nice to do voluntary work I dunno (0.5) just  
get on with it basically

3 MX =she can't get a j- (.) they can't get jobs that is what it  
is about they can't [get jobs

4 F1 [can't get a job↑

5 M5 =that White Dee (.) since she's been on there she's been to  
Spain (0.5) partying with young lads (.) they've shoved her  
in pool (.) and she's gonna sue them now

...

6 F1 well she shouldn't have gone there then [should she

7 M2 [it's probably a  
style that she has run for [so many years

8 M5 [I wish they'd take me to Spain

In reference to the clip, F1 says White Dee 'should' get a job (turn 2), and others condemn her for behaviours that are seen to be inappropriate for someone on benefits (turns 5-8), drawing on stories about White Dee from the national press (see also section 9.4.1). As with the discussion of Fungi, we see references to participants' own experiences but this time in disapproving (perhaps envious) terms (e.g. 'why not take the kid off somewhere?' and 'I wish they would take me to Spain').

The group's discussion of the social elite draws on a similarly moralistic discourse. In Extract 9.10 this extremely wealthy social group is explicitly described as immoral because they live outside of normal society, possessing wealth that goes far and beyond the monies possessed by the rich in the past:

**Extract 9.10 - 'greed, greed, greed'**

1 M1 but management NOW (1.0) is supermanagement >I mean< the  
managers of yesteryear have nothing on what these guys have  
now [er you know they just

2 F1 [too many chiefs and not enough Indians

3 M1 they're just richer and much much richer (0.5) you know a  
banker of yesteryear it's nothing on what these guys get

- 4 M2 yeah (0.5) how much money they on  
5 M1 you know it's astronomical wealth (0.5) stratospheric wealth  
(.) but yeah it's [leaving a big gap  
6 F1 [greed greed greed

The participants regard this elite group as morally degenerate, possessing 'astronomical' wealth that leaves 'big' gaps in society. While the group's discussion of the underclass was relatively balanced, with an acknowledgement that some people in society occupied this position through no fault of their own (see Extracts 9.6 and 9.7), by contrast there was no such concessionary discussion surrounding this elite 'super management'. There was no sense that this group is aspirational or that the elite was justified in occupying its position at the top of the class structure. Rather, this elite group was described as being driven by 'greed', and elsewhere this elite group was said to exist in a 'parallel moral universe' to the rest of society. What unites the group's discussion of the underclass and the elites, however, was an underlying moralistic discourse and a belief that these class positions are linked to particular forms of behaviour: for benefits recipients there is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, while for the elites their class position dictates that they must have behaved immorally.

### **9.5. Does money talk equal class talk?**

Our results indicate that a 'lack of money' is not used as a proxy for a 'lower class'; the links our participants made between these two notions are more complex than an explicit one-to-one relationship. Indeed, several of our participants rejected the notion of class entirely, but others were comfortable using it in relation to the wealthy. The Batley focus group used the term 'underclass' but rejected other labels, such as 'middle class' and argued for 'no class'. When asked explicitly about what determines your social class, one participant claimed it was 'money', but also suggested that education 'can be part of that'. For this participant at least

there is a clear connection between social class, money, and education. Indeed, money can influence the education one receives: tuition fees for a private school, additional home tutoring, or even being able to afford a house in a particular catchment area. However, the participant goes on to suggest that money and education do not necessarily go hand in hand and perhaps money can be earned by any social class. Thus, there is an implicit recognition that their understanding of social class encompasses a strong cultural component: ‘as a kid I couldn’t learn at school [...] So went to get a job, good money, could buy what I want and that were it’.

A further indication that education indexes social class is that when asked whether ‘the way people speak has anything to do with social class’, the participants’ responded in terms of vocabulary use (‘big words’), rather than accent or dialect. Big words are, in turn, associated with intelligence and with teachers. Here intelligence appears to be being used as a proxy for education, rather than, as some might see it, as a natural attribute that is not necessarily due to education. Education in general is not necessarily associated with having money. Rather, according to another participant, it is money that ‘controls education’ and this controls opportunity: ‘I didn’t get the education that my dad got and it’s, and that is because of money’. Taken altogether, then, it seems that money and education do not necessarily go together and, in fact, education has direct associations with debt. Nevertheless, education acts as an indicator of social class in terms of its cultural capital.

Overall, our participants do draw upon the semantic field of money in their discussions of *Benefits Street*. They explicitly mention money when they discuss *Benefits Street* participant White Dee, whom they evaluate negatively and suggest is one of the main beneficiaries of the programme (alongside its producers). Participants’ use of terms relating to debt is restricted to students, and their use of money terms more generally links to the wealth of others (particularly managers with ‘astronomical’ and ‘stratospheric wealth’ and the generic ‘super wealthy’ and ‘super rich’) and the wealth gap between rich and poor. They are also critical of how they

perceive the government spends money ('There's billions going out to other countries'). The participants do not tend to draw upon scrounger discourses to evaluate those on benefits (although there are some allusions to this in their discussion of foodbanks) and are not overly critical of how those on benefits spend their money; with the exception of Extract 9.8, there are no instances in the Batley data of 'flawed consumerism' discourse (c.f. Bauman, 2004), which contrasts with what we found in our analysis of the Nottingham focus group (Paterson, Peplow and Coffey-Glover, 2016). In contrast, their talk of money and debt centres on criticisms of those who have money and suggest that 'bankers and the people at the top' create financial problems through their greed.

Finally, the participants in our Batley focus group tended to show some sympathy for people whose sole income is from government benefits. In particular they consider aspects of Fungi's situation to be beyond his control (Extract 9.7), an evaluation which is perhaps influenced by their own experiences of benefits receipt and their knowledge of the UK benefits system. But this sympathy contrasts with their negative evaluation of those whose behaviour they do not approve of, such as White Dee (and the neighbours mentioned in Extract 9.8). Such evaluations suggest that whilst the participants did not see themselves represented on screen, the depictions of the working class portrayed on *Benefits Street* were enough to evoke discussions about other benefits claimants that they knew. Furthermore, at the start of their discussion, the participants considered whether the makers of *Benefits Street* and Channel 4, who screened the programme, were 'taking [the] piss out [of] these that are on benefits'. This assertion was rejected by one participant who noted 'I don't think they are taking the piss, they are just living their life and that's the way real life is', a claim that accepts, at least in part, the depictions of life in receipt of benefits that *Benefits Street* portrayed.

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