Unsettling the Anti-Welfare Commonsense: The Potential in Participatory Research with People Living in Poverty

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Abstract

Drawing on participatory research with people living in poverty, this article details the possibilities inherent in this research tradition and its particular applicability and as yet often unrealised potential for poverty and social security research. The dominant framing of 'welfare' and poverty foregrounds elite political and politicised accounts, which place emphasis on individual and behavioural drivers of poverty, and imply that the receipt of 'welfare' is necessarily and inevitably problematic. A large body of academic evidence counters this framing, illustrating the extent to which popular characterisations are out of step with lived realities. What is often missing, however, are the voices and expertise of those directly affected by poverty and welfare reform. This article argues that placing experts by experience on poverty at the centre of research efforts is best understood as constituting a direct challenge to the marginalising and silencing of the voices and perspectives of people living in poverty. While this hints at participatory research's great potential, it is vital also to recognise the inherent challenges of taking a participatory approach. Significantly, though, participatory research can undermine popular characterisations of poverty and welfare and provide opportunities for alternative narratives to emerge, narratives which could contribute to the building of a pro-welfare imaginary over time.

Keywords: participatory research; poverty, welfare; social security; experts by experience

Introduction

People living in poverty are very often talked about by politicians, policy makers and media commentators, but it is quite rare to see them being listened to.
(North East Child Poverty Commission, 2016)

The lives and behaviours of people living in poverty have long been a popular subject of political and media debate (Golding and Middleton, 1982; Timmins, 2001). Questions of deservingness, (un)respectability and contribution are intertwined into discussions about the appropriate role of a well-functioning social security system, and the levels of support that it should

provide. These heavily politicised debates most often feature the perspectives of politicians, journalists and commentators, who share their particular (and often partial) knowledge, expertise and opinions about the causes of and solutions to poverty alongside their linked perspectives on 'welfare'. What these discussions all too often marginalise, or exclude completely, are the viewpoints of individuals in poverty, who have the particular expertise that is borne from experience (AgeUK, 2015). The simultaneous silencing and misrepresentation of experiences of poverty and 'welfare' compounds the social injustice already faced by people living in poverty.

This article explores the scope for researchers to place more emphasis on their own role in working to challenge the dominant framing of 'welfare', not only through unpicking its underpinning assumptions, but also by doing more to include people living in poverty in their research. Following a summary of the reach and nature of the framing consensus on welfare, the article details the ways in which poverty is best understood as a site of both material and relational injustice. The scope for participatory research set against this context is then introduced. Examples from the author's own research are detailed in order to explore both the possibilities and challenges implicit in doing more to foreground research *with* rather than *on* people (Barnes and Cotterell, 2012). Before concluding, there is a discussion of the possibilities inherent within participatory approaches to researching poverty and 'welfare', and a consideration of how these approaches might begin to have more traction and usage within social policy, and across the academy.

The framing consensus on 'welfare'

In the UK, over recent years, there has been a remarkably consistent characterisation of welfare in general, and welfare dependency in particular, as necessarily and inevitably problematic (Garthwaite, 2016; Patrick, 2017). This dominant narrative, which draws upon Americanised understandings of 'welfare' (Lister, 2011) is underpinned by sharp, dichotomous and simplistic divisions being drawn between 'hard working families' and 'welfare dependants'. While working families are endlessly praised and valorised, 'welfare dependants' are subject to sustained critique, censure and stigmatisation, with politicians and the media consistently and often emphatically 'othering' those who rely on social security for all or most of their income. Recipients of out-of-work benefits (hereafter claimants) are characterised as passive and inactive, with a defective agency that can only be corrected through highly interventionist and behavioural forms of welfare conditionality (Dwyer and Wright, 2014). This negative characterisation of the lives of those in receipt of only the most visible forms of 'welfare' has been mobilised to defend harsh and often punitive changes to the benefits system, which have seen a significant and ongoing retrenchment and

residualisation of social welfare provision (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016; Patrick, 2017). Perversely, politicians have argued that welfare reform that reduces and constrains access to social welfare will actually improve social inclusion by enabling transitions from 'welfare' and into 'work', with paid work exclusively and narrowly equated with dutiful, responsible citizenship (Dwyer, 2010; Patrick, 2013). This narrative of inclusion through punitive welfare reforms endures despite the large (and continually growing) body of research evidence that details the ways in which benefit changes, particularly since 2010, are leading to increased poverty and even destitution (see, for example Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018; Hood and Waters, 2017; Stewart and Wright, 2018).

The political discourse is bolstered and reinforced by media portrayals of 'welfare', and, in recent years, by the exponential growth in what some term 'Poverty Porn' (Jensen, 2014). Television programmes such as *Benefits Street*, *On Benefits and Proud* and *Benefits: Too Fat to Work* purport to show the 'reality of life on benefits' but in fact depict a very partial, edited and most often sensationalised account. With these very popular programmes, viewers are invited into benefit claimants' homes where they are encouraged to observe and, most often it seems, critique individuals' lives. This reinforces the idea of the welfare claimant as an 'other', with editing priorities skewing the portrayals in ways that further amplify partial and stigmatising accounts. Decisions about whose stories viewers hear, and which aspects of individual accounts are given prominence, are controlled by media elites, elites whose lives are often far removed from those that they are capturing in making 'reality' television (De Benedictis *et al.*, 2017). In this way, poverty is recast as light entertainment, a form of entertainment that also functions to delegitimise the claims and deservingness of people living in poverty (Skeggs, 2014).

Taken together, media portrayals and political narratives operate as a 'machine of anti-welfare commonsense' (Tyler and Jensen, 2015) that pushes forward a negative characterisation of 'welfare', and diminishes the possibility for other, contrasting articulations and understandings of 'welfare' to emerge and to be heard. This machine of anti-welfare commonsense informs public attitudes to 'welfare' and popular views about the generosity or otherwise of Britain's social security system. Opinion polling reveals strong support for much of the UK's post-2010 welfare reform agenda, with the Household Benefits Cap attracting very high public approval ratings prior to its implementation (Ipsos MORI, 2013). At the same time, however, there has been resistance to some of the 'reforms', and this has, on occasion, led directly or indirectly to a softening of the harshness of some policy changes – for example, around Universal Credit and earlier changes to tax credits (Bowden, 2017; Stone, 2016).

What is clear from a rich body of empirical research is the extent to which the anti-welfare commonsense is based upon a misrepresentation of the everyday lives of people in poverty, which fails to capture fluids shifts between

'welfare' and 'work', the very many ways in which claimants are so often active as parents, carers, volunteers and the hard work that getting by on benefits demands (Daly and Kelly, 2015; Patrick, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2012). However, the power and purchase of the anti-welfare commonsense makes it very hard for this research evidence to change the debate, and there is a seeming permanence and stability to the dominant framing. This framing inevitably negatively impacts upon the lives of those in receipt of out-of-work benefits, both because of the negative and regressive reforms that it functions to defend but also because of the misrecognition and 'othering' of claimants that it entails.

Poverty as a site of redistributive and relational social injustice

Academic efforts to question and unpick the dominant framing of 'welfare' are important, not least because of the ways in which this framing is mobilised to defend and justify calls for each successive wave of welfare reform and welfare state retrenchment. Further, this framing itself constitutes part of the relational social injustice faced by people living in poverty. Nancy Fraser's (2009) conceptualisation of poverty details the extent to which it is a site of both redistributive and relational injustice. Building on Fraser's work, Lister (2015) has placed emphasis on the extent to which the othering of people in poverty is a form of misrecognition which is often tied to a denial and silencing of their voices. Popular and political debate others and misrecognises the lives and experiences of people in poverty, and operates to exclude their voices from discussions about policy changes which directly impact upon their lives. This is best understood as a process of symbolic injustice (Fraser, cited in Lister, 2015), which causes significant relational harm and sits alongside the financial hardship that people in poverty experience. Being explicit about this relational social injustice and seeking to address it is vital, especially because it drives and makes possible the linked redistributional social injustice of which poverty is a part. Importantly, though, while a politics of recognition is most often associated with an assertion of group difference (Lister, 2015), with people living in poverty it is better understood as a struggle for 'recognition of and respect for their common humanity and dignity' (2015, p. 16), something which is too often denied to people in poverty in the current climate.

Indeed, cross-national research has shown the extent to which shame and stigma so frequently coincide with poverty across diverse national contexts (Walker, 2014). Mechanisms and cultures within the social security regime can entrench the extent to which poverty is associated with disrespect and a denial of voice, with claimants (both in the UK and cross-nationally) reporting how they so often feel ignored and treated with a lack of dignity in their interactions with benefit officials and advisers (Patrick, 2017; Walker, 2014). In this way, the social security system can operate to reinforce rather than alleviate the

relational injustice caused by poverty. Further, a lack of financial resources can make it very difficult for individuals to participate in and relate to their familial, local and national communities, leading to further exclusion and marginalisation (Daly and Kelly, 2015). Experiences of stigma (and fear of further stigma) inevitably make risky and even frightening any efforts by people living in poverty to give voice to their own experiences. This gives the machine of anti-welfare commonsense great power. For effective, alternative accounts of 'welfare' to emerge, there is a need for people with direct experiences of 'welfare' to document and share their diverse experiences, but this is made more difficult because of the dominance and purchase of the stigmatising, popular account.

Further, there is a tension inherent in people with experiences of poverty simultaneously seeking recognition of their common humanity, while also being required to defend their entitlement to state support as part of a politics of redistribution (what Fraser (1997) describes as a 'redistribution-recognition dilemma'). In her analysis of class classifications and struggles, Tyler (2015) ties this to a requirement to be 'strategically essentialist' by, for example, reclaiming positive working-class identities as a form of resistance to negative caricatures of an underclass. Resolving the redistribution-recognition dilemma is far from straightforward:

> People who are subject to cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution. They need both to claim and to deny their specificity. (Fraser, 1997, cited in Tyler, 2015: 507)

Any successful challenge to the cultural and economic injustices faced by people living in poverty requires redistribution but also a politics of recognition and respect (Lister, 2015). Important here are efforts to dismantle and collapse lazy (if powerful) dichotomies between work and welfare, and between the deserving and undeserving (Garthwaite, 2016). There is also value in attempts to re-articulate the positive role social security can play in creating a good society and efforts to generate recognition of the extent to which we are all dependant on welfare in different ways and at different times in our lives (Hills, 2015). Additionally, though, there is scope in academics reflecting upon how they research poverty and social security, and the extent to which their research practices might contribute to challenging the current misrecognition and misrepresentation of people in poverty (Patrick and Garthwaite, 2018). The academy in general, and the social policy community in particular, needs to carefully consider whose expertise and knowledge it privileges, and the potential here to do more to recognise the expertise and experiences of individuals living in poverty. In this regard, there are particular possibilities in pursuing participatory methodologies in poverty research, and it is to this potential that this article now turns.

Participatory research with people living in poverty

In a trenchant critique of mainstream social policy, Peter Beresford (2016) argues that too often a separation exists between academics and policymakers on the one hand, and those who have direct experiences of social policy interventions as service users on the other. For Beresford, the privileging of the evidence provided by academics all too often sees the experiences and perspectives of service users instrumentally mobilised as objects of research and case studies rather than sources of expertise in their own right. Beresford argues for a radical change in how we 'do' social policy, calling for academics to learn from the service user and disability movements by putting participation in general and self-organisation and collective action in particular at the heart of social policy research and engagement (2016).

While Beresford would seem to call for a fundamental readjusting of whose expertise we value and incorporate into policy design and development, what is particularly relevant for the purposes of this article is his persuasive account of the potential in participatory and emancipatory research approaches. Participatory research realigns the role of the researched from being an object of study to becoming an active participant and partner in the research endeavour (Barber *et al.*, 2012; Maguire, 1987). It sits along a continuum, with participants variously more or less involved in different elements of the research process from the conception of a piece of research to its completion and dissemination (Aldridge, 2016). For research to lay claim to being participatory, the authority of research participants needs to be explicitly recognised within the research design, and they should have at least some control over the research process and a degree of influence over how the research is used and disseminated, even if overall control remains with the researcher (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). This necessitates a meaningful shift of power away from the researcher and towards participants. Quite often, the definitional boundaries between researcher and researched unravel as research proceeds in partnership and becomes a site of co-production (Frankham, 2009).

Participatory research has a particular relevance and resonance for research with people living in poverty. This is due to the opportunities participatory approaches 'present to give participants a *voice* in research as well as in public and political discourse . . . (Aldridge, 2016: 5, emphasis added). As Fran Bennett and Mo Roberts argue: 'people in poverty have a right to participate in analysing their own situation and how to tackle it' (2004: 6). It is this right which is explicitly recognised in participatory methodologies, which further enable greater inclusion in processes of knowledge production and policy debate and design (O'Neill and Stenning, 2013). There is a particularly strong history of participatory research with people in poverty in the Global South, while, in the UK, the disabled people's movement has called for better involvement of disabled people in policy research and design since at least the 1970s (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000;

David and Craig, 1997; Frankham, 2009). Disability studies theorists were influential in arguing that research about disabled people must involve and include disabled people for it to be meaningful and valid. This was encapsulated in their call: 'nothing about us without us is for us', a call which has since been adopted by other movements including the poverty truth commissions (Barnes and Mercer, 1997). Today, there is evidence of participatory research with people in poverty occurring with some frequency (see, for example, Hall *et al.*, 2017; Pemberton *et al.*, 2014), but it still sits outside of the social policy mainstream.

Over recent years, there has been an explosion in research that seeks to detail the 'lived experiences' of various marginalised groups in order to better understand lived realities at the sharp end of austerity and welfare state retrenchment (McIntosh and Wright, 2018). While such research (the author's own work sits within this tradition) has value in foregrounding direct experiences, it does not of itself do enough to work with and recognise the expertise of the people sharing their lived experiences. It is here that participatory research has the greatest potential, offering the possibility of starting to collapse and challenge the misrecognition and denial of voice so often experienced by people living in poverty. To explore this potential further, this article now introduces two small-scale research projects with which the author was involved, outlining the ways in which they incorporated participatory elements and the value (as well as the challenges) in so doing.

The Dole Animators and Poverty2Solutions projects

In 2013, the author worked in partnership with a group of seven research participants (all of whom were living in poverty and in receipt of out-of-work benefits) to co-produce an animated film that detailed findings from doctoral research into experiences of welfare reform (for further details, see Land and Patrick, 2014). The decision to make a film was driven by participants themselves. At a steering group meeting, a participant suggested making a film, to highlight key messages from the research in a more engaging and accessible way than would be possible with a more traditional output. Given the researcher's commitment to valuing and incorporating the views of participants, she then endeavoured to see if making such a film was viable and subsequently secured funding from the National Lottery to do so.

The animated film – *All in it together: are benefits ever a lifestyle choice?* – was developed during a series of eight workshops. What became known as the Dole Animators project represented a partnership between the participants from the doctoral research, the researcher and an animator. The project sought to hand power and decision making over to the participants, with the group itself holding copyright of the final film. It sat towards the participatory end of the participatory research continuum developed by Aldridge (2016), with

participants best conceptualised as active actors in the research, who were fully included in the project and all decision making associated with it. Employing arts-based methods in the workshops created a space to physically *do* something, and also helped to re-orientate power dynamics, given that the primary researcher had only a very perfunctory knowledge of animation techniques.

What was particularly important for the participants was the way in which animation provided a vehicle for their voices to be heard, while allowing them to protect their anonymity. Further, the project reinforced the considerable scope for beyond-text tools and arts-based methods to engage participants in research and to generate outputs that have more meaning and relevance for participants (Brady and Brown, 2013). It also illustrated the scope for co-produced, arts-based outputs to engage wider audiences. The film has now been viewed over 14,000 times online, and has received much wider attention than the broader research of which it forms a part. Since the film launched in 2013, the Dole Animators have remained active, with group members regularly taking up opportunities to speak and write about their experiences and viewpoints, and, in so doing, to provide an alternative to the popular narrative on 'welfare'. Examples here include authoring comment pieces for national newspapers and online blogs (Head, 2014; Watson *et al.*, 2014), co-authoring a book chapter about experiences on benefits (Patrick *et al.*, 2018), guest lecturing to social policy students, and giving keynote speeches at national conferences for welfare rights advisers. In all these activities, the Dole Animators report welcoming the opportunity to share their experiences, and to contribute their expertise to debates on welfare.

More recently, the Poverty2Solutions project (Poverty2Solutions, 2018) has built on the particular scope in arts-based approaches through a partnership between the author and three groups made up of individuals with direct experiences of poverty (Dole Animators, ATD Fourth World UK & Thrive Teesside). The participants in this project include a diverse range of individuals who variously have experiences of the care system, of disability, mental health challenges, single parenthood, working poverty and addiction. What unites them all is their common experiences of social security receipt and of poverty, and their drive to vocalise their experiences and contribute to social change by sharing their ideas for addressing poverty in the UK.

In the initial phase of this ongoing project, each group worked with the researcher and a graphic designer (Dan Farley) in a total of six workshops (two with each group) to develop graphic blueprints, which represent their policy proposals on poverty (see Figures 1–3). These were launched at an All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty event at the House of Commons in 2017).

The three groups also came together in a peer learning workshop, where they had a chance to discuss the solutions each group had identified and explore the extent of consensus which existed both between the three groups

Figure 1. Poster developed by ATD Fourth World as part of Poverty2solutions project

but also between the groups and other anti-poverty experts and organisations. A further series of workshops followed, which sought to develop the emerging consensus on solutions to poverty and build alliances between the groups involved in this project and other groups of individuals with direct experiences of poverty. This has led to the creation of a network of groups with direct experiences of poverty – the APLE (Addressing Poverty Through Lived Experience) Collective – which secured significant media coverage (including a letter to *The Times*) as part of concerted action calling for reforms to be made to Universal Credit (Wynne-Jones, 2018). At the time of writing, the Poverty2Solutions members are engaged in work to develop and strengthen a concrete policy ask, around elevating the voices of people living in poverty in policymaking processes. The Poverty2Solutions project sits further along Aldridge's (2016) participatory continuum than the Dole Animators project,
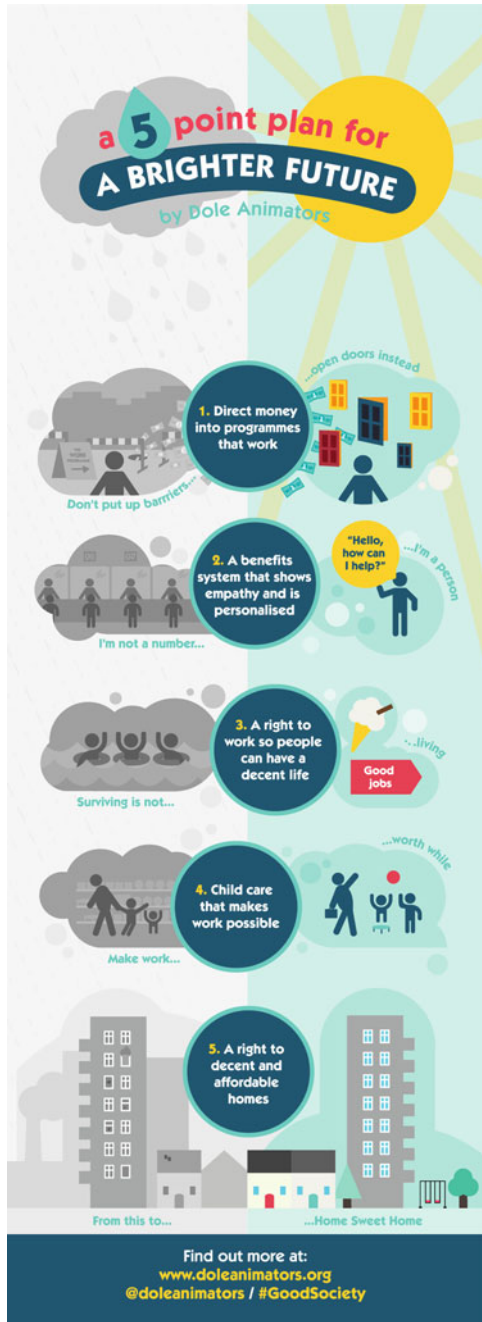
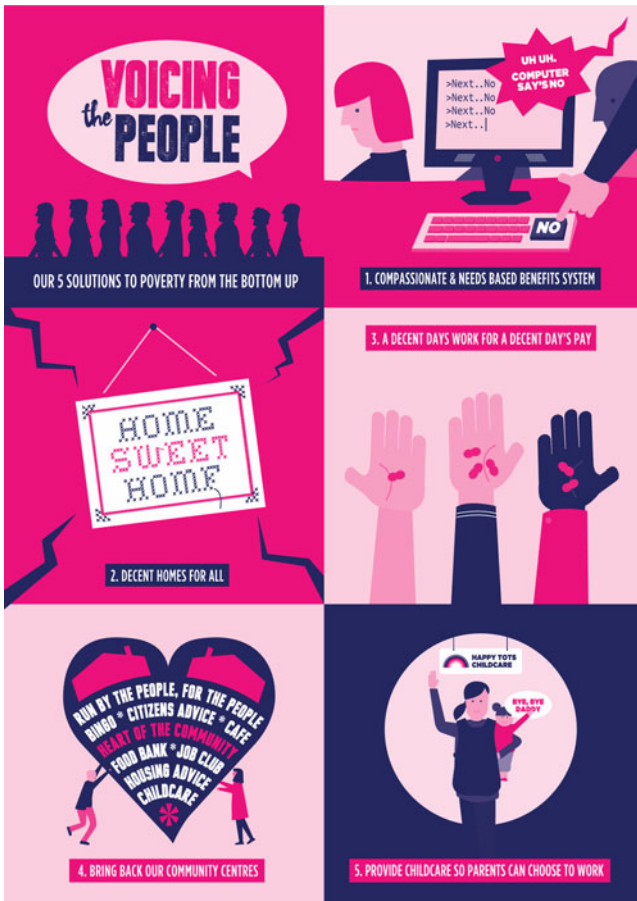Figure 2. Poster developed by Dole Animators during Poverty2Solutions project

Figure 3. Poster developed by Thrive Teesside during Poverty2Solutions project

and is closer to being participant-led (and so fully participatory), given that the participants themselves drive and direct the project's priorities and activities.

What both the Poverty2Solutions and Dole Animators projects share is a commitment to participatory approaches with people with experiences of poverty and a utilisation of arts-based methods to create outputs with the potential to engage both research participants and research beneficiaries and users. In different ways, they both support people with experiences of poverty to 'get organised' (Lister, 2004) and, in so doing, to develop alternative narratives on 'welfare' and poverty that better represent their own experiences. Further, and particularly with the Poverty2Solutions project, there is an explicit recognition of the expertise of people with experiences of poverty, not just regarding their own situations, but in terms of what might be the most effective policy responses to poverty.

While both projects seek to bring new voices to discussions and debates on 'welfare', there are questions about whose voices are then privileged, and related challenging questions about who was listening to those voices that asked and often demanded to be heard. The active involvement of participants in dissemination activities did add a layer of credibility to the outputs (as well as often attracting media attention), but it was still difficult to get a meaningful audience with policymakers. The Dole Animators film and the Poverty2Solutions graphics both launched during a period of state imposed austerity, and at a time when political leaders did not seem particularly interested in meaningful engagement with the expertise of experience on poverty and social security, or indeed in research evidence more broadly (Monaghan and Ingold, 2019). Participants did not find a receptive audience among parliamentarians in power, and this led to often difficult discussions about what is feasible in projects of this nature in the current climate. The projects helped mobilise important voices, but could not necessarily convert these into voices with influence (Lister, 2004). This, although perhaps unsurprising, was often very disappointing for those involved, given that individuals desperately wanted to engage in a conversation with those making policy that so directly (and most often negatively) impacted on their own lives. This raises ethical challenges around managing expectations in participatory research in ways that recognise, respect and act upon the diverse knowledge, experiences and objectives that each partner brings to a project.

The ethical plane within participatory research is an extremely complex and important one, and there is a need to engage with both regulatory ethical frameworks and 'everyday ethics': the daily work and practice of negotiating and responding to the ethical dilemmas that emerge in participatory practice (Banks *et al.*, 2013). In these projects, the author was guided by an ethics of reciprocity and of care, while she also recognised the need to make both proactive ethical decisions as well as responding more reactively when she encountered 'ethical speedbumps' (Neale and Hanna, 2012). Close attention must be paid to the ethical underpinnings of relationships that develop between the research team, and consideration given to how best to establish and continue these relationships in positive ways that are supportive rather than exploitative, and underpinned by partnership and efforts to soften the unequal power dynamics that exist, even in more participatory approaches (Banks *et al.*, 2013).

Particular ethical challenges can emerge where participants want to forgo their anonymity to speak out about their experiences (as has happened in both projects) and here there is a need for everyday ethics, and an approach that recognises the shared ownership of research, the agency of research participants and their status as research partners rather than research objects (see Aldridge, 2016). Supporting research participants to use their real names can clash with regulatory institutional ethical practice, which is all too often premised on a less

participatory model, where the researcher and participant are strictly (and per-haps artificially) delineated. Any decision to forgo anonymity within research should be tied to robust processes of informed consent, which includes full and detailed discussion of the risks and possibilities inherent with particular choices and their potential repercussions.

Participatory research is also resource and time intensive, and demands a considerable investment of energy if it is to be effective (Hoggett *et al.*, 2013). Both of these projects required significant and ongoing commitment from the whole research team, with particular efforts to sustain effective and positive relationships. For example, particular time was required to update participants who missed workshops, and to create possibilities for people to participate even where they were not able to attend workshops (and, by so doing, to further embed the participatory and inclusive nature of the projects).

There are associated challenges around making participatory research inclusive, and recognising the difficult balance that needs to be struck between including participants in the research activity and decision making, without for-getting their role as volunteers doing this work on an unpaid basis. Participatory research is very costly, given the importance of fully covering all related expenses for participants (including, for example, travel, child care, all subsistence, accessibility adaptations) (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Researchers must also navigate institutional structures that privilege particular forms of outputs tied to the REF agenda, and the ways in which these structures can undermine efforts to develop participatory approaches. If researchers are to secure the resources required to do this type of research properly, significant work is required to persuade funders and their institutions of the value in taking a participatory approach. Hopefully, examples such as the Dole Animators and Poverty2Solutions projects can help make this case, with both projects demon-strating the challenges but also the potential in incorporating participatory approaches into research with people living in poverty.

Discussion: towards a pro-welfare imaginary

Creating opportunities for people living in poverty to contribute to and partici-pate in research into poverty and welfare has both symbolic and substantive value (Barber *et al.*, 2012). By foregrounding voice (Bennett and Roberts, 2004; Frankham, 2009), participatory research demonstrates and makes possible the right of people in poverty to engage in an analysis of the situation they face, and to explore what might make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). This is potentially transformative (Durose *et al.*, 2012; Frankham, 2009), and has the possibility to go some way to relocat-ing where the power and expertise on representations and understandings of poverty lies. Further, it can be a partial mechanism of redress, where genuinely

participatory research founded in mutual respect, recognition and democratisation can start to undermine the denial and silencing of voice which is so closely associated with poverty (O'Neill and Stenning, 2013).

Significantly, the valuing and incorporating of the expertise of people living in poverty in research is an active challenge to the exclusion, marginalisation and stigmatisation which they most often face (Beresford, 2016). Participatory research in this domain has inherent symbolic value because, so long as it is done effectively, it recognises and respects the expertise, agency and humanity of people in poverty. Set against the context of the anti-poverty struggle, participatory research is partially about validating and supporting recognition-based claim making, and incorporating this into knowledge production (O'Neill and Stenning, 2013). Participatory research can also be a tool in efforts to resolve and work through what Fraser (1997) describes as the redistribution-recognition dilemma. It can constitute a space that mobilises the specific expertise and claims-making of people in poverty, but also recognises and upholds their basic human rights for respect and to have their voices heard. Further, by involving people living in poverty in developing policy proposals to address poverty, participatory research can provide scope to operationalise recognition as a route to redistribution.

It is also vital to recognise the ways in which the process of engaging in participatory research can be transformative and empowering for the individuals involved (Frankham, 2009). This extends both to those participating as experts by experience, but also to academics and other co-producers, who may well find their previously stable positions and assumptions challenged where they engage in a meaningful dialogue and partnership with participants (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Participants described the projects discussed here as boosting their self-confidence and esteem, while they also attached particular value to the opportunities they provided to develop supportive relationships with others who had also experienced poverty and welfare reform. These peer relationships helped individuals to overcome and ultimately resist benefits and poverty stigma, and gave them the confidence needed to give voice to their experiences and perspectives in disseminating the research. These research outcomes need to be better recognised and incorporated in formalised metrics and markers of research 'impact'.

Participatory research can develop new knowledge and understanding on poverty, and so may, over time, lead to more effective policy responses and a more sensitive political and public discourse. This long-term impact is hard to realise against a context of ongoing welfare state retrenchment, and the continuing dominance of an anti-welfare commonsense (Jensen, 2014). Nonetheless, particular potential remains, given the consequences of making new voices heard in political, public and media debates. Research beneficiaries here can encompass the experts by experiences themselves, academic

researchers, policymakers and others who have the opportunity to learn from and listen to voices so often marginalised from debates in this area. This was certainly evident in both the projects discussed here, despite the aforementioned challenges in directly enabling conversations with policymakers. What was particularly notable was the extent to which the wider community of anti-poverty activists and organisations who engaged with project outputs and events developed a greater understanding of what *really* matters for people living in poverty. For example, both projects highlighted the significance of officials' (mis)treatment of people in poverty, and the ways in which treatment that is characterised by an absence of dignity and respect then creates encounters that are seen as punitive, unsupportive and generative of stigma.

What both research projects also hinted at, and a central argument of this paper, is the possibilities within participatory research to develop and sketch out a pro-welfare imaginary. Despite the strong evidence of rising poverty and the negative impacts of welfare reform (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016; Hood and Waters, 2017), the machine of anti-welfare commonsense continues to exert a powerful hold with politicians, media and much of the public seeming to fail to recognise (or choosing to ignore) the extent and nature of poverty and its causes. This has led some to be quite critical of mainstream social policy and anti-poverty activity and to argue that we need a new approach if we are to effectively challenge the terms of the debate and rethink poverty (see, for example, Beresford, 2016; Knight, 2017; Scott Paul, 2016).

While the author would defend social policy's contribution to improving our understanding of poverty, 'welfare' and social security policy, there remains considerable work to be done if we are to effectively challenge the anti-welfare doxa ("that which goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu, 1972 cited in Jensen, 2014)). Here, there is power and potential in developing an account of poverty and 'welfare' that starts with direct experiences and mobilises these experiences to develop and build narrative(s) and discourse(s) in this domain, which will, almost inevitably, look very different from the popular narrative. Radical and democratic accounts can instead emerge (see Silver, 2018), and can help build a persuasive pro-welfare imaginary and argument. For this reason, it is important that participatory research with people in poverty involves people not only in sharing their experiences, but also in thinking through what a different and more effective social security system might look like. This is essential if their expertise is to be truly valued and utilised to generate solutions and policy agendas grounded in individual experiences of what support, interventions and wider cultural changes might make a difference at both an individual and structural level.

It is also important to recognise the ways in which research on poverty that incorporates participatory elements can also lead to better and more robust research (Allam *et al.*, 2004, cited in Frankham, 2009), with greater potential

to have impact and to create outputs that have meaning and relevance for diverse audiences. As Lister (2004) argues, the active participation of people with experiences of poverty in research (as well as in campaigning and policymaking) can enhance the effectiveness of these activities and so has intrinsic value. The recognition and mobilisation of the expertise of people with direct experiences of poverty enables its inclusion into research design and decision making. While this can be challenging to operationalise, it means that research can gain from this expertise at every stage of the process (including, for example, in making decisions about sampling, recruitment, research foci and analysis). Further, participatory, co-produced research can be more impactful than research that adopts more traditional methodologies (Pain, 2014) and so can be more effective in seeking to engineer policy and attitudinal change. There are various reasons for this greater impact, but much of it is tied to the ways in which outputs that are produced from participatory research projects are often more tangible and accessible to a diverse range of audiences than typical academic research outputs such as monographs or journal articles. Given the high prominence currently attached to securing impact, some (MacDonald, 2017) have argued that those interested in research orientated towards social justice can co-opt the impact agenda to defend and build the case for more publicly engaged forms of research (of which participatory research would definitely form a part). Critically, then, participatory research with people living in poverty can be impactful, symbolically and substantively valuable, and can be part of a wider effort to develop a pro-welfare imaginary that acts as a challenge to the popular anti-welfare commonsense.

This is not, however, a treatise to adopt and only adopt participatory research methodologies, but instead a call to recognise their particular and inherent potential and value. As noted earlier, participatory research is not an all or nothing zero sum game, with research best conceptualised as sitting along a continuum with emancipatory research at one end and completely non-participatory research at the other (Aldridge, 2016). It would make sense for those researching poverty and welfare to consider how and whether some element of participatory practice might be incorporated into their research design. But this is not to say that each and every research project in these areas should be fully participatory. Simply put, the arguments in favour of adopting participatory approaches are sufficiently strong that including elements of this approach within research designs at least merits consideration, and there are strong ethical reasons why proceeding in this way is important, given the extent of the misrecognition that people in poverty face.

Further, while there is great scope in participatory research with people in poverty, it does not follow that research that is participatory is necessarily good research (Frankham, 2009). There are linked dangers that in privileging the voices of the experts of experience a new essentialism can emerge, where one

person or a small group of people with experience are privileged and seen as speaking for all those who have had similar experiences (Frankham, 2009). There are sensitivities about how the voices of experience are presented, and how their viewpoints and positions are challenged, where they do not coincide with evidence from other sources. Further, researchers need to recognise the risks inherent in sharing experiences of poverty in public forums, given the extent and reach of the stigma of poverty and benefits receipt. This all requires careful consideration, and the recognition that participatory research is, by necessity, a collaborative and messy process. There are rich possibilities inherent with participatory approaches, but these can only be realised if all research partners commit to thoughtful and reflexive research practices, and take time to explore and unpick the competing tensions and ethical dilemmas that will inevitably arise.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the extent to which participatory research approaches have great and still untapped potential in efforts to better understand experiences and consequences of poverty. Drawing on the Dole Animators and Poverty2Solutions projects as examples, it has argued that participatory approaches have both substantive and symbolic value in researching poverty and welfare. By mobilising the expertise of experience on poverty, it is possible to challenge the dominant machine of anti-welfare commonsense and the misrepresentation of the lives of those in receipt of social security for all or most of their income.

As social policy researchers interested in poverty we all need to ask ourselves whose side we are on (Becker, 1967). Most of us seek to stand alongside those living in poverty in an effort to build a future less marred by poverty, insecurity and, for many, destitution. In taking sides, we then need to ask a further question about the kind of research we do and whether the approach we take, and the research we conduct, furthers anti-poverty struggles and campaigns. Any well-designed research into poverty and welfare can be beneficial to anti-poverty activity by developing a more reliable and finely-grained evidence base. Nonetheless, there are particular possibilities that could be realised if more academics consider including participatory research principles within their research designs. At the same time, a greater role could be played by the academic community in creating and supporting opportunities for the voices of those with direct experiences of poverty to be better and more widely heard. In essence, some of us within the social policy community might even take on the role of 'doxa warriors' (Jensen, 2014) by seeking to break down and collapse the longstanding and sadly seemingly robust popular characterisations of welfare and poverty. In this battle, we would be well served to work alongside

experts by experience in an effort undermine the misrecognition and silencing of people living in poverty in Britain today.

Acknowledgements

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