

Editorial on Welfare Rights Special Edition- 'Austerity from above and resistance from below'

This Welfare Rights edition- 'Austerity from above and resistance from below' has been inspired by discussions with people attempting to navigate the welfare system over the past decade. It presents a series of articles that reflect the despair, illness and worse that people have suffered as a result of the unprecedented governmental attack upon disabled people in the UK in the previous decade. It also documents examples of how this bureaucratic onslaught has been, and continues to be, resisted by disabled people, their communities and allies. This editorial will set the historical and political context in which these articles have been framed before turning to consider each of them in turn with consideration given to what they can reveal about the impact of welfare reform and it's resistance in the field of mental health. The editorial will conclude with comments on the process of the editing of the special edition and reflections on future directions for research, activism and practice.

The state of the welfare system in the UK has deteriorated rapidly since the coalition government in 2010, but any history of welfare reform would need to start much earlier to trace the rot. The Beveridge Report originally called for a "Social Insurance fully implemented (that) may provide income security; it is an attack upon want." It resisted means testing in most cases and while the 'abolition of want' was aimed for, Beveridge recognized the importance of the relationship between the state and the individual to "leave room and encouragement for voluntary action by each individual..." From the two testimonials in this magazine, little can be inferred from the current government policy that would suggest any form of *voluntary participation* on the part of disabled people in the welfare system. As the pieces by Maria Pike, and Miriam Bender on behalf of DPAC make painfully clear, current UK policy in the provision of social security for disabled people renders us powerless in the face of nonsensical assessment procedures and unpredictable punitive measures that can leave us without the most basic forms of food and shelter. Maria's article "Fear of the Brown envelope", illuminates what it is like to live in a constant state of fear and highlights the paradoxical impact this fear has on health, for while the welfare reform agenda is supposed to get people back to work, it actually renders many less capable. Deploying humor through her description of the "Grim Creeper" as she calls her mobility scooter, Miriam skillfully documents how an apparently minor policy change at a public level, in this case the removal of her entitlement to a social care provided through a wheelchair referral scheme, can have a profound impact on her daily existence. This includes her ability to participate in forms of social activism; the indirect silencing of people's voices by starving them of access to resources needed to speak could not be starker.

What strikes me reading these pieces are the parallels with the 'hostile environment' towards long-settled Commonwealth migrants that has attracted so much attention in recent months. As the sociologist Will Davies observes of the government's enactment of the hostile environment policy, there was a form of "weaponised paperwork" that was "intended as a way of destroying (people's)

ability to build normal lives.” The use of the Work Capability Assessment to systematically confuse claimants and to conflate their ability to engage in everyday functional activities with a readiness to engage in a precarious labor market is a form of weaponised assessment that renders the claimant feeling fraudulent, as Maria emotively describes here. In this I hear echoes of what the Glaswegian political activist Cathy McCormack has named the “War without Bullets”; the sustained structural violence of the state against oppressed communities through the deployment of impoverishing and delegitimizing social and economic policies. The impact on lives described here are heartbreaking and not a little dispiriting were it not for the fact that they have both been written by victims of this hostile environment, who have managed to be heard in spite of the attempts to silence them.

Psychologist Jay Watts’s ‘cut out and keep’ piece (with help from Winvisible and Recovery in the Bin) for professionals offers a practical guide for how those of us working in mental health can support claimants. It offers detailed advice on how to best support claimants, making particular note of the importance of not privileging emotional over practical support. Given that welfare reform initiatives have relied heavily on psychological theories of behavioral change drawn from positive psychology and behavioral economics that are designed to ‘nudge’ claimants towards employment, it is refreshing to hear a contrasting psychological view. These initiatives are forms of what Lynne Friedli has called ‘psychocompulsion’, attempts to explain social processes such as disability and unemployment through the use of individual psychological mechanisms. Jay in her piece resists this reductionism but still attends to the psychological harm resulting from engagement in the welfare system, advocating for claimants to be helped to manage their shame and fear through relationships based on partnership and practical solidarity rather than changing how claimants think. For professionals working in mental health settings and those of us tasked with training them, it offers a stern rebuke for the relative lack of training for professionals in this area and cries out to be pinned to mental health team office boards or introduced into professional training program’s curricula.

Writing about a collaborative project with myself and others, Ellen Clifford from Inclusion London offers an alternative model of research practice in the area of welfare reform. Ellen describes the large numbers of research requests her member groups receive to participate in other people’s research but how few offer opportunities for a more equal form of engagement. Ellen sees her role on this project as co-supervisor, as offering an opportunity to set the agenda regarding research on welfare reform and to ensure that Disabled people’s voices are central to each stage of the research process. This argument is at the heart of survivor led and genuinely co-produced research in the fields of mental health and disability studies more generally. One pioneer in the area, the survivor academic Peter Beresford has called for those with ‘close by’, experiential expertise in research areas to be given parity of participation in a more inclusive form of research. I can say from my vantage point of co-supervisor with Ellen that she was able to detect detail in research transcripts that would have passed me by and to frame the analysis in the wider context of Disabled people’s communities that as an outside academic I simply have not got

access to. All this adding up to making Ellen's involvement not an 'add on' but an essential component of the project's scientific integrity.

No Asylum magazine would be complete without a Dolly Sen cartoon, which helpfully reminds us that ridicule can often offer the strongest form of resistance. The detail of the 'Piss on Pity' t-shirt nicely subverts the idea that claimants are in need of paternalistic emotions but rather respect as equals. This coupled with Rachel Rowan Olive's terrifyingly accurate portrayal of the state as a multi-headed beast reminds us that arts based commentaries can offer forms of resistance that can both educate and entertain.

Finally, I want to draw reader's attention to the Tweet below that we were given permission to anonymously quote. This has been one of the central lessons of the process of compiling this special edition, that in some cases it can be difficult to articulate what it is like to be in the welfare system as the experience itself renders us speechless. This is reminiscent of speaking with survivors of trauma who 'can't find the words' to relay their experiences. This speechlessness has impacted on the process here with a number of contributors simply being too worn down to put pen to paper. A key co-editor also had to withdraw because of complications arising from activism. This edition is the lesser for their absence and I would like to dedicate this editorial to my co-editor, the authors who withdrew and the many of our fellow citizens who at times have been rendered speechless by the weaponised assessments of welfare reform. I hope that this edition can offer some modest assurances that while they are currently silenced, there are many who hear them and that through speaking together we can be stronger in our resistance.

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