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Negotiating stance within discourses of class: Reactions to *Benefits Street*

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the way that audiences respond to particular representations of poverty. Using clips from the Channel 4 television programme *Benefits Street* we conducted focus groups in four locations across the UK, working with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds who had different experiences with the benefits system. *Benefits Street* (2014) is an example of reality television where members of the public are followed by film crews as they perform everyday tasks and routines. Our choice to focus on this particular programme was prompted by the huge media response that it received when it was broadcast; *Benefits Street* generated 950 complaints to regulatory watchdog Ofcom (2014) and was referred to as 'poverty porn' (Clark, 2014). We focus on the way that viewers of this programme produce assessments of those on benefits, analysing the discursive strategies used by our participants when evaluating representations of those on benefits. Specifically, we consider how the participants in our study construct their own stance and attribute stance to others through naming and agency practices, the negotiation of opinion, and stake inoculation.

We invited our participants to judge the people they saw on screen, but they went beyond this. They used clips of the programme as stimuli to collaboratively construct an overarchingly-negative stereotype of those on benefits. We conclude that *Benefits Street* is not *just* an entertainment programme, but is rather a site for ideological construction and the perpetuation of existing stereotypes about benefit claimants. The programme (and others like it) invites negative evaluations of those on benefits and is thus a worthy site for critical linguistic analysis.

Keywords

Autobiographical note

Laura Paterson is a corpus-based sociolinguist whose work focuses on epicene pronouns and the depictions of marginalised groups. She is Senior Research Associate on the Discourses of Distressed Communities project at CASS (Lancaster University) and a member of the Language and Class Reading Group (Sheffield Hallam) and the Discourses of Marriage Research Group.

Laura Coffey-Glover is a feminist linguist interested in gender representation in the media and wider issues in language, gender and sexuality. Her work is focused on metaphor and language use in magazines and other mass media. She is a member of the Language and Class Reading Group and the Discourses of Marriage Research Group.

David Peplow's research is focused on social interaction. He has written about how non-academic readers discuss literary texts in groups and is interested in the therapeutic benefits that people get from engaging with art, particularly literature. He is the founder of the Language and Class Reading Group and has also worked on a critical review of arts therapy research that was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Introduction: Social class, language, and reality television

In this article, we examine the way that audiences respond to particular representations of poverty. Using clips from the Channel 4 television programme *Benefits Street* we conducted focus groups in four UK locations (Sheffield, Batley, Burnley and Nottingham) working with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, some of whom were, or had been, in receipt of benefits. Justification for focusing on *Benefits Street* comes from the rise of public-focused television programmes and wider representations of social class (Skeggs and Wood, 2011). Couldry (2011: 33) argues that reality television in the UK specifically, 'embed[s] new mechanisms for publicly reproducing class difference in an increasingly unequal society'. By focusing on an identifiable site of class representation (and construction), we wish to bring social class to the forefront of sociolinguistic discussion. To this end, we are working within the broad scope of applied sociolinguistics, and note that alongside visual markers of social class, such as dress, and socioeconomic measures (education, (un)employment, etc.) class, at least in part, is constructed through language. One way this can be achieved is through the 'othering' of social groups in discourse and this is our focus here.

Couldry (2011: 37) argues that we live 'in societies where, within the authorising frame of media institutions, people are allowed to harshly judge and embarrass others in public without the judged having the opportunity to respond'. Television programmes like *Benefits Street* are packaged as entertainment rather than as critical commentaries on social class; however, to exempt such programming from critical analysis, by suggesting 'it's only entertainment' is, according to Couldry (2011: 37), 'to miss the point: that this is an actual process which *serves* as "only" entertainment, a process that under other conditions might be challenged'. Thus, our analysis aims to highlight the resources people use to discuss issues surrounding benefits.

We use the term 'stance' to refer to an evaluation produced through discourse, whereby a speaker takes up 'a position with respect to the form or content of one's utterance' (Jaffe, 2009: 3). An analysis of how our participants construct their own stances, and how they attribute stance to others, is of critical importance when debating issues of social class. Du Bois (2007: 139) argues that stance is 'a linguistically articulated form of social action' and taking a stance 'invokes an evaluation at one level or another, whether by assertion or inference' (2007: 141).

Through analysing how people perform these interactional moves, we can show how particular social groups are evaluated within wider culture. The perpetuation of negative evaluations of poor people may be used as supporting evidence for governmental policies relating to the benefits system. Indeed, Du Bois (2007: 173) notes that 'Social actors are accountable for how they manage and indeed reshape the systems of social value on which we all depend'. We draw on the concept of stance to examine how benefit claimants are discussed in focus group discourse. Specifically, we consider how our participants construct their own stance and attribute stance to others through naming and agency practices, the negotiation of opinion, and by performing stake inoculation – that is, explicitly demonstrating that they have no vested interest in holding their particular view.

Benefits Street and poverty porn

Benefits Street was originally filmed as a five-part series of hour-long episodes broadcast weekly on Channel 4 beginning 6th January 2014. Each episode was loosely themed; the first programme focused on crime and included residents being released from prison, shoplifting and attempting to buy drugs. Subsequent programmes focused on immigration, parenting, work and debt, and relationships. *Benefits Street*, with its focus on real people in receipt of government benefits, is one of the most recent examples of 'poverty porn', defined as 'the media portrayal of the feral and feckless poor as the source of social breakdown' (Squires and Lea, 2013: 12). Hancock and Mooney (2013: 111) note that poverty porn has its focus on 'individual failures and deficiencies' as opposed to looking at wider societal/economic constraints. They further suggest that poverty porn programmes, such as chat shows *Tricia* and *Jeremy Kyle*, and make over programmes such as *The Fairy Jobmother* (where a case worker lives with an unemployed family), are 'designed to titillate and entertain', but also to 'invoke anger and indignation amongst viewers' (2013: 111); these programmes are akin to pornography as they represent the poor for the purposes of entertainment.

To aid the classification of *Benefits Street* as poverty porn, an analogy can be drawn between *Benefits Street* and the 2010 BBC Scotland programme *The Scheme*, which followed families on a council estate in Kilmarnock. By comparison, *Benefits Street* followed a group of residents on

James Turner Street in Birmingham, a street where a large proportion of residents received government benefits. Hancock and Mooney (2013: 113) note that *The Scheme* 'caricatures poverty and people experiencing poverty' by presenting a narrow and decontextualised view of the lives of a few individuals who are presented as representative of a homogenised whole. They also observe there was a tendency in *The Scheme* to show non-essential possessions (expensive televisions, alcohol, tobacco, etc.) to reinforce the notion that 'many of those in poverty are "flawed consumers"' (Bauman, 2004) in receipt of benefit payments that are too high (Hancock and Mooney, 2013: 113). This framing of welfare recipients beside high-end electronic goods, which also occurred in *Benefits Street,* casts them as undeserving, and draws on prevalent ideologies of benefit scroungers/cheats. Both programmes included predominantly-negative portrayals of the working class and invited viewers to judge the participants. Hancock and Mooney conclude that 'in a context where positive representations of working-class people are notable by their absence, poverty porn offers up distorted, decontextualised and sensationalised accounts of the behaviour, attitudes and dispositions of marginalised groups' (2013: 118).

Previous work on the televisual representation of (lower) working class groups include Biressi's (2011) study of programmes that contrast the socioeconomic status of different (groups of) people. She focuses on Channel 4's 2010 *Benefit Busters*, which followed people enrolled on or running courses designed to get unemployed people into paid work. Biressi argues that such programmes 'help to establish the ground on which judgements are formed about the deserving and undeserving poor, about entrepreneurs, good citizens and bad welfare beneficiaries in the context of a philosophy of individual self-reliance as the motor of social mobility' (2011: 145). One key example from *Benefit Busters* (which Biressi does not analyse in detail) occurs when the leader of a company designed to help the long-term unemployed into work asks 'shame-faced "lone mothers": "Why aren't you all queuing up outside McDonald's, KFC and Burger King then, why aren't you queuing up at their door if you want a job so badly?"' (2011: 151). In terms of characterising the working class, it appears the only options being presented to these women are low-paying jobs in the fast-food/service industry. There is no indication that any of these women have (or could have) wider aspirations. The leader of the training programme reinforces

this class stereotype by stating '"benefit scrounger, loan parent [sic], blah, blah, blah, blah, sapping off the system, can't be bothered to work, staying at home and using the kids as an excuse, you've heard it all before, haven't you"' (2011: 151). Biressi notes that *Benefit Busters* facilitated the 'scrutiny of ordinary people in difficult circumstances (single mothers, unskilled long-term unemployed and those too sick to work) leading, more often than not, to intense moments of acute embarrassment, shame and distress as well as humour' (2011: 149). There are similarly-characterised individuals in *Benefits Street*: in one episode an unemployed father travels to a food bank but finds he is ineligible for a food parcel as he is not named on the relevant paperwork.

The wider social implications of framing the working classes in this way, noted by Couldry (2011: 37), is that 'in the social process of reality TV' judgement is not only cast by people participating in the programme, but also by its audience, who 'take up the programmes' invitation to judge, albeit with some ambivalence'. It is worth noting, however, that not all judgements are automatically negative. This range of judgements is reflected in our data where participants negotiate their positions on the availability of jobs (see Extract 3).

Methodology: Analysing stance in focus groups

To investigate how stance is negotiated in relation to benefit claimants we established four focus groups, each of which was shown clips from *Benefits Street* to facilitate discussion. Our groups included people from a variety of different locations and backgrounds, including benefit recipients, care workers, non-academic university staff, and retired people. There were 24 participants, aged 26-60+, comprising 16 women and 8 men. Our groups ranged from four to nine participants.[1] Our rationale for using focus groups was that we wanted participants to take discussions to areas/topics that they thought were relevant to the issues presented in *Benefits Street.* In this sense, focus groups were less restrictive than other data collection methods, such as questionnaires. The stimuli for the focus groups, chosen to prompt conversation, were five

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[1] Differences in group size/gender balance are explained by the fact that our participants were self-selecting volunteers. However, Litosseliti (2003: 3) notes that smaller groups are suited to in-depth conversations, the exploration of complex issues, and give participants time to talk.

clips from *Benefits Street*.[2] Although we selected the clips, we did not lead discussions by introducing topics; instead, we asked general questions to stimulate debate, including 'what do you think about (the people in) that clip?'. The researchers conducting the groups had a list of these questions to keep the sessions as uniform as possible, although group dynamics meant that no two groups were identical. Each focus group ran for between fifty and ninety minutes, resulting in four hours of recorded material. Recordings were transcribed and we used triangulation, drawing on corpus linguistics tools and CDA, to determine the key themes that arose during the discussions.

We wanted to analyse how discourses associated with benefit claimants are introduced/negotiated in a group setting, and to show the participants' '*shared understandings* of everyday life' (Litosseliti, 2003: 18). As Litosseliti (2003: 18) notes, participants in focus groups 'respond to and build on the views expressed by others in the group – a synergistic approach that produces a range of opinions, ideas and experiences, and thus generates insightful information'. Furthermore, Wilkinson (2004: 277 in Liamputtong, 2011: 18) suggests that focus group participants refer to their own experiences and aim to put their own identities into a topic and make 'collective sense' of them. Analysing how our participants situated their own experiences in relation to those shown on screen gives an insight into whether the experiences portrayed on *Benefits Street* are representative of wider norms.

We approach our data using a form of Critical Discourse Analysis to evaluate stance construction and attribution. Wooffitt (2005: 54) notes that analysing language with the aim of critically evaluating underlying ideologies 'assumes that language embodies "sediments" of social practices which serve to justify and perpetuate inequalities of power and opportunity in society'. One way these ideologies can be identified is through an analysis of evaluation and representation of particular social actors. Our approach is data-driven in that the categories that we focus on – naming and agency practices, negotiation of opinion, and stake inoculation – developed from close reading of the transcripts. Thus, these categories reflect the linguistic resources our participants utilised most when constructing/attributing stance.

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[2] The clips included several different *Benefits Street* residents and covered topics such as parenting, employment, and food banks.

We are aware of the conversational nature of our data and we acknowledge our participants were working together to construct particular group identities through their discourse. Wooffitt (2005: 67) stresses that language is a 'medium of social action' not representation, implying that it would be problematic to take things said as straightforwardly representing and/or referring to objects or actors, or embodying conceptual categorisations of things. Utterances are designed for the 'here-and-now' (Wooffitt, 2005: 67) of their production and advance interactional agendas. Thus, whilst we cannot claim to know exactly how our individual participants feel about issues relating to benefits, we can analyse the resources they use to produce group talk about these issues. Therefore, our analysis is not exclusively focused on individual speakers' conversational moves and lexical choices, but also considers how participants work together to call upon, reject, and construct overarching discourses and ideologies relating to benefit claimants. The particular statements made by the participants are not to be taken as expressing well-defined and stable positions or attitudes, but are more 'strategically' or 'tactically' deployed in relation to prior talk or 'inter-textually' in relation to familiar descriptions or claims (Wooffitt, 2005: 102ff).

Initial analysis

When shown the *Benefits Street* clips, most members of the focus groups took up the opportunity to pass judgment on those represented in the programme; likewise, the participants frequently offered their opinions on 'benefits culture' in wider society. To perform such assessments, participants frequently drew on their own understandings of issues such as benefits, employment, and poverty, often relating these to their own experiences. On some occasions, this personal experience was based on a member's first-hand experience, whilst on other occasions anecdotes were indirect and involved someone else's experience (e.g. a relative or an unnamed other).

General reactions to the clips varied. Some participants took negative views about the impact that the programme could have on viewers, with one participant suggesting 'if you watch it you are going to be depressed watching it… so you might as well call it Depression Street'. Similarly, there were suggestions that the programme drew on a 'very narrow view of people on benefits'

and it reminded one participant of the sitcom *Shameless*. Another stated that they thought the programme was 'exploiting people... Because they just show... a stereotype or ideology in society about maybe a sort of class or certain groups of people'. However, there were others who thought the programme could have a positive effect as it looked 'into the problems of people on benefits... somebody is actually taking an interest now rather than just sweeping it aside'.

An issue repeated across the focus groups was the ethical stance of the programme's producers. Some were sympathetic towards the producers, noting that they had a difficult task. However, the majority of participants mentioning production took a negative view. They were aware that they were not being told a complete story: 'because you only get a snippet, you are making the story up yourself' and 'you are making assumptions about things [but] you might actually make a wrong assumption'. Reacting to a suggestion that 'some people don't want to work they just want to be on benefits, drink booze or take drugs' one participant questioned 'But how do you know they don't want to work? How do you know they can't get jobs?' This awareness that the lives of those on *Benefits Street* are viewed through a particular lens can help to position some participants as resistant readers to the stereotypes that they claimed they saw portrayed.

These initial insights into our participants' perceptions of the programme suggest that they are not a homogenous group and have differing opinions about welfare recipients and their portrayal in the mass media. However, although there were diverse opinions expressed across the groups, keyword analysis performed using WordSmith Tools (Scott 2012) suggested that the discussions participants had were similar in terms of content. Several semantic fields, including money, employment, education, kinship terms, and social groups/class, were repeated in each focus group. Therefore, we have decided to focus on one focus group to allow for close analysis of participant interaction. The chosen group consisted of five females and one male. All members of the group were over 60 years old, and five were retired. One participant reported that they are, or had been, in receipt in benefits (specifically pension credits). This focus group lasted around 90 minutes, with the discussion moving between direct responses to *Benefits Street* and more general talk about class and poverty. In the analysis below we examine the following elements: naming and agency, negotiation of opinions, and stake inoculation. All four of these elements are directly related to stance and stance attribution.

Naming and agency

Analysis of the strategies people use to label referents and to ascribe agency to them reveals something about how a particular person/entity is perceived, giving an indication of a speaker's ideological position, and therefore stance (Jaffe, 2009). This section examines the naming and agency strategies used by participants to refer to both those on *Benefits Street* and an (imagined) wider population of benefit claimants. The analysis centres on the noun phrase, which includes choice of head noun, premodifiers, and pronouns.

Participants did not use explicitly evaluative nominal labels to name those on *Benefits Street* (or benefit claimants more generally). They mainly used the neutral plural noun 'people' when referring to the wider population of benefit claimants, or the pronoun 'they' when referencing people on *Benefits Street*. When discussing the (potential) activities of benefit claimants participants viewed negatively, they used quantifying determiners – 'some' and 'a lot of' – expressing small and large quantities of people respectively, creating conflicting accounts of the number of people doing 'illegitimate' things. For example, in response to a clip from *Benefits Street* in which a mother discusses her hopes for her daughter's future (see Extract 2), one participant suggests that some people receiving benefits just do not want to work: 'Some people are like that, I mean not, obviously not everyone' which is reinforced by another speaker stating 'No but there is a hell of a lot like that'. There are relatively few adjectival descriptions, but those that do occur index demographic categorisations ('young'), feelings or perceptions ('depressed'), or serve to emphasise diversity ('everybody is different'). When discussing Extract 2, one participant describes the daughter as 'young enough to do something about it', implying that there is a point of no return for older benefit claimants.

The participants also frame their discussion within hypothetical scenarios, which include some speculation of how benefit claimants feel. For example, as the group moves to a general discussion of employment and poverty, one participant suggests that being on benefits 'must be depressing even if they don't realise it. I think a lot of them are probably without knowing it quite [depressed]. That's why they are smoking and drinking'. This stance is qualified by other members of the group suggesting 'yes, they are depressed' and 'perhaps they are depressed some of the time'. In these examples, the participants attribute hypothetical benefit claimants

with depression, although this is treated epistemically with a degree of uncertainty via modal adverbs 'perhaps' and 'probably'. These descriptions index common stereotypes of lower social class groups suffering from mental health issues and link to wider debates about neoliberal politics and agency.

Examining who is represented as the actor in the group's discussions highlights attitudes towards the people who appear in the programme. Issues of transitivity (who is represented as doing what to whom, and what type of action is chosen) are also important in terms of distinguishing or aligning with the people represented in the programme (Mills and Mullany, 2013; Burton, 1982). There is a tendency to represent the people on *Benefits Street* as talking rather than acting. In response to Extract 2 (see below) one participant notes 'You know **they are just talking** about it' with another qualifying that 'really you have got to do something concrete'. Relatedly, when concrete actions are discussed, benefit claimants are constructed as the recipient or goal of an action, as in 'why should I work, **let the state keep** me' and the related comment that 'because of the benefit culture, they are so used **to people doing things for them,** they tend not to do things for themselves'. The implications of taking this stance are to diminish the agency of those on benefits and construct them as people who cannot take independent action.

There is a keen distinction made between what our participants think people ought to do and what the people in the programme are seen to do. For example, it is implied that there is some neglect of children's education by parents receiving benefits (Extract 2). Although this position is not stated explicitly, members of the group note that 'you have got to encourage them to go to school on a regular basis', remember to 'set a good example' and 'encourage them to do their homework, you have got to support them'. This positioning relates to the use of mental verbs and the representation of those on *Benefits Street* as thinking about or wanting to do things, but not doing them. For example, 'She **wanted them** to have a career; she **wanted them** to do well; but **she didn't seem to be bothered** about her own career' and 'she definitely did **want** her children to do better but she **didn't want to seem to go down** that path herself if she could avoid it'. Here, a *Benefits Street* resident (White Dee) is represented as avoiding work and being somewhat naive: 'it is as though **they feel** as though having a career is just something that

happens and it doesn't, you have to do something about it'. The `you' refers to a hypothetical someone who does something to get a job and is set in stark contrast to White Dee (and other benefit claimants) who are conceptualised as inactive.

A closer examination of mental and verbal processes shows that participants attribute stance to benefit claimants by presenting their own views as if they were factual representations of how others think and feel. For example, in a general discussion of benefit claimants one participant states: 'they get pregnant because **they think** that with the baby he's [the father] is going to stay' and '**they think** there is just a pot of gold'. These examples present opinions as the mental processes of others and homogenise those on benefits. The participants use this attribution of mental processes, including sixteen occurrences of 'they think', alongside 'they know', 'they suppose', and 'they forget', to (implicitly) negatively evaluate benefit claimants, despite the fact that many of the issues they refer to (especially pregnancy, see Extract 6) did not occur in the stimulus clips we used. This attribution of stance is increased through the use of verbal processes, where our participants put words into the mouths of hypothetical benefit claimants. For example, '**I want** a flat' and '**I want** a house'. These phrases are presented as Free Direct Speech (Short, 1996), where participants assume the voice of those on benefits and again evaluate them negatively. This echoes findings in Buttny (1997), where students used reported speech to negatively attribute stance to others when discussing issues of race (see also, Benwell 2012).

When the residents of *Benefits Street* are represented as doing something, this is often a stigmatised action, such as smoking and complaining. Furthermore, they are positioned as 'taking' and 'getting' benefits, rather than the more neutral 'receiving': 'they are quite happy to **take** money off the State' and 'there was something just not long ago about them **getting** £500 a week'. To take smoking as an example, the participants note that White Dee has 'got cigarettes' and state that, in contrast, even though they do not receive benefits, 'I couldn't afford to smoke anymore' (Extract 1). This extract comes after the group saw a clip of White Dee talking about her daughter.

```
1   F3   erm… there has been such a lot in the papers about that (0.5)and
         her lifestyle (1.0) that is enough to turn you against her I think

2   F4   I see that she got cigarettes

3   F3   yes

4   F4   [and as a long time smoker

5   F3   [that they can afford those ((laughs))

6   F4   I consider I am sort of fairly settled but I couldn't afford to
         smoke anymore (1.0) what are they 5 or 6 pounds a packet

7   F5   more I think

8   F1   if people have been brought up in er a a family that smokes and
         they smoke it is ever so difficult to get (0.5) to stop it unless
         you have got (1.0) support and motivation (0.5) but it is very very
         difficult

9   F5   yes you need quite a lot of drive don't you to probably erm (0.5)
         get out of that rut

10  F1   yes

11  F5   of being on benefits (.) and spending your money on what we
         probably wouldn't think of a very sensible manner but (.) you just
         get in that rut (.) and it is probably very hard to get out of it

12  F1   the problem is that when you smoke (0.5) if you are doing something
         a bit difficult or you are feeling depressed (0.5) then you sort of
         go out (.) you might go outside the house or whatever and you have
         a cigarette (0.5) erm (.) I mean I have (.) been in situations
         where people if they do a bit of work they are working (0.5) and
         then (.) oh they have to go outside and have a cigarette erm and
         erm (0.5) I think it is <very difficult to change that>

13  F5   absolutely
```

The fact that White Dee smokes is mentioned by F4 (who is critical of White Dee's motivation to have a career, see Extract 2) and follows immediately on from F3's comment about White Dee's lifestyle being 'enough to turn you against her'. Thus, the act of smoking is linked to White Dee's lifestyle being negatively evaluated; she is a 'flawed consumer' (Bauman, 2004) for spending benefits on cigarettes. F4's reference to the price of cigarettes (Turn 4) suggests that smoking is expensive and she implicitly contrasts her own choice not to buy cigarettes with that of White Dee's smoking habit. There is no overt negative evaluation of smoking, but it is implied, and it is this negative evaluation that is taken up in F1's next turn where she mentions the difficulty of

giving up. However, it is also clear from Extract 1 that not all participants evaluated White Dee in the same way. The negotiation of different views is explored in the following section.

Negotiating opinion

In Extract 2 the participants are discussing parental responsibilities in response to a clip showing White Dee with her daughter. The concept of motherhood is debated, with 'the mother' evaluated as not taking action to support her daughter's aspirations to better herself.

Extract 2 - 'They are just talking'

```
1   F4   why doesn't the mother do something about the daughter who had a
         career (.) the daughter who wants her children to have a career
         (2.0) you know they are just talking about it

2   X³   yes

3   F4   and really you have got to do something concrete

4   X    mmm

5   F1   what do you think people can (.) what do you think you can do for
         your children to have a career

6   F4   well you have got to encourage them to go to school on a regular
         basis

7   F3   [set a good example

8   F4   [encourage them to do their homework (0.5) you have got to support
         them (.) you have got to help them

9   F1   but maybe they couldn't pick up erm (1.0) from this (.) as to
         whether they were supported or not I mean they [seem to be getting
         ready to go out

10  F4                                                  [I mean being
         supported in the family

11  F1   yes that's right yes (0.5) yes that's right (.) I mean she was
         certainly wanting them to do well wasn't she
```

F4 begins the exchange, setting out her position. F1 asks the question 'what do you think you can do for your children to have a career?' (Turn 5), which is on the surface a request for more information from F4, but could be read as a challenge, since the question implies that the action that F4 wants to see is not self-evident. F4 provides clarification, saying they should encourage

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³ Speaker identity unclear.

their children to engage with formal education (Turns 6 and 8). There is then a hedged disagreement from F1 who suggests that there is not enough evidence in the clip they saw to make a judgement about family support: 'but maybe they couldn't pick up erm... from this as to whether they were supported or not'. This move starts with the contrastive word 'but', but the force of the disagreement is mitigated with 'maybe' and justified with 'I mean, they seem to be getting ready to go out'. Rather than interpreting this as a different opinion, F4's response (Turn 10), appears to be a clarification of her point, suggesting that she thinks F1 may not have understood. F1 emphatically agrees with this point of view (saying 'yes' three times) and re-frames the conversation seen on screen in a more positive way: 'she was certainly wanting them to do well wasn't she?'. F1 ends her turn with a tag question which invites agreement from F4, which is given. Thus, one strategy that participants use to handle disagreement is to find elements of the argument that can be easily agreed with, to agree on them, and then to change the focus of the argument slightly. However, direct contradictions do occur, as shown in Extract 3 when M1 states that there are jobs available and F1 disagrees.

Extract 3 - Benefits vs. working

```
1   M1   there are jobs to be had (1.0) but the problem is that they get
         more money from the state (.) than they get through working all
         week

2   F1   the problem is that there aren't very many jobs (.) and you have
         people who can be sending off their applications erm (0.5) for I
         don't know 10 jobs a week for a long time and it's very (.) and
         [just getting you know no response

3   F4   [I think generally you have got to have a fair level of education
         these days for almost any jobs haven't you

4   F1   yes

5   F5   you have yes

6   F1   I mean you have got to be erm

7   F5   that is right I mean in the 50s and 60s you (.) you could always
         get a job and the national (1.0) what did they call it (.) national
         assistance would send you to (.) a man anyway (.) to a building
         site for the day (0.5) so they sent you off to CS Leman or
         something or other (.) so the system was very different then

8   F4   and you see I would think that with the level that they are at
         (0.5) I mean I don't know (0.5) had that daughter got some GCEs or
         what have you (0.5) I very much doubt it (0.5) erm (2.0) the sort
         of jobs that they would get would not bring them in very much money
```

```
9   F3  true
10  F5  no
11  M1  this is the problem
```

Notice that these conflicting opinions do not lead to a disagreement; instead F4 comes in with what could be seen as a fairly tempered position − that a high level of education is needed for jobs (Turn 3). Following on from the two previous contradictory claims, this could be read as implying that although jobs exist, they are only for educated people. This brings explicit agreement from both F1 and F5 and then F4 extends the argument saying that unless you are educated you cannot get well-paying jobs, implicitly linking back to discussions of education and motivation. Thus the problem is constructed as being one of poor education, rather than one of unemployment or individual laziness. This meets with agreement from F3, M1, and F5.

In general there is a lot of agreement amongst the speakers. That is, while their private opinions may differ greatly from one another, in this situation participants construct a cordial and cooperative conversation. This is perhaps because they define the situation (a discussion group based on an existing reading group) as one in which cooperation is expected. In adopting the role of assessors, participants were invited to offer their opinions on employment and benefits, but they simultaneously worked to maintain a group identity. One way they attempted to understand the events on screen was by drawing on their personal experience. Furthermore, they used these invocations of personal experiences to strengthen their own opinions about benefits and the people represented on *Benefits Street*. The use of concrete examples helped participants to present their opinions as credible or fact-based. The techniques used to introduce and evaluate such experiences are the focus of the next section.

Stake inoculation

Extremely relevant to discussions of social judgements is the work of Potter (1996) and te Molder and Potter (2005), which considers the ways people present facts in conversation and describes how opinions are conveyed to appear factual or credible. Potter considers the management of 'stake' to be important for speakers providing opinions or assessments. This refers to an individual's (vested) interest in a matter and so can compromise a speaker's

neutrality and thus, potentially, the validity of their opinion. As Potter argues, at its 'strongest… [stake is] used to suggest that the description's speaker, or the institution responsible for the description, has something to gain or lose; that they are not *dis*interested' (Potter, 1996: 122, original emphasis). In order to appear to hold a valid opinion, speakers may have to perform 'stake inoculation', showing that they do not have a particular interest in holding their opinion.

When assessing those represented on *Benefits Street*, and benefit claimants more generally, the participants drew on their *direct* and *indirect* experiences of benefits. An example of a *direct* experience is when one participant noted their own work ethic in contrast to the attitudes of the people on *Benefits Street*: 'I think people get out of the habit, of 9-5… I mean it's hard work, you know, [as] somebody who doesn't do mornings believe you me ((laughs)) getting up to get to work for 8.30 in the morning was everyday a trial'. Here, full-time employment is presented as a duty, requiring commitment and 'hard work'. Whereas others in society may 'get out of the habit' of working, this participant presents their own experience in a more positive light; in spite of their dislike for early mornings, they still got up and went to work. A form of stake inoculation occurs when they play down their natural disposition to enjoy all aspects of work (i.e. getting up early). In presenting their experience in this way, the participant foregrounds how their own strong work ethic overcame their natural predisposition to dislike early mornings. This is implicitly contrasted with the attitudes of those on *Benefits Street* and benefit recipients, who are 'out of the habit' of waking early.

Members of the group discussed *indirect* experiences of work using the stories of others. The level of indirectness varied, with some experiences attributed to people close to the speaker (friends/relatives) and other experiences attributed to people further removed (acquaintances, neighbours, and stories passed down a chain). One participant positively evaluated friends who volunteered when out of paid employment: 'if you are unemployed, if you go and work in a charity shop or something you have got something to put on your CV in order to get another job… one or two of my friends who have been unemployed they have done that and they have got jobs'. In contrast to this proactive behaviour, benefit claimants are depicted as unable (or unwilling) to break the cycle of unemployment. In this vein, F5 relates the experience of her son

who is in employment and works alongside people claiming benefits (Extract 4). This extract also comes after the group saw the clip of White Dee and her daughter.

Extract 4 - Ill-paid jobs

```
1  F5  you see a lot of the jobs are so ill paid (.) I mean John works in a
       pub he is a chef (.) he earns £7 something an hour and there is
       people he works with that are all signing on (0.5) in fact the
       majority of the people in this pub are <signing on and getting paid
       cash in hand> there is only him and one other person that are being
       full time (1.0) so he would be better off doing (.) what they do (.)
       but he is not going to do it or at least he will have me to answer
       to ((laughs))but you see there is a lot of jobs like that (.) where
       you can't see much benefit (1.0) and you c- can't (0.5) I am not
       saying you can't blame people but you can see where they are coming
       from

2  F2  oh yes

3  F1  or people have to learn how to get by in whatever way they can don't
       they

4  M1  yes
```

F5 shows sympathy for the plight of those on *Benefits Street* and for benefit recipients generally, a stance which is echoed by F2, F1 and M1 in relation to this example. The practice of claiming benefits whilst employed is criticised by F5, but because of the low wages and poor work conditions associated with some jobs she remarks that you can 'see where they are coming from'. F5's expression of sympathy goes against the dominant, negative opinion that has been established within the group (Extract 1, 2, 3), and she has to present her view within this context. In mitigating her sympathy with 'I am not saying you can't blame people', F5 performs stake inoculation. This demonstrates that she is not predisposed to sympathy for people who claim benefits whilst working, yet allows her to be sympathetic to this practice in certain situations. In spite of her sympathetic stance, however, F5 reports being pleased that her son is not claiming benefits whilst working, reporting that he will have 'me to answer to' if he follows his colleagues' examples. There is an implicature here that claiming benefits whilst employed is always illegal, despite this not actually being the case. This invocation of her son's personal experience portrays F5's family in a good light (as law-abiding) while the stake inoculation allows her to present her potentially-controversial opinion as measured and coherent with the dominant views of the group.

The group members also described the experiences of parties who were further removed, being acquaintances or people indirectly known to them. These people, external to the group and their immediate family/friends, were generally presented negatively and the narratives concerning them often served to support unsympathetic accounts of benefit claimants. In Extract 5, F5 describes a family she knew who received benefits yet understood little about where the money came from. This extract occurred after the group saw a clip of two women on *Benefits Street* phoning prospective employers, looking for work.

Extract 5 - Pot of gold

```
1   F5   I think the trouble is (1.0) they think (.) some of them do
         probably think and I was (0.5) I knew a family like this and they
         (0.5) it was as if somewhere there was a pot of gold and they were
         getting money out of this pot of gold (.) >well not pot of gold but
         you know what I mean<

2   F3   yes

3   F5   and I don't think they ever thought

4   F3   would be empty

5   F5   well would belong to anybody else (0.5) or that anybody else had
         paid in I think that's the problem I think (0.5) they have the idea
         that the money is there (0.5) you know (1.0) for them and I don't
         think they ever think that the people up the road from them

6   F4   somebody's income tax and national insurance has [paid for this

7   F5                                                    [no I don't think
         they think that (0.5) I think they think there is just this pot of
         gold somewhere that they are using (.) and quite entitled to use I
         don't think they really think where the money comes from

8   F4   well they think it's just come from the government don't they?

         …((30 secs of talk omitted))

9   F5   I think they think it's all come from somebody (0.5) some Lord
         somebody

10  F2   somewhere over the rainbow

11  F1   but I think they come from backgrounds where you get by as you can
         and you don't think about it you just get by as you can (0.5) and
         it is a much more difficult place to be than if you have got a job
         and you are paying tax (0.5) I would much rather be in a job and
         pay tax than be in the sort of position that those folk are in (.)
         and just thinking how can we get the next penny (0.5) how can we
         manage (.) and they won't think where it comes from it will be just
         a question of managing
```

Here, the speakers give examples of benefit claimants who are seen to have cheated the system. F5 in particular attributes an epistemic stance to benefit claimants by suggesting that many are ignorant about the origin of the money they receive. F5 starts by making a generalisation about benefit claimants, which quickly gets mitigated and attributed to a particular family that she knew: 'I knew a family like this...'. The idea emerges across a few turns from different speakers that many people on benefits do not consider where their benefit money is coming from; benefit recipients believe they are 'entitled' to draw on the 'pot of gold', without considering that 'somebody's income tax and national insurance has paid for this'. There is movement between specific examples – the family who failed to consider that 'people up the road' had funded their benefits – and general comments about generic benefit recipients who do not consider the provenance of their income. The example of the specific family allows the speakers to ground their opinions in a concrete example, which operates as a form of stake inoculation and serves to validate the generalisations being made.

At Turn 11, F1 offers a different perspective on this issue, sympathising with benefit claimants on the grounds that the emotional difficulty of being unemployed would override any contemplation about the origins of the money claimants receive. This sympathetic stance is partly constructed through the use of second-person address (contrasting with the other participants' use of third-person 'they'), which reduces social distance between the participant and the hypothetical benefit claimant. In contrast, articles and demonstrative determiners – 'the' and 'those' – are often used to create a social distance between participants and the people on the programme (e.g. 'the mother', 'those families'). The social distance implied by these linguistic resources arguably makes the situations of those on benefits seem less real.

A synthesized analysis

So far we have shown how naming strategies, agency and transitivity patterns, negotiation of opinions, and stake inoculation were used by our participants to evaluate those on *Benefits Street* and benefit recipients in general. However, there is no implication that these linguistic tactics are used independently and/or weighted differently in terms of their evaluative power.

In this final section, we draw these elements together to show how they interact. In Extract 6 M1 tells a story of his ex-wife's experience of working dealing with benefit claimants. At this point in the focus group the participants have moved towards a general discussion of benefit claimants. M1 describes a mother who was provided with a newly-decorated flat with a new kitchen because she 'plonk[ed] a baby on the counter' in the council's offices. The mother (and other 'girls' like her) are invoked as examples of people who are merciless and calculating in their dealings with the benefits system.

Extract 6 - 'Baby on the counter'

```
1   M1   there was quite a serious standard problem (.) the council have
          that is (0.5) er er a girl would walk in with a baby and plonk it
          on the counter (0.5) and demand a flat (.) and this and that (0.5)
          the other all this and >she would get it< (.) and they would go
          (1.0) God here we go (.) and ((laughs))

2   F4   well we had girls who got pregnant at 16 and they were (.) they
          were given a flat[they were given furniture

3   M1                    [deliberate planned

4   F4   they were giving (.) given money for the cot (.) and the pram for
          the baby and the clothes and everything and all they had to do was
          (.) sit back and dress the baby (0.5) push it out nicely

5   X    yes

6   M1   yes (0.5) my f- (.) former wife worked at the gas board (1.0) and
          they used to send them down there for a cooker (0.5) right (.) free
          cooker they would just go and choose one (.) a reconditioned one
          and they were good (.) brand new looking (.) so right (0.5) this
          girl got (1.0) with a baby (0.5) got a really nice flat at Clifton
          (.) really good flat (1.0) decorated it for her (0.5) erm (.) got
          some furniture for her (1.0) and you know decorated the kitchen
          (1.5) new kitchen (1.0) she complained about everything she got new
          all the time you see she kept on going and then she came down to
          the gas board to get this electric erm (.) sorry (.) gas cooker
          (0.5) so she got this super gas cooker yes great (1.5) and then she
          came back and complained that it was no good so they went (0.5) out
          to fix it

7   F1   did [she say why it was no good

8   M1      [said it was alright she said no it is not broken or anything
          (1.0) God you know what do you want us for then (1.0) she said well
          it is the wrong colour it doesn't fit my kitchen ((laughs))so
          anyway back with this and reported this and said well (1.0) what
          are we going to do you know (0.5) oh sod it (0.5) she wants a
          cooker she has got one (.) it was perfectly alright nothing wrong
          with it (0.5) >it was a perfectly good< you know (0.5) it went on
          and on and on but in the end they had to go in and take it out (.)
          and put the one in that <fitted the colour of her kitchen>
```

```
9   F4  I wish [I could do that

10  M1       [it took her a while it took her a bit of a while arguing
             about it but she got it in the end (0.5) she got everything she
             wanted (0.5) and that kind of thing has been going on well (1.0) it
             was going on for years

11  F3  so if you persevere

12  M1  it got to a situation where (0.5) they just couldn't cope with it
        (.) because all these girls were going in and bouncing the baby on
        the counter ((laughs)) I want a flat (.) I want an house

13  F5  well the problem is where is the fathers isn't it
```

The story of the family in Extract 5 who believe that their benefit money was from a 'pot of gold' is similar in many ways to the story in Extract 6, although M1's access to the events of the story is more indirect than F5's. The story of the mother is told through the speaker's 'former wife', who is reported to have heard parts of the story from her dealings with the council. Although M1 does not have direct access to this story, he presents his narrative as if he does. He produces the direct speech of the council workers ('God, here we go') and the mother ('it [the oven] is the wrong colour''), and seems to know a lot of detail about the mother's flat: 'really nice flat at Clifton, really good flat, decorated it for her, erm… got some furniture for her, and you know decorated the kitchen, new kitchen'. The use of positive evaluative terms for the flat ('really nice', 'really good') imply that the mother should be grateful, yet, through her actions, she is not.

In contrast to the description of goods and services, the terms used to describe the 'problem' posed for the council by pregnant women construct it as a 'serious' and 'standard' issue, caused by actions that were 'deliberate' and 'planned'. At the start of the extract no particular mother is referred to, so it is impossible for the participants to have any awareness of the intentions of a generic 'girl'. Yet the participants collaboratively construct a predominantly-negative image of 'girls who got pregnant at 16'. The choice to mention the age of the women may also be significant, in drawing on wider negative depictions of teenage pregnancy, as is Turn 13 which refers to absent fathers. M1's verb choice in his opening statement is also indicative of this negative evaluation; the request for a house is labelled as a 'demand' and the mother is said to 'plonk' their baby down. Furthermore, we see the repetition of 'want' (as opposed to 'need')

throughout Extract 6 alongside 'she complained about everything she got', suggesting again that the woman was ungrateful.

As well as starting with generic references to 'girls', at end of the extract the story of the mother is extended to be representative of a wider problem that the council faces, with 'all these girls' engaging in the same devious activity as the mother in question. F4 recycles 'girls' as a naming term, which both orients to the mothers' young age and suggests immaturity and F4 appears to speak from direct experience and with epistemic authority – 'We had girls who got pregnant at 16 and they were, they were given a flat, they were given furniture' – although it is unclear how she has obtained this knowledge. Furthermore, M1's story is revealing because of his lack of orientation to his own stake, interest or bias. In spite of his very indirect access to the events of the story, M1 presents his tale as factual and emanating from his own experience.

By combining an analysis of transitivity and naming strategies with consideration of how participants negotiate opinions and use anecdotes to perform stake inoculation, we can see how the participants collaborate to construct a negative evaluation of particular young mothers. This occurs despite the fact that none of the clips used as stimuli referred to pregnancy or councils housing young/single mothers. The participants' choice to bring such examples into consideration moves away from *Benefits Street* and towards wider conceptualisations of the working classes. Similarly, participants also suggested that 'people that are quite happy to take money off the state' are characterised by 'drinking and smoking' and 'often they have dogs'. This image is constructed collaboratively, with one participant mentioning dog ownership and another agreeing 'invariably and it is always a big one'. No dogs or alcohol appeared in any of the clips that were shown. However, it seems that viewing clips from *Benefits Street* was enough to evoke such associations and stereotypes. Thus, a case can be made for the position that poverty porn facilitates the evocation of negative evaluations.

Conclusions

Our analysis shows that our participants evaluated particular practices that they associated with benefit recipients – smoking, drinking, being lazy, uneducated, and getting pregnant – negatively. However, not all participants agreed with each other all of the time. When

participants disagreed, they would handle differences of opinion by finding common ground to share before changing the focus of the discussion. Here we see how the need to construct group membership and work collaboratively was potentially stronger than the need to state one's own opinion. This pull towards constructing a coherent group is worthy of further study in alternative settings. There were cases where some participants were somewhat resistant readers and showed a level of sympathy for those on benefits, although there were no strong positive associations. For example, in Extract 2, the participants suggested that White Dee held ambitions for her children but this is contrasted with the implicature that people like White Dee do not help their children with their homework. Relatedly, none of the participants claimed affinity with the people they saw on screen, although some participants in other focus groups were in receipt of benefits and were slightly more sympathetic. In all cases though, our participants considered themselves to be separate from those represented on *Benefits Street*.

Relating to previous works on poverty porn (Biressi, 2011; Couldry, 2011; Hancock and Mooney 2013) this analysis contributes to a growing body of literature focused on public reactions to media representations of benefit recipients. The clips from *Benefits Street* were enough to get our participants to tap into their beliefs about benefit recipients – that they do not work, that they get pregnant at 16, that they smoke and drink – even if similar events were absent from the stimuli clips. We invited our participants to judge the people they saw on screen, but they did more than that; they used the individuals in *Benefits Street* to work collaboratively to construct an overarchingly-negative stereotype of those on benefits.

Our work also has implications for wider debates about social class in linguistics. Whilst our participants' use of the term 'class' will be analysed in detail elsewhere (see Paterson, forthcoming), the trend towards the homogenisation of benefit claimants shown here suggests they are conceptualised as constituting a particular, identifiable social group. In this data, such a group was referenced by citing particular attitudes and attributes (laziness and cigarettes, etc.), quantification ('all these girls'), and the use of 'they' to refer to all (imagined) benefit claimants. An analysis of stance allowed us to see how our participants 'assign value to objects of interest, to position social actors with respect to those objects, to calibrate alignment between stancetakers, and to invoke presupposed systems of cultural value' (Du Bois, 2007: 139). We

conclude that, *Benefits Street* is not 'only' entertainment (c.f. Couldry, 2011), but is rather a site for the perpetuation of existing stereotypes about benefit claimants. The programme, and others like it, invites negative evaluations of poor people and benefit recipients, and should, therefore, be subject to critical linguistic analysis.

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Appendix - Transcription key

Transcript feature	Key
(.)	pause less than 0.5 seconds
(0.5)	timed pause
[yeah [yeah	simultaneous speech
Underlined	speaker places emphasis on word/phrase
>yes<	speaker speeds-up
<no>	speaker slows down
((laughs))	nonverbal communication