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A problem shared? The role of the public in the legitimation of policy: a case study of gendered welfare change in the UK

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This article argues that *shared problematizations* – shared political and public ways of thinking – legitimize policies and their outcomes. To support this argument, it examines the legitimation of gendered welfare reform in the recent UK context. Drawing on focus groups with the public, it provides evidence that the public's problematization of welfare, specifically that reform was necessary to "make work pay" and "restore fairness", aligned with that of politicians. It argues that the assumptions and silences underpinning this *shared problematization*, especially silences relating to the value and necessity of care, have allowed for welfare policies that have disadvantaged women.

Introduction

There has been a tendency, when exploring why we get the policies and outcomes we do, to focus on the way policies are framed by political elites. While this article accepts that elite discourse matters, it argues that this is only half of the story, and to fully understand why we get certain policies and outcomes, we need to look at why the public accept these. In particular, it argues that for policies to be accepted, the way in which the policy issue is problematized in political discourse – and the assumptions and silences underpinning this – need to align with the *public's* problematization of the issue and the assumptions and silences underpinning this. To support this argument, this article examines the role of the public in the legitimation of gendered welfare change in the recent UK context.

Women are more likely to rely on welfare[1] than men because they tend to have lower attachment to the labor market due to unpaid care responsibilities (Lewis 2009, Pascall 2012). It is unsurprising, therefore, that austerity measures introduced in many countries following the 2008 financial crash have had a disproportionate and negative impact on women (Karamessini and Rubery 2014). This has certainly been the case in the UK. A program of welfare reforms introduced by the Conservative and

Liberal Democrat Coalition government of 2010-2015, and continued under subsequent Conservative led administrations, has exacerbated gender inequality. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) estimate women have lost £400 per year on average, compared to £30 for men (2018, 99). The impact on lone parent households has been a key driver of this gendered impact. Over 90% of lone parents are women (ONS 2015) and lone parents have been the biggest losers from the reforms, losing on average 'almost 19% of their net income' (EHRC 2018, 80).

Literature has sought to highlight the extent of the disproportionate impact of recent reforms on women, as well as to explain this – pointing to women's greater reliance on benefits, tax credits and services, as well as a lack of women in parliament and the cabinet (e.g. Sanders et al. 2019). However, the question of how the gendered impact of these policies has been legitimized remains. Although there has been work looking at the framing of recent welfare reforms, there has been little work looking at whether the public's conception of the problem aligned with this framing, nor any analysis looking at how this may have contributed to the legitimation of gendered welfare change. This article fills this gap by analyzing data from a series of focus groups with the public. For this purpose, it applies Carol Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach (2009). This approach – traditionally used to interrogate the way problems are represented in policy – is used here to interrogate the public's problematization of welfare.

This article develops over three main sections. The first section outlines the theory: it makes the case for examining problematizations when seeking to understand how policy change is legitimized; it then posits a way of conceptualizing the legitimation of policy that takes account of the dual role of political elites and the public (legitimation through *shared problematization*). The second section outlines the methods: it discusses the choice of focus groups and outlines Bacchi's WPR approach and how it was applied. The third section applies the theory and method to the issue of gendered welfare change in the recent UK context. First it summarizes the recent political problematization of welfare – highlighting that this has largely centered around the need to "make work pay" and restore "fairness" to the welfare system. It then presents analysis of the focus group data. It finds that participants adhered to a similar problematization of welfare, similar assumptions relating to "work" and

"fairness", and similar silences around the reality and value of care. It then presents evidence that this underpinned participants' acceptance of gendered welfare policies and outcomes – specifically the acceptance of cuts to lone parent benefits and increases in lone parent conditionality and sanctions.

The theoretical concept: shared problematizations

Literature has highlighted the importance of the way in which political problems are represented for explaining policy outcomes (Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Carol Bacchi's work has been influential in this regard (1999, 2009). Bacchi draws heavily on Foucault's idea that discourses shape what it is possible to think and to say in relation to specific issues in a specific context (Foucault 1991, 59-60). She suggests problematizations normalize policy solutions and outcomes. Therefore, if we want to understand why we get the policies and outcomes we do, we need to analyze the problematizations that make these possible (Bacchi 2009). Furthermore, with problematizations what is not said is just as important as what is. Bacchi and others have encouraged us to interrogate both the assumptions upon which problematizations rely, as well as the silences these contain. Silences limit what can be conceived as acceptable policy solutions, minimize consideration of the negative effects policies may have on certain groups and, ultimately, minimize resistance to these policies (Ibid., 12-14).

Feminist scholars, in particular, have written on the need to interrogate how silences function in political discourse to obscure the way in which policies might disproportionately disadvantage women or exacerbate gender inequality (Bakker 1994, Fraser and Gordon 1994). Within this tradition, however, there has been a preoccupation with the frames adopted by political elites in justifying policy change; there has been little work looking at the role *public* problematizations may play in the legitimation of policy. There is good reason, however, to explore the role of the public. Theories of policymaking tell us that the public (citizens and voters) constrain policy makers, determining whether policies are accepted (Sabatier 2007). Ideational theorists also highlight the importance of the public. Campbell argues that 'for policies to be adopted they must fit with the underlying norms and values of a society' (1998, 380). He suggests that although frames are the 'symbols and concepts that help policy makers to legitimize policy solutions to the public', public sentiments (communicated through opinion polls and other feedback mechanisms) 'constrain the normative range of political solutions

available to policy makers' (Ibid., 385). Similarly, Schmidt claims that the public not only receive political ideas and discourse from elites, but also contribute to these, including through 'grass-roots organizing, social mobilization, and demonstrations', as well as opinion polls, focus groups and elections (2008, 310-11).

While both policymakers and the public have a role to play in policy change, measuring the relationship between them is not straightforward, and even if a relationship is detected, it is difficult to be certain of the direction of causality. While consistency or congruence between opinion and policy could suggest that the public influences policymakers, on the other hand it could suggest that policymakers, with defined policy objectives, manipulate public opinion to facilitate acceptance of these. Indeed, the direction of the relationship may change depending on the salience of the issue. Furthermore, literature suggests that policies themselves help to create interests, resources and patterns of mobilization among the public (Hacker 2002), as well as to shape public attitudes (Campbell 2012) – including toward those targeted by the policies (Ingram et al. 2007) – in a way that influences future policymaking. In other words, 'Policies can set political agendas and shape identities and interests', as well as 'influence beliefs about what is possible, desirable, and normal' (Soss and Schram 2007, 113).

This article argues that accepting that both politicians and the public matter when it comes to policy is key. However, the focus is not on establishing which leads and which follows. Instead, it argues that shared political and public discourses – *shared problematizations* – are productive; making certain policies and outcomes make sense, and others not. These shared problematizations may be formed through the iterative interplay between political and public discourse, as well as influenced by previous policies and the ways of thinking and identities these help to shape. However, how these shared problematizations are formed is not the primary focus; rather, the focus is the nature of these. The aim is to uncover the shared problematizations that function to normalize or legitimize particular policies, at particular points in time. Here normalization and legitimation are seen as two sides of the same process: problematizations normalize certain policies and outcomes; and if policies and outcomes are in line with the way in which the issue is problematized, then they are legitimized.

Although the argument made here does not rest on suggesting that politicians influence the public or

vice versa, it *is* argued that policies put forward by politicians – and the problematizations upon which they are based and defended – must be shared by the public, if they are to be accepted. It is *shared problematizations* that confer policies and their outcomes legitimacy. Thus, in order to understand why we get the policies and outcomes we do, including their disproportionate impact on certain groups, we need to unpack the shared problematizations – and the shared assumptions and silences underpinning these problematizations – which legitimize these.

Methods

This article seeks to uncover the shared problematization between politicians and the public which has led to the legitimization of gendered welfare reform in the recent UK context. It does this by drawing on focus group data. Laenen et al. (2019) highlight the usefulness of focus groups for inductively exploring public attitudes to welfare, including capturing motivations for welfare support and evaluations of deservingness. Focus groups are also well suited to exploring how members of the public problematize policy issues, helping to 'tease out previously taken for granted assumptions' (Bloor et al. 2000, 13), as well as silences relating to the issue. Although focus groups do not allow for statistical generalization, like other qualitative methods, they provide scope for analytic generalizability – helping us to develop and test theoretical propositions (Bryman 2012, 406).

Focus groups with the public were conducted in four locations across Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire in spring 2017. The locations were chosen to maximize the chances of getting participants with a mix of political views and from a range of socio-demographic backgrounds. Two of the locations chosen are relatively wealthy areas; the other two are less affluent. A total of 40 participant took part, recruited through advertisements and word of mouth. A demographic profile of the participants is provided separately (Supplementary Table 1). Participants were informed that the purpose of the focus groups was to explore public attitudes toward welfare. No prior knowledge or experience of the welfare system was necessary to take part and minimal information was provided to participants about welfare policy before and during the groups. Participants were asked to discuss their views of welfare, their awareness of, and attitudes toward, recent welfare reforms, as well as issues such as work and fairness; they were not asked directly about gender in relation to welfare, as one of

the aims of the research was to explore the extent to which gender was spontaneously recognized as an issue.

The data from the groups was coded inductively in Nvivo, guided by Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach. This approach was originally developed to interrogate the way in which issues are problematized in policy. However, this article demonstrates that this approach can be usefully applied to examine public problematizations. The approach outlines six questions to guide researchers (2009, 2). Initially, the data was analyzed with question 1 of the WPR approach in mind (what's the "problem" represented to be?). Most useful in this regard were responses given to the questions 'When you hear the word "welfare" what do you think that means?' and 'Do you think that the welfare state is generally a good thing or a bad thing? Why?'. Next, the data was analyzed with question 2 of the WPR approach in mind (what presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem"?). In particular, in the interests of understanding the extent to which recent political welfare discourse spoke to discourses within the wider public, the participants' assumptions about "work" and "fairness" were interrogated. Question 4 was then applied (what is left unproblematic or silent in this representation of the "problem"?). Specifically, the extent to which participants recognized the reality and value of care was explored. Lastly, the data was analyzed in terms of what it tells us about the effects of the problematization (question 5 of the WPR approach) – in particular, the acceptance of gendered welfare reform. Questions 3 and 6 of Bacchi's approach (how has the representation of the problem come about? and how/where the representation has been produced, disseminated and defended?) also informed the analysis, and inform the presentation of the findings in this article.

The next section begins with a summary of the welfare context and the recent political problematization of welfare in the UK. Then, the findings from the focus groups are presented in order to explore the public's problematization of welfare and whether this aligned with the recent political problematization.

The legitimation of gendered welfare change in the UK

Following the 2008 financial crash many countries introduced austerity measures, including welfare reforms. In the UK, this began in earnest after the 2010 general election. The incoming Coalition government published their proposals for reform shortly after coming to office (DWP 2010a). These proposals were criticized by those concerned with gender equality for proposing a substantial intensification of the "welfare to work" measures introduced by the previous (New Labour) administration and largely ignoring the barriers, not least unpaid care responsibilities, which make greater participation in paid work difficult for many women. Despite these concerns, the Welfare Reform Act was passed in 2012, including a raft of measures[2] which have hit women hardest. Further reform came under the subsequent Conservative-led administration, with the introduction of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. Again, the measures introduced[3] have disadvantaged women significantly more than men.

Women in the UK, as elsewhere, are increasingly expected to enter paid work on the same basis as men while still undertaking the majority of care (ONS 2016). This is causing increasing conflict between women's roles as carers and paid workers (Lewis 2009). Societal changes are exacerbating this conflict; there have been significant changes in marriage and childbearing since the Second World War (Pascall 2012, 8) and the percentage of people living in lone parent households (mostly lone mother households) has increased dramatically (ONS 2010). The ageing population is also increasing the care burden posed by elderly family members – a burden also most frequently borne by women (ONS 2016).

The continued implementation of welfare reforms which hit women hardest and perpetuate gender inequality makes it well-overdue to examine how such policies and their effects are legitimized.

The political problem with welfare

Literature focusing on how recent welfare reforms have been framed by political elites highlights that these have been justified in the name of "making work pay" and restoring "fairness" to the welfare system. Pantazis has highlighted how "worklessness" has been represented as an 'endemic problem' in

policy and discourse since 2010, and been key in the justification of measures to make life harder on benefits (2016, 6). Similarly, Wiggan has suggested politicians have created the perception of a moral dichotomy between those who contribute to the welfare state and those who receive benefits, allowing them to justify tough policies as necessary to punish benefit recipients and restore the 'balance in favour of the "rights" of taxpayers' (2012, 389-90). Feminist scholars have also highlighted how austerity discourse has been gendered, personalizing responsibility through the promotion of the traditionally feminine practices of thrift and household management (Allen et al. 2014, Cain 2016, Jensen and Tyler 2012). Others have drawn attention to gendered silences in the Coalition's justification of their welfare reforms. MacLeavy has criticized the Coalition for not considering the 'impact of these reforms on women as the sex most vulnerable to new social risks owing to their dual and potentially conflicting, roles in reproductive care and paid work' (2011, 365). Similarly, Patrick has suggested that by problematizing dependency while promoting 'paid work as the primary duty of the responsible citizen' the Coalition, as New Labour before it, ignored 'caring, voluntary work and other forms of socially valuable contribution' as work (2012, 13).

A recent article by the same author (Richards-Gray 2020) has extended the analysis from a gendered perspective. Presenting an analysis of Coalition policy documents, this found that the government represented the problem with the welfare system to be that it did not "make work pay" and that those on benefits were enjoying an unfair advantage, getting "something for nothing" at the expense of taxpayers. It also presented further analysis of Coalition speeches and found that they: 1) defined "work" almost exclusively as paid work; 2) promoted paid work as good for the individual, family and society; 3) promoted as "fair" reforms which rewarded paid work; and 4) largely ignored unpaid care work as work, as valuable, and as a potential barrier to participation in paid work. It concluded that the assumptions and silences underpinning the Coalition's problematization of welfare functioned to obscure the ways in which welfare policy interacts with existing gender relations, in particular the unequal distribution of unpaid care between women and men, and that this has contributed to the legitimization of the gendered impact of recent welfare reforms. As already mentioned, however, there

has been little work looking at how this political framing may have aligned with public ways of thinking about welfare. This is the focus of the rest of this article.

The public's problem with welfare

Participants in the focus groups expressed strong support for the welfare state as a safety net for those who fall on hard times. It was clearly a source of national pride for some, signifying that as a society we are prepared to look after our most needy. Some said that they could not imagine a future without such a safety net. This is in line with other research that has shown little public appetite for wholesale dismantling of the welfare state (Brooks and Manza 2006).

Nevertheless, support for the welfare state was tempered with caveats relating to perceived flaws with the system and there was a perception that this is not working well in practice. Some expressed concerns relating to the complexity of the system. Those in receipt of benefits talked of their direct experience of a system that is difficult to understand and benefits which are regularly subject to change. Meanwhile, those without direct experience of receiving welfare benefits also perceived the system to be overly complicated and bureaucratic.

> 'It doesn't work properly. It's a brilliant idea. In practice it seems very, very difficult to
>
> get right' (Male, Group 3)

There was also concern about the welfare state's long-term sustainability. Participants perceived the system to be financially stretched and felt that this was likely to get worse in the future as a result of an aging population. A few also raised concerns about the perceived disproportionate cost of administering welfare benefits compared with the amount that those in need actually receive. Many also felt that the system is abused and that benefit recipients are not adequately encouraged to engage in paid work – voicing similar narratives to those in recent political discourse relating to welfare fraud and the intergenerational nature of welfare dependence (DWP 2010a, b).

> '[It] can be abused' (Male, Group 1) [In reply] 'Oh yes, it gets abused' (Female, Group 1)

'We are into the fourth generation of benefits so there are now families who have four

generations that have never done anything but been on benefits' (Male, Group 1)

The idea that the welfare system is being abused, either through welfare fraud or because people are choosing to live on benefits rather than get a job, was explicitly expressed by around a quarter of participants and went largely uncontested by others. Only a small number countered this view in any way, saying that they felt that only a minority abuse the system or that abuse is portrayed by the media and politicians to be a bigger problem than it is.

Others have suggested that public perceptions of inefficiency and welfare abuse undermine welfare state legitimacy (e.g. Roosma et al. 2016). This seemed to be the case in the focus groups. Concerns around complexity, long-term sustainability and abuse of the system formed the core of the perceived "problem" with welfare and underpinned the acceptance of, or at least a lack of challenge to, the idea that reform was needed. In this context, very few raised concerns that recent reforms, including extensive cuts to benefits and services, undermined the foundation of the welfare state.

'I would hope…that the changes are to enable it to be sustainable. The changes are so that

we can continue to keep helping' (Female, Group 3)

In particular, participants echoed the theme from recent political discourse that the system needed to be reformed to "make work pay" by making life tougher on benefits in order to move more people into paid work, thus reducing abuse and the overall burden on public spending. Although participants did not explicitly refer to the need to address "unfairness" within the system, they often alluded to this in relation to perceived abuse – echoing the theme in political discourse that those on benefits enjoy an unfair advantage over those in paid work.

The next section turns to a consideration of the assumptions underlying this problematization, specifically in relation to "work" and "fairness".

What's "work" and what's "fair"?

In line with the political framing of the need for welfare reform, a key assumption underpinning the participants' problematization of welfare was that "work" is paid work and is the primary way in which individuals can contribute to society. Also – again in line with the political framing – participants adhered to the assumption that participation in paid work is good for you and that not being in paid work has negative effects for individuals and families.

Participants also felt that it is reasonably easy to get a job and therefore, where someone is out of paid work it is because they do not want a job or because they are 'choosy with their jobs' (Female, Group 2). A theme that recurred was that benefit claimants turn down low pay/low status jobs, preferring to remain on benefits, leaving the jobs to go to immigrants.

> MALE 1: 'There are quite a lot of jobs available which nobody in Britain want to actually
> go for…cleaning or rubbish or strawberry picking'
> FEMALE 1: 'They complain that they are taking our jobs but…'
> FEMALE 2: '…but they can't be bothered getting off their arses and doing it themselves'
> MALE 2: 'You ask: "did you apply for that job?"'
> FEMALE 1: 'No they didn't apply'
> FEMALE 2: [adopts a different accent, mimicking a fictional jobseeker] "I'm not going
> to be picking some strawberries"

While there was some recognition that it may be harder to get full-time work than part-time, that zero hours contracts seem to be on the rise undermining job security, and that some on benefits may be in low-paid work, there was nevertheless a general acceptance of individualistic reasons for people being out of paid work. This supports findings from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey in 2014, when 54% agreed 'around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one' and 57% agreed that 'benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding paid work' (Park et al. 2014, vi). In light of this, reform was accepted by participants as necessary to encourage/force people off of benefits, because otherwise they are likely to be too choosy or lazy to

get a job, and therefore will not contribute to society nor get the satisfaction and self-esteem that results from this.

Participants' ways of thinking about "fairness" were also explored. Each group were presented with four possible ways of defining fairness and asked to individually rank these in terms of which they agreed with the most to least. Table 1 shows the number agreeing most and least with each definition.

Table 1: Participants' preferences for different conceptions of fairness

Definition[4]	No. Agreeing most	No. Agreeing least[5]	Net Agree (Agree most – agree least)
In a fair society, everyone should get a decent income that keeps them out of poverty	16	2	+14
You can have a fair society even if people's incomes are quite unequal, as long as you have equality of opportunity	16	5	+11
In a fair society, people's incomes should depend on how hard they work and how talented they are	5	10	-5
In a fair society, nobody should get an income a lot bigger or a lot smaller than anybody else gets	3	18	-15

Participants showed the highest levels of support for fairness as providing people with a decent income and fairness as equality of opportunity. Taking account of the net support for each, it appears that the definition that 'in a fair society everyone should get a decent income that keeps them out of poverty' was the definition that resonated most with participants. Arguably this definition chimes best with the founding principle of the welfare state in the UK – to provide social security for those in need. Reasons given by those agreeing with this definition centred around a concern that no one should be in poverty and that existing inequalities may lead some to be disadvantaged and therefore the system should step in to prevent severe hardship. Equality of opportunity also gained overall net support. Those favouring this spoke about the importance of opportunities provided by jobs, health, education and housing etc. for people to overcome disadvantage and make the best lives they can for

themselves. Some said that it is a key role of the welfare state to 'make up for the differences' (Female, Group 4) in individual circumstances of birth. Some also associated this definition with absence of discrimination which people felt is an integral component for a "fair" society.

'In a fair society, people's incomes should depend on how hard they work and how talented they are' is the definition that comes the closest to the "just deserts" conception of fairness that has been strongly promoted in recent political welfare discourse. This was the third most popular with participants. The least popular definition proposed was equality of outcome. Participants complained that this was "too much like communism" or that this would be unfair as it would not reward individual talent and effort (i.e. it would contravene just deserts fairness).

These findings are largely in line with recent European Social Survey (ESS) data, which shows relatively little support in the UK for the principle of equality of outcome – with only 45% agreeing with this principle (2020, 4-7). The ESS did not test support for equality of opportunity. However, as in the focus groups, it did find greater support in the UK for the need principle (72%) and the just deserts principle (76%) (Ibid.). Higher levels of support for the need principle in the focus groups may reflect that participants completed this exercise shortly after being asked about their views of the welfare state; the idea that there is a safety net to keep people out of poverty was one of the things participants celebrated about this.

Other studies have suggested that, as well as perceptions of need, perceptions of effort and whether a person is responsible for their own situation play an important role in public evaluations of welfare deservingness (Laenen et al. 2019, Petersen 2012). Although only five out of the forty participants agreed most with the just deserts principle in the exercise, these criteria (whether people are lazy or unlucky) featured heavily in discussions following the exercise above, with considerable support voiced for people's rewards to be proportional to their effort i.e. their participation in paid work.

> 'what if someone is truly lazy? What if someone is just an arse? If someone's truly lazy why shouldn't they be in poverty?' (Female, Group 3)

Following the ranking exercise, participants were asked whether they felt that recent reforms had made the welfare system fairer and about specific reforms they were aware of that they thought were fair or unfair. Again, in these discussions, participants broadly adhered to a just deserts conception of fairness. Some raised concerns about specific policies which they felt were unfair, especially in relation to changes to benefits for disabled people. However, the main view expressed was that these had addressed a perceived lack of fairness in the system in that they had increased incentives for those on welfare to enter paid work, mainly by making life harder on benefits. Participants expressed strong support for policies such as the Benefit Cap which, introduced in 2013 and lowered in 2016, limits the total amount of benefits per household. Fitting with participants' attitudes toward work, support for these policies seemed to be based on an acceptance of the principle of less eligibility – the idea that conditions on benefits should be sufficiently poor in order to motivate people to move into paid work, or at least that welfare provision should be such that those on benefits do not have an easier life than those in paid work.

There was also general support for the principle of welfare conditionality and sanctions for those not complying with job seeking requirements. Again, the acceptance of this seemed to be underpinned by an assumption that many on benefits do not make enough effort to seek paid work and therefore they need to be forced to through the welfare system.

> 'I think you should make the effort of turning up for work or you should lose your
>
> benefits' (Male, Group 2)

There has been a tightening of welfare conditionality in the UK in recent decades. For their part, the Coalition introduced Claimant Commitments for those on Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit. These outline the expectations recipients must meet and the consequences for them not doing so (such as losing their benefit income for a period of time). The idea of such a "welfare contract", that makes the right to benefits conditional on the fulfilment of certain obligations, was promoted as fair throughout the Coalition's welfare discourse and was an idea that participants also accepted as fair.

'If someone else has to pay for you, you have to abide by their rules' (Male, Group 3)

Overall, participants adhered to similar assumptions to those in recent political welfare discourse: that "work" is paid work and that it is good for individuals, families and society; and that those not in paid work are choosing this and therefore, if they are on benefits, are unfairly getting help they do not need. Based on this, despite showing support for a safety net to prevent poverty, participants largely accepted recent welfare reforms which reward paid work and punish those out of paid work as "fair". The next section considers whether participants also adhered to similar gendered silences to those in recent political welfare discourse.

Recognizing care?

'We should look after our elderly and disabled with generosity and dignity...anybody else living off the Welfare State should be miserable and skint' (Female, Group 3)

The assumptions highlighted above around "work" and "fairness" shut out consideration of the reality and value of care. Very few participants spontaneously acknowledged care as a barrier to paid work. Furthermore, only a few participants mentioned the potential effects of recent welfare reform on lone parents needing to juggle childcare with the increased expectation to enter paid work; when they did, it was because they had experienced the effects of the reforms themselves or knew someone who had. Most had given little thought to when lone parents are expected to "go back to work". When asked about this, participants generally supported lone parents being compelled to look for paid work once their youngest child was in full time education, so aged five, at least part time. No one was aware of the new rules around Universal Credit that means that lone parents need to look for work when their youngest is three. When informed of this, some felt this was too young, whereas others thought this sounded 'good in principle' (Male, Group 3).

To explore the perceived value of care within the home, participants were asked whether the state has a role to play in supporting those with caring responsibilities. Responses largely revolved around what would be cheaper for the government. Those expressing support for the state supporting care (through

Income Support or Carer's Allowance) often gave the reason that it would be cheaper to pay these benefits than to subsidize or provide outsourced childcare or social care. Others supported lone parents, in particular, being encouraged to get a job, as this would save the cost of these benefits and create another job for the person doing the care instead of the parent. Participants displayed little acknowledgment of the reality or value of care within the home. Care, specifically parenting, was not recognized as work, and the benefits of children receiving one-to-one care (Brooks–Gunn et al. 2002) were largely ignored.

Getting lone parents into paid work was also seen as important in order that they might provide a good role model for their children. This aligns with political discourse, particularly since 2010, which has linked participation in paid work with good parenting (Jensen and Tyler 2012, Richards-Gray 2020).

> '[You need] somebody in your family that's showing you that this is what you do with
>
> your life, you do contribute to society and you do work" (Male, Group 2)

This is in line with what Daly (2011) and others have pointed to as a trend away from the idealization of parenting in policy, and a political and public devaluing of care. Meanwhile, in the UK and elsewhere, there has been a recasting of welfare, from the male breadwinner model to the adult worker model (Lewis and Giullari 2005). Although women were excluded from the conception of citizenship that underpinned the former – based on the ideal of the working male, unconstrained by care responsibilities – care within the home was nevertheless recognized, legitimizing the use of public resources to support mothers in this work when not supported by a male breadwinner (Lister 1997). Over time, however, women have increasingly been expected to fulfil paid work as a citizenship obligation, while the reality and value of care has been increasingly silenced. This not only creates a conflict for lone parents in fulfilling paid work and unpaid care commitments, but the discourse used to reinforce this expectation serves to vilify them as "dependent" subjects if they choose, or have no choice but, to care – denying them citizenship status and justifying policy burdens upon them (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Lister 1997).

The legitimation of gendered effects

The shared problematization explored above – including shared assumptions relating to "work" and "fairness" and silences relating to the reality and value of care – underpinned relative support, or at least tolerance, for cuts in benefits to support lone parents. In the first two focus groups, participants were asked to individually rank, in order of priority for government spending, the following benefits: pensions, benefits for single parents, benefits for the unemployed and benefits for disabled people. Participants were then asked to share their rankings and their reasons for these. Table 2 below shows support for each benefit type across the first two groups.

Table 2: Support for different benefit types

Benefit type	1st (Most Important)	2nd	3rd	4th (Least Important)[6]	Net support (1st + 2nd minus 3rd + 4th)
Benefits for disabled people	20	0	0	1	+19
Pensions	0	10	6	5	-1
Benefits for single parents	1	6	11	3	-7
Benefits for the unemployed	0	5	4	12	-11

Overwhelmingly, most popular was spending on benefits for disabled people. All but one participant put this as their number one priority across the two groups. Second most popular was spending on pensions. This supports BSA data since 1998 which has consistently reported comparatively high levels of support for more government spending on benefits for disabled people (61% in 2015) and

retired people (49% in 2015) (Curtice et al. 2016, 27). Around half of participants ranked benefits for single parents as their third priority, and three ranked it last. While not as unpopular as benefits for the unemployed, there was less support for spending in this area compared to disability benefits and pensions. Again, this supports BSA data which has consistently shown this to be a relatively unpopular area for more government spending (36% in 2015), second only to spending on benefits for unemployed people (17% in 2015) (Ibid.). When asked to explain their prioritization, many putting benefits for single parents as their 1st, 2nd or 3rd choice said they did so out of concern that cuts to these might lead to the children of those parents suffering; as one woman put it, 'You've got to support the children' (Female, Group 1). Other work has also found focus group participants in the UK do not want to see the removal of welfare benefits and services from children as a result of their parents' choices (Laenen et al. 2019).

To test whether support for spending on benefits for lone parents may be inflated in surveys (such as the BSA) out of a concern for the children of these parents, in the second two focus groups, child related benefits was added as a discrete category. There was also discussion in the first two groups about the need to support carers of sick and disabled people. Therefore, a second new category, benefits for carers, was added in the second two groups. The results were interesting in terms of the change in support for the original four categories. Table 3 shows support for each benefit type across the second two groups.

Table 3: Support for benefit types when including child related benefits and benefits for carers

Benefit type	1st (Most Important)	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th (Least Important)	Net support ($1^{st} + 2^{nd} + 3^{rd}$ minus $4^{th} + 5^{th} + 6^{th}$)
Benefits for disabled people	7	8	1	0	2	0	+14
Child related benefits	9	3	2	0	2	2	10
Benefits for carers	0	4	6	2	2	4	2
Pensions	2	0	3	5	2	6	-8
Benefits for the unemployed	0	2	3	5	5	3	-8
Benefits for single parents	0	1	3	6	5	3	-10

When pensioners were the only recipient group outside of "working age", they were the second priority, after those physically or mentally incapable of working. With the inclusion of child related benefits and benefits for carers, and because pensioners were acknowledged to have been relatively protected from recent cuts, they dropped down the priority list to fourth. Children, like disabled people, were perceived as unable to help themselves (i.e. by engaging in paid work) and thus were said to be deserving. Carers were also felt to be deserving because, although they may be physically able to engage in paid work, the care and support they provide to vulnerable people was recognized as valuable and readily accepted to be a potential barrier to participation in paid work.

However, the value and potential barrier posed by care was not recognized in the context of lone parent households. This is supported by the fact that, with the inclusion of the two new categories, single parents became the lowest priority group for government spending, dropping below unemployed people. Again, when questioned about this, participants reported a willingness, if they know that children are being provided for through child related benefits, to accept or even support cuts that fall on lone parents. This supports the finding from the first two focus groups that support for government spending on benefits for lone parents was inflated by a desire to ensure the children of these parents are provided for (as there was not a separate category for child related benefits).

> 'If I was a parent, I'd just want my child to be happy…I wouldn't mind if I didn't, not if I
> didn't eat but like…if they are looked after that's number one' (Female, Group 4)

This lack of support for government spending on single parents seems to be a result of the shared problematization explored above: that welfare should "make work pay" for those who are physically able and not doing other valuable work as these groups are undeserving. As parenting is not readily recognized a barrier to paid work or as valuable work, this includes lone parents.

Question 3 of the WPR approach asks us to consider how problematizations, including the assumptions and silences underpinning them, come about. The perceived fairness of lone parents receiving welfare benefits has evolved in the UK, as elsewhere, over time. There has been a shift in perceptions of lone parents, specifically lone mothers, 'from the deserving widow to the undeserving unmarried single parent or "welfare queen"' (van Oorschot 2006, 26). There has been much work highlighting this shift in the United States, where discourse has been increasingly classed, gendered and racialized (e.g. Hancock 2004). Work in the UK has also highlighted the intersections between gender and class in welfare discourse (Jensen and Tyler 2015, Skeggs 2005) and the ways in which this has served to justify the burden of welfare cuts being borne by poor lone mothers. This literature suggests that welfare recipients – in particular lone mothers – have been increasingly framed as figures of disgust, excessive consumption and unrestrained reproduction, supporting the neo-liberal devaluing of care and social reproduction (Allen et al. 2014, Tyler 2011). The tightening of access to welfare for

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this group over time may also have fed into this shift in perceptions. Some have suggested a feedback process: with political and public discourse around potential abuse and the deservingness of particular groups leading to a tightening of access to benefits, which in turn further strengthens negative perceptions and undermines the legitimacy of benefits targeted at these groups (Ingram et al. 2007, Roosma et al. 2016).

In the focus groups, assumptions relating to lone parents' potential abuse of the system, or misuse of benefits, buttressed acceptance of welfare burdens being placed upon this group. The idea of lone parents being required to undertake paid work was supported by those concerned that they may be incentivized to have children they would not otherwise have had in order to live off benefits (echoing the assumption already highlighted, that people claiming benefits are often choosing to do so, rather than doing so because they are in need). The following exchanges from groups 3 and 2 respectively are illustrative here.

> MALE 1: 'Single parents are a real dilemma because…the child is the…concern. But I
> don't feel you can afford to go to a situation, which I think was the case in the past, where
> it was actually incentivizing people to become single parents as opposed to being
> widowed or…some unfortunate event'
> FEMALE 1: 'and paying per child'

> FEMALE 1: 'I think some are self-inflicted…to be in poverty…there's women – sort of
> single mums – and they spend the money on other things and their children go without…'
> FEMALE 2: 'They spend it on luxuries instead of necessities'
> FEMALE 3: 'They'll spend it on a £60 handbag or something'

In this context, policies that make life harder for lone parents were defended as fair – both to punish this group for perceived abuse or misuse of benefits, as well as to deter others from choosing to do the same. This included support voiced for the "two-child limit", that came into effect from April 2017, limiting support to the first two children for those in receipt of Child Tax Credits and Universal Credit.

'If you can't afford a third child you shouldn't have a third child…If you have three

children that's your problem – that they give it to you for 2 but not for 3 – therefore you

have to take precautions' (Female, Group 1).

'…you get all these programmes like *19 Children and Counting* [sic] and it's like "no,

you need to be stopped"' (Female, Group 2)

It is unsurprising, in this context, that cuts that have fallen heaviest on women – in particular lone mothers – have been legitimized. As noted above, lone parents (predominantly women) have lost around a fifth of their net income (EHRC 2018). The Benefit Cap, accepted by participants as "fair" as a means of ending the unfair advantage supposedly enjoyed by those on welfare, has particularly affected this group. According to the DWP's own impact assessment, 61% of all households affected by the cap will be headed by single mothers (DWP 2016, 11). It is also not surprising, in light of these findings, that the continued erosion of Income Support for lone parents has been legitimized in the UK context. As noted above, there was tolerance in the groups for getting lone parents "back to work" to provide a good role model to their children and to discourage them from having children in order to live off benefits. Until 2008 lone parents not in paid work could receive Income Support until their youngest child turned 16; under Universal Credit this is now three, with work focused interviews and work preparation activities expected of those with one- and two-year olds. This means more women than ever are being expected to juggle paid employment and childcare – increasingly making the choice to raise one's own children the preserve of the middle class and those in relationships.

In the groups, the problematization of welfare outlined also underpinned support for, or at least lack of concern regarding, conditionality and sanctions for those with caring responsibilities that are on Jobseeker's Allowance. Several assumptions and silences fed into this. Firstly, increased conditionality and sanctions were seen as "fair" to encourage paid work as this addressed the perception that those on welfare may be choosing not to be in paid work and often have an easier life than those in paid work. Related to this, participants assumed that those on Jobseeker's Allowance are

readily able to take up work if sanctions prove too painful. As care was not recognized as a barrier to paid work without prompting, this was not considered as a qualifying factor in this situation. Lastly, the lack of awareness relating to how soon parents are expected to look for work after the birth of their youngest child may also have underpinned a willingness to accept sanctions for lone parents. As participants generally overestimated the point at which lone parents were made to "go back to work", they may have under-estimated the challenges involved in doing so.

Although some spontaneously talked about the need for discretion over sanctions allowing for individual circumstances, and caveated their support for sanctions with the stipulation that jobseekers should receive help with the cost of travelling to and from interviews, most did not mention the need for such discretion until prompted to consider if any groups of welfare claimants should be exempt from sanctions. When asked this, many felt that mentally and physically disabled people should be excluded, and some felt that elderly people should also be exempt as it might be particularly difficult for them to find a job. Only two said that those with children should be exempt through fear of inadvertently punishing the children for their parents' failure to comply. Most participants were comfortable with the idea of parents, including lone parents, being subject to sanctions if they are provided with clear guidance on the circumstances under which these would be applied. This is in line with ESS data from the UK from 2016 that showed that 67% and 78% respectively agreed that a lone parent of a 3 year old should lose some or all of their benefits if they refuse a job because it pays less than they earned previously or because it requires a lower level of education than they have.[7]

Shared assumptions relating to work and fairness and silence around the reality and value of care have therefore legitimized the punishment of lone parents on welfare through policy, with little regard for their need to balance their unpaid care work and paid work commitments. There has been a sharp rise in the number of sanctions applied to lone parents over the past decade and a half. In particular, Gingerbread, the charity for single parent families, report a rapid escalation of lone parent sanctions between 2010 and 2014 following the introduction of the Coalition's stricter sanctions regime; while just over 1,000 were sanctioned in 2005/06, nearly 50,000 received a sanction in 2013/14 (2018, 7). Furthermore, while lone parent flexibilities have existed in relation to Jobseeker's Allowance since

2008 (allowing those in this group to work fewer hours if necessary, depending on the age of their youngest child and other circumstances), many of these flexibilities do not apply under the new Universal Credit system and the circumstances in which others can be applied have been restricted (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp 2018). Meanwhile the threat and imposition of sanctions is causing distress and hardship. Evidence suggests that lone parents are needing to employ ways of coping such as eating less, visiting foodbanks, borrowing money and cutting down on heating and lighting (Ibid.).

Conclusion

This article makes the case for interrogating *shared problematizations* – shared ways of thinking about policy issues between political elites and the public – that legitimize policies and their outcomes. By introducing this theoretical concept, it is hoped that researchers will be encouraged to look beyond the way in which policy change is justified in political discourse – toward a dual focus on politicians and the public. It is argued that this is vital as the public constrain policy making and are likely to reject policy solutions that do not fit with their conception of the policy issue.

As a way of demonstrating the importance of interrogating *shared problematizations*, this article has presented a case study of recent UK welfare reform. Previous work has shown that political elites have problematized welfare as not making work pay and as unfair, as it was unduly benefiting those on benefits at the expense of taxpayers. Focus group data was analyzed to determine whether the public's problematization of welfare aligned with this. Participants represented the problem with the welfare to be that it did not adequately incentivize paid work and, on this basis, accepted the need for reform in order to "make work pay". In line with the political problematization, underlying this were the assumptions that only paid work is valuable and that life on benefits needs to be hard in order to prevent people choosing not to engage in paid work. Furthermore, despite initial support for defining "fairness" in terms of providing a decent income for those who need it, when evaluating recent welfare reforms, "fair" policies were seen to be those which punish those disengaged from paid work. Gendered silences in this problematization were also highlighted and discussed and again these aligned with the political problematization: there was little acknowledgment of the reality and value of care, especially care provided for children within the home. Finally, this article demonstrated how this

problematization – and the assumptions and silences underpinning it – informed support among participants for lower government spending on benefits for lone parents, as well as acceptance of increases in lone parent conditionality.

With the effect on lone parent households being the main driver for the disproportionate impact of recent welfare reforms on women in the UK, this article exposes the discursive forces behind the legitimization of this impact. After all, it is not enough to decry the policies and outcomes we get, we must expose the discourses that make these possible if we are to successfully challenge these.

Notes

1. "Welfare" refers here to means-tested and non-means tested social security benefits and tax credits.

2. Including the introduction of Universal Credit, the Benefit Cap, reforms to Housing Benefit, and an increase in conditionality and sanctions for those not complying with job seeking requirements.

3. The reduction of the Benefit Cap, the four-year freeze on benefits and tax credits, and the implementation of the two-child limit in relation to Child Tax Credits and Universal Credit.

4. Definitions are from (O'Brien 2011) except the definition relating to the provision of a decent income to avoid poverty which, to the best of my memory, is my own.

5. Not everyone chose a definition they agreed with least.

6. Three participants in Group 1 did not state a 4th priority. Therefore, this was assumed to be the benefit type not stated as their 1st, 2nd or 3rd priority. One participant did not complete the exercise.

7. Based on analysis of 2016 ESS data available here: http://nesstar.ess.nsd.uib.no

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