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Review of:

For whose benefit – The everyday realities of welfare reform by Ruth Patrick

by Donald Hirsch, Professor of Social Policy, Loughborough University

A broad gulf divides two conflicting narratives about the lives of those depending on benefits in Britain today. The language of the popular press, television programmes such as *Benefits Street* and many politicians portrays 'welfare' as a state of feckless dependency whose subjects require a firm push to get out to work. This book, like the film *I Daniel Blake*, observes an alternative reality of people ground down by a 'welfare' system that, rather than supporting them, seems set on working against them.

The book is based around the lived experiences of 22 young jobseekers, lone parents and disabled people claiming benefits. All were initially interviewed in 2011 by the author, Ruth Patrick a researcher at Liverpool University. For this longitudinal study, she re-interviewed 15 participants six months and 18 months later, and nine of them again in 2016. This has produced a rich and thorough depiction of what it has been like to experience the 'welfare reforms' implemented by the Coalition government. Patrick sets the testimony of those individuals in a thematic framework linked to the reforms' objectives, examining for example whether they are ending 'welfare dependency' and providing routes from 'welfare to work' (the overwhelming answer to both these questions being 'no'). She engages closely with the present-day politics of welfare, by juxtaposing the results of her research with a detailed examination of the current discourse.

The most powerful theme of the book is the way in which our benefits system has abandoned the spirit of 'social security' in favour of a notion of 'reformed welfare', which turns out to be counterproductive in its own terms. That is to say, the system's focus has changed from giving security of income in difficult times to that of exerting pressure to return to work, but does so through a brutal form of coercion that hinders rather than helps claimants' ability to enter and thrive in the labour market. In particular, claimants feel that they are dealing with a hostile system of gatekeepers so intent on making them jump through impossible hoops in order to merit their benefits that they are ill-placed to give them any real help in moving into work or improving their lives.

While this may all sound like a familiar story to those who have been following recent developments in the benefits system, there are several features that make this book a particularly important contribution.

First, it shows clearly that while themes such as the 'reactivation' of those who have grown 'dependent' on the welfare state have been around for at least two decades, the spirit of this welfare reform has become far harsher and meaner-minded in the

course of the last five years. This is witnessed directly by those followed between 2011 and 2016. In particular, as their experiences of ever stricter versions of conditionality have taught them to dread new policy pronouncements and the uncertainties that these cause.

Secondly, Patrick develops a crucial narrative about what has caused the welfare reform rhetoric of 'matching rights with responsibilities' to fail. She explains this as the 'disjuncture between citizenship as it is conceptualised from above and citizenship as it is lived and experienced from below'. The promise from above is that the system will support individuals to become more productive members of society. This contrast with the overwhelming experience of claimants of not feeling supported, by a system that seeks to control and undermine them rather than offer them security, opportunities or real choices .

A further distinctive theme of this book is the importance of public discourse itself in this process of undermining benefit claimants. Again and again it comes across that what Patrick calls "scroungerphobia" profoundly affects the way in which 'welfare' services are received. As well as frequently expressing the emotion of shame, so common in the literature, claimants described how their perception of hostility of the benefits service was itself a barrier to finding it helpful. One man described how counterproductive coercion from his 'adviser' could be: 'If they say "you have to do it", no I won't do it. But if it's "would you do it", then yeah I would.

Thus the hostility towards benefit claimants in public discourse and the associated mistrust of their motives by the system has itself become part of the problem. This book does not offer solutions in terms of how to bridge the gulf between the dominant scrounger myth believed by so much of the public and the sympathetic stories told from the claimant's viewpoint in studies such as this one. Perhaps such a gulf is ultimately unbridgeable.

The book itself is not neutral. Like any such qualitative research study, it is informed by the perspective of those interviewed – and in this case explicitly seeks to help make their voices heard, including through an animated film made with participants as a spin-off of the research. A tricky issue here is that a study that only draws on those aspects of people's experiences that show them in a positive light could lack credibility, because people are not angels. Patrick partially avoids this inference by reporting, for example, guilty admissions of low-level shoplifting (described as 'survival crime'). She also identifies one woman who comes close to conforming to the 'work-shy' stereotype, while thoughtfully describing how this attitude was not entrenched, but changed over time and had originally been based on a misconception of how much better off she could be in work. These examples of describing people 'warts and all', to the extent that research subjects choose to disclose things that may show them in a negative light, are important for future researchers to follow. They add credibility to the picture painted, and avoid further

polarising the competing narratives of the selfish scrounger and the blameless victim of the welfare system.