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Resistance or resignation to welfare reform? The activist politics for and against social citizenship

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Since 2008, mature welfare states have, to varying degrees, pursued a strategy of welfare reform that has reconfigured the dominant praxis of social citizenship. Drawing on qualitative data from two studies, this paper explores what bearing this has had on the political subjectivity of welfare claimants in the New Zealand context. The findings suggest welfare claimants engage in diverse political struggles for and against social citizenship to resist, reconfigure and resign themselves to the prevailing socio-political settlement. In light of this, conclusions are drawn about the insurgent politics of low-income social security claimants as political agents in the citizenship-making process.

key words welfare politics • conditionality • acts of citizenship • social policy

Introduction

In recent years, successive rounds of welfare reform have weakened the status and rights of social citizenship across many developed welfare regimes (Raffass, 2016). Alongside increasing work-related and social obligations, benefit sanctions and welfare withdrawal have created new modes of control, marginality and subordination (Jones et al, 2013; Hodgetts et al, 2014). This article examines what impact these exclusionary practices of citizenship are having on the political subjectivity of welfare claimants (Turner, 2016).

A great deal of research has explored the effects of welfare reform and its implications for social citizenship (for example, Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Berry, 2015; Humpage, 2015b). However, less attention has been given to the varied ways in which those denied the status and rights of citizenship engage in political struggle to defend and contest the ideals, operation and outcomes of social citizenship. With this in mind, this article examines how welfare claimants 'constitute themselves as political subjects under sometimes extreme conditions of subjugation' (Tyler and Marciniak, 2013, 149).

Since 2010, the National-led coalition government in New Zealand has adopted an increasingly paternalistic, governmental and punitive approach to welfare provision that has elevated the role of individual and familial responsibility (Humpage and Baillie, 2016). These policy developments demand attention to the deeds and discourses through which citizens challenge the existing citizenship configuration. To this end, Isin (2008, 18) argues that there is a need to investigate those 'moments when, regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens – or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due'.

To do so, this article draws on data from two qualitative studies exploring lived experiences of citizenship and welfare reform undertaken in 2007–08 and 2013 in New Zealand. Over the course of this six-year period, existing forms of welfare conditionality were extended and intensified through a sustained programme of welfare reform. For many low-income social security claimants, these reforms made it harder to secure the material and symbolic benefits of social citizenship. This article examines the 'activist politics' of marginalised individuals seeking to resist, reconfigure or resign themselves to the prevailing socio-political settlement. Where appropriate and possible, the article also explores whether the shifting welfare landscape has induced a change in the political subjectivity of welfare claimants. The findings suggest that welfare reforms have not only precluded ostensible citizens from the emancipatory potential of citizenship, but also created new sites of struggle and contestation through which citizens dispute the basis and ideals underpinning collective entitlement and belonging.

Status, habitus and acts of citizenship: implications for welfare politics

Traditionally, social and political theorists have tended to advance a 'vertical' conception of citizenship (Clarke et al, 2014). Such a treatment conceives of social citizenship as a *status bestowed upon*, rather than a *process enacted by*, citizens. This 'top-down' approach concentrates on the formalised interactions that exist between citizens and the state within the political–legal system. Arguably, this bypasses the means and focuses on the ends of citizenship, obscuring the mechanisms by which welfare reforms attain social and thus institutional legitimacy (Tyler, 2013, 5).

If social citizenship is understood as having macro-structural, rather than democratically determined, origins, citizens are regarded with little, if any, political agency to endorse, deliberate or contest the ideals and pursuit of the common good. This article argues that citizenship, including its distributional and symbolic promise, needs to be understood as a polity-driven practice in which claims-making, identity and rationality are socially-embedded and essentially contingent. Once understood in this way, citizens – or civil society more broadly – can be recognised as actively engaged in the construction and transformation of welfare politics. In this regard, the exercise of political agency within the public sphere has a profound influence on the deliberative character of civil society. The collectives and movements emerging from this have the capacity to affect the institutions of citizenship. However, very often the uneven exercise of political agency corrupts the democratic coherence of citizenship by privileging the attitudes and engagements of some and not others. Despite providing a necessary link between the political projects of citizens and state apparatus (Clarke et al, 2014), the formalised features of civil society can also serve

to further exclude citizens from the deliberative public sphere. Previous research has shown how civil society organisations have the capacity to repress, silence or co-opt the political projects of some of the most marginalised citizens (for example, Emejulu and Bassel, 2015). With this in mind, it is necessary to re-imagine citizenship from the perspective of those most marginalised by it and re-insert their 'grassroots' views and practices into welfare debates (Dwyer, 2002).

Numerous studies have already sought to examine citizenship in light of the everyday routines, experiences and attachments that give it meaning and moral purpose (for example, Hopkins and Blackwood, 2011). This literature has sought to include 'habitus (internalized or embodied ways of thought and conduct) alongside status within studies of citizenship' (Isin, 2008, 17). While such studies explore how citizenship status can become contested or lack internal coherence, they principally concentrate on the ways in which citizens negotiate their own position, identity and belonging. For example, lived experiences of exclusion can lead to differing forms of (critical) political disengagement (for example, Manning and Holmes, 2013) or marginalised citizens can adopt pragmatic strategies to overcome or cope with the failed promises of social citizenship (for example, Dean and Shah, 2002). These studies fruitfully explore how marginalised citizens reconcile their own lived experience of social citizenship with the symbolic and distributional benefits it purports to engender. However, they tend to focus on the processes by which existing citizenship structures and ideals are maintained. An alternative that comes closer to explaining both the regression and progression of welfare politics is to explore the ways in which citizens engage in political struggle to not only challenge the status but also the 'habitus' of citizenship (for example, Holston, 2008; Davies, 2013).

For marginalised citizens, 'acts of citizenship' can be seen as the exercise of political agency and deliberative autonomy. The 'activist politics' of citizens are those instances where 'subjects become citizens as claimants of justice, rights and responsibilities' through new sites and scales of struggle (Isin, 2008, 18). Through such 'acts of citizenship', creative breaks and ruptures in welfare politics become possible. This has contemporary, but also historical, relevance for explaining the processes by which citizenship progresses or regresses, and in turn, how social transformation is conceived and achieved. The current hardening of welfare politics in New Zealand, as elsewhere, has cultivated a political and policy mandate for welfare reform. Within this context, we examine how marginalised citizens negotiate the current welfare landscape and whether this has instigated an increasingly activist politics *for* and *against* social citizenship.

In struggling *against* social citizenship, citizens may resist or criticise the increasingly exclusionary policies and ideals that structure welfare outcomes. This includes acts of dissent that problematise the capacity of social citizenship to either tackle inequality, or indeed, safeguard an equality of status between citizens. Alternatively, citizens may engage in an activist politics *for* social citizenship. This entails an assertion of one's citizenship and right to (politically constrained) welfare resources. Discourses drawn upon might resort to a defence of one's entitlement ahead of other claimants. Such an approach represents an individual's resignation to the terms upon which rights and status are granted, but a resistance to their own positioning within such a system. By contrast, others struggling *for* social citizenship articulate counter-hegemonic discourses that seek to reformulate the ideals, practice and outcomes that underpin citizenship. In sum, this article examines whether welfare claimants resist, reconfigure

or resign themselves to the prevailing socio-political settlement through 'acts of citizenship'.

Methods

This article draws on two studies undertaken in 2007–08 and 2013 in New Zealand. Both explored lived experiences of welfare and attitudes towards the status, ideals, rights and responsibilities of social citizenship. Although differing sampling strategies were used for the two studies, all 38 participants, whose data is analysed here, were living close to or below the relative poverty line, were unemployed and receiving working-age benefits (for periods ranging from a few weeks to over 15 years). These benefits included: Unemployment Benefit, Domestic Purposes Benefit, Sickness Benefit, Invalid's Benefit for the earlier participants and from 2013, Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support and Supported Living Payment. Participants included in the analysis reflect a broad range of ages, genders, ethnicities and household types.

The 2007–08 data is drawn from 25 participants who took part in a semi-structured interview or a focus group. The 2013 data is drawn from 13 structured scenario-driven interviews. All participants were presented with either a range of statements (earlier study) or vignettes (later study) to stimulate an applied discussion about abstract concepts and principles underpinning welfare and social citizenship. This made it possible to explore lay accounts that are often absent from welfare debates (Dwyer, 2002). In both studies, participants were principally recruited via advertisements, community newspapers and personal networks. A smaller number of participants were receiving support and/or advice through benefit advocacy organisations and were recruited via referrals from organisation gatekeepers. While this might suggest some latent degree of activism among a small number of participants, this is factored into the analysis and inferences drawn from the data. Participants across both studies were offered a small shopping voucher to thank them for their time and participation. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

The shared thematic focus of both studies resulted in many parallels between the questions asked across the two time periods. In certain instances, this made it possible to identify similarities in the political subjectivity of those interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013. Where possible and appropriate, we have also explored differences in the activist politics exhibited by welfare claimants across the two time periods, enabling some examination of how low-income social security claimants have negotiated successive rounds of welfare reform in New Zealand. A number of factors limit the comparability of the qualitative data collected in 2007–08 and 2013. For example, some of the 2007–08 data is drawn from participants interviewed through focus groups; although it was possible to identify individual responses for each focus group participant, it is acknowledged that responses may have been influenced by the group situation in which they were given. In addition, participants in the two studies were not asked *exactly* the same questions, although they were on very similar topics. These limitations are factored into the analysis and moderate some of the inferences drawn about the continuities and differences observed across the two time periods.

From 'conditional citizens' to 'contingent subjects' of the welfare state

In many respects, recent rounds of welfare reform can be seen as an extension and intensification of the welfare conditionality that emerged in developed welfare regimes in the 1980s and 1990s (Dwyer and Wright, 2014). However, the following discussion demonstrates how contemporary reforms have undermined the social rights of citizenship to such an extent that 'conditional citizens' (Dwyer, 1998) have increasingly become 'contingent subjects' of the NZ welfare state.

Shortly after coming into power, the Labour–coalition government (1999–2008) placed greater emphasis than its predecessor on case management, education and training to support unemployed individuals, including those experiencing ill health and disability, to move closer towards paid employment (Humpage and Craig, 2008). Work tests for Domestic Purposes Benefit and Widows Benefit recipients were replaced with compulsory Personal Development and Employment Plans. New Job Seeker Agreements not only set out a benefit recipient's employment-related obligations and the penalties for non-compliance but also what support could be offered, suggesting some attempt to balance the rights and responsibilities of benefit recipients as citizens (Humpage, 2015b).

With an enhanced case management system in place, however, 'social inclusion' became increasingly focused on the belief that 'work in paid employment offers the best opportunity for people to achieve social and economic well-being' (New Zealand Government, 2007, np). Work-focused assistance was extended to *all* clients regardless of their benefit type in 2007. Domestic Purposes Benefit recipients found their planning and activity requirements and sanctions strengthened and those on Sickness and Invalid's Benefits were routinely subjected to these for the first time. The 2007 Social Security Amendment Act strengthened work-testing, including a new *pre*-benefit activity requirement for the unemployed, and revised the fundamental principles behind social security to reflect the 'work-first approach' adopted. A new In-Work Tax Credit also discursively contrasted 'deserving' low- and middle-income families who were working longer for less, with 'undeserving' benefit recipients for whom the package provided a monetary incentive to gain employment. These developments occurred alongside regressive tax cuts, a falling real-term value of particular benefits and increasing restrictions on hardship provisions (Humpage and Craig, 2008).

In 2008, the National-led coalition government gained power and initially responded to economic stagnation with an assistance package for the newly unemployed and extended subsidies encouraging employers to retain workers or take on low-skilled young people. However, the extent of economic stagnation and public sector debt was often overstated. Welfare reforms were presented as a pragmatic response to economic conditions but were actually motivated by an increasingly neoconservative approach focused on ensuring 'a fairer system of social assistance with an unrelenting focus on work' (New Zealand Government, 2010, 1; Edmiston, 2017). From 2010, the National Party introduced a work test of 15 hours per week on sole parents whose youngest child was aged six and on Sickness Benefit recipients deemed able to work part-time with sanctions of reduced benefit payments for non-compliance (Humpage and Baillie, 2016). It also required Unemployment Benefit recipients to

reapply every 12 months, while the Sickness Benefit was subject to yearly reviews and eight-week medical certificates.

Much of the neoconservative discursive work around welfare, however, was achieved under the auspices of the Welfare Working Group (WWG, 2011). It was established to examine ways to reduce long-term benefit dependency for people of working age *without* reference to income adequacy, New Zealand Superannuation, or the tax–benefit interface. The National-led coalition government sought to implement some of the WWG's proposals and introduced three new benefits that significantly increased work-related obligations for lone parents and sickness beneficiaries. In addition, the National Party adopted the WWG's proposal for an actuarial approach to measuring the forward liability of welfare dependency (Humpage, 2015b).

In 2012, income management was introduced for 16–17 year old benefit recipients and 18-year-old parents, who have most of their benefit and other supplementary assistance quarantined on an electronic payment card with restrictions on items such as alcohol and cigarettes (Humpage, 2016). An increasingly neoconservative approach to welfare provision was also advanced through the introduction of small financial incentives for effective budgeting and meeting 'social obligations'. The latter were introduced in July 2013, requiring all benefit recipients to enrol any of their children over three years of age with an early childhood education provider and a primary care provider. Non-compliance also results in financial sanctions. Benefit recipients could also be subject to random drug tests (Humpage and Baillie, 2016).

Cumulatively, increased conditionality, sanctioning and welfare withdrawal has made it more difficult to secure the social rights of citizenship and has caused significant hardship as a result (Hodgetts et al, 2014). Across both studies considered here, individuals drew upon a range of strategies to overcome the material and symbolic marginality arising from welfare reforms (for further details see Humpage, 2015a; Edmiston, 2017). As 'conditional citizens', many of those interviewed in 2007–08 felt that increasing work-related obligations attached to welfare provision undermined their legitimate entitlements and status as equal citizens. The majority of the 2007–08 participants agreed with a statement used to provoke discussion that asserted 'benefit recipients are treated like second class citizens':

> "I've been treated with suspicion or as if what I'm saying about my life isn't what my life is." (Rob, 2007–08)

> "You can't get credit, can't get 'hire purchase'. You are a second-class citizen." (Leonie, 2007–08)

For those subjected to subsequent rounds of welfare reform, there appears to have been a further degradation of their 'second-class citizenship' (Edmiston, 2017). Similar to those interviewed in 2007–08, participants from 2013 felt that their material condition precluded them from mainstream societal activities and participation. However, referring directly to treatment received from welfare institutions and actors, the vast majority of participants did not feel that they were able to claim the social rights to which they were ostensibly entitled. Their social, economic and political marginality undermined a sense of citizen identity and common belonging:

"Before the reforms I used to be able to cope and life was quite good… they weren't extravagant but at least you felt like part of society but this government, this particular party wants to isolate us." (Chloe, 2013)

"No, I don't feel like a social citizen." (Rebecca, 2013)

Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly difficult to characterise low-income social security claimants as even 'conditional citizens' (Dwyer, 1998). For those subjected to recent reforms, their rights, identity and belonging are *contingent* rather than *conditional*, in that the fulfilment of the conditions attached to welfare receipt does not necessarily lead to the fulfilment of one's claims and status as a social citizen. Ill-defined attitudes or behaviours have become central to achieving full social citizenship, changing the expected relationship between citizen and state. Arguably, the precarity and uncertainty with which these individuals are able to secure their basic wellbeing situates them as contingent subjects. The following section examines how those affected by such welfare reforms engage in 'acts of citizenship' to defend their own claims-making and identity as social citizens.

The activist politics *for* and *against* social citizenship

Individual citizens can actively defend and contest the ideals, operation and outcomes of social citizenship through their everyday attitudes and engagements. While struggles for and against social citizenship may differ according to socio-political and material categories, the following evidence suggests that these 'acts of citizenship' are manifest in the multiple, and often divergent, discourses of citizens. Individuals may struggle against the prevailing citizenship configuration through a range of critical and adversarial strategies. However, they may simultaneously subscribe to ideals and practices in a procedural struggle for their own social rights. Equally, in negotiating a welfare landscape that has come to structure their marginality, individuals may also draw on new and alternative political imaginaries to advance the emancipatory potential of welfare citizenship.

The following section explores whether and how successive rounds of welfare reform have affected the activist politics *for* and *against* social citizenship among contingent subjects of the New Zealand welfare state. In doing so, we tentatively note some differences in the strategies and 'acts' drawn upon between those interviewed in 2008 and those interviewed in 2013.

Resistance or resignation?

While discussing their experience of welfare institutions and policies, many of those interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013 critiqued the distributional functions of welfare and the ideals of social citizenship. These critiques were related to: the prevailing socio-political settlement and the incumbent political administration; the principles underpinning welfare reforms; the procedural means by which citizenship status and rights are secured; and the symbolic and material inequalities that arise as a result. Many participants articulated dissident discourses to challenge and subvert the principles, practices and outcomes of 'unequal citizenship'. Manning and Holmes (2013, 480) suggest that the relative absence of poor and marginalised groups in political discourse

represents a 'critical rather than apathetic response to mainstream politics'. This claim appears to hold true in both studies, with participants expressing highly critical views towards the practice and potential of key actors and institutions that structure social citizenship. Very often these individuals problematised the capacity for social citizenship to tackle poverty and structural inequality:

> "Providing for yourself at a really fundamental level is a luxury now, you know it's something that [only] wealthy people and middle-class people can afford." (Kate, 2007–08)

What is important is that many of those interviewed in 2013 felt that this was the direct result of welfare reforms that undermined their equality of status and right to have rights. Rather than seeking to address or temper inequalities, some individuals felt that the policies and ideals underpinning social citizenship were implicated in the continuance and propagation of inequality.

> "The people that are actually most supportive to look after other people are now at the bottom of the rung, whereas the people that sort of basically make a fortune exploiting other people, and exploiting the environment are at the top of the social ladder." (Grant, 2007–08)

> "We never used to have poverty. We used to have welfare – but it was adequate. We only have poverty now because our welfare system is so woefully inadequate." (Rebecca, 2013)

Beyond broader critiques of inequality, a number of participants also contested the role, motivations and impact of welfare institutions and political administrations. Some were sceptical about the interests, competencies and claims of political leaders. Some rejected their capacity to design an effective welfare system capable of addressing macro-economic problems while fairly addressing socio-economic injustices. Others felt that the social position of political leaders and representatives made it difficult for them to effectively understand the 'real world' and therefore address social disadvantage.

> "It doesn't matter which party gets in, they're not in to help us, are they? They're only interested in what they can get out of the country." (Paul, 2007–08)

> "I think the government need to be more people-orientated. I mean, what would John Key [the New Zealand Prime Minister] know about poverty with $40 million in his hand, you know? It's alright for all these rich cases to go round making rules and regulations for us but they don't know nothing about what it's like." (Oliver, 2013)

Participants in both studies found interactions with Work and Income (WINZ) – the front-line income support and employment agency – to be a particular site of contestation and political struggle. Neither study explicitly asked participants about their engagement with WINZ, but those interviewed in 2013 were more likely to resist the treatment they were subjected to and to challenge the outcomes of visits or

decisions made by welfare institutions and service providers. Sometimes this resistance was directed towards the actual principles and procedures through which welfare was claimed. At other times, criticism was directed towards the behaviour and attitude of case managers. Across both time periods, participants provided detailed accounts of verbal confrontations and treatment that they found emotionally distressing or damaging to their sense of self-worth:

> "It takes a hell of a lot, to get an appointment…[to] actually go in and just say 'Hey look, I am, this is it – there's nowhere else to go, I have to ask you guys.' I don't want to feel like shit, you know a little snarky remark will just like bring me down to tears because I'm already like – this is rock bottom for me." (Mere, 2007–08)

> "You get treated really bad in WINZ. It's amazing how bad you get treated. They're…just totally rude. Just horrible. I don't know how they do it. They judge you all the time." (Joe, 2013)

As a result of this kind of treatment, some participants problematised the degree of discretion case managers were granted in deciding welfare entitlements and were worried about the potential repercussions of this. In seeking to overcome this, Sarah from the 2007–08 study thought that it was important to be "armed with the information first".

In response to the ideological and administrative shifts that have occurred in welfare politics in recent years, many participants across both time periods engaged in direct acts of resistance against social citizenship. This entailed subversive strategies that amounted to an implicit, and occasionally explicit, criticism of welfare policies and practices. Participants in 2007–08 strongly criticised a statement presented in interviews and focus groups that suggested that 'individuals should take more responsibility for themselves' – reflecting the dominant political and policy discourse surrounding welfare dependency. Many participants challenged the idea that they or others were somehow 'dependent' on welfare. Where participants did identify as 'dependent', they rejected the idea that this should be seen as problematic and asserted that welfare (inter-)dependency, in one form or another, is present and necessary across the life course. The majority agreed with a further statement claiming the 'government should take the responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for'. For instance, many felt that ensuring a decent standard of living was a necessary precursor to being able to participate in society:

> "There's always going to be a part of our society that we need to take care of and provide for." (Julie, 2007–08)

> "You cannot learn, you cannot work properly, you cannot do anything without the basics of a decent roof over your head and heating." (Anne, 2007–08)

A small number of 2013 participants spontaneously noted that they had engaged in political protests and social movements to challenge and censure the function and limits of welfare in its current form. As 'revolting subjects', these participants articulated

'counter-political speech' to oppose the increasingly governmental nature of welfare provision (Tyler, 2013, 47). In certain instances, these dissident acts were also bound up with class struggles for a more inclusive type of social citizenship (elaborated on shortly). Very often, there were financial and legal repercussions to their behaviour.

> "I protest with everything I have. I go to Wellington to protest and go and chalk on the streets. I've been writing to MPs for years about this stuff…I ended up doing a sit-in protest. I write poems criticising government." (Rebecca, 2013)

Other participants engaged in more procedural forms of resistance by seeking to challenge the welfare system through established forms of citizen engagement. For both those interviewed in 2007–08 and in 2013, it was widely acknowledged that voting was an important means by which to challenge but also improve welfare politics. This is particularly surprising given the low level of voter turnout among poorer citizens in New Zealand (compare Manning and Holmes, 2013; Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

In addition to this, many participants also engaged in subversive strategies to resist what they felt were increasingly punitive measures and outcomes of welfare reform. Many refused to 'blindly' conform to prescribed forms of citizenship behaviour. More broadly, participants criticised the manner in which citizenship had become increasingly work-centric and reduced to a financial transaction, for instance challenging the idea that welfare beneficiaries should be forced to take any form of work available to them. While these individuals expressed a desire to work, they resisted activation measures and expectations by passively 'going through the motions'. They justified their behaviour by affirming their right to sufficiently remunerated employment that provided self-actualising opportunities. Others also justified their right to raise their children and pursue socially, if not economically, valued activities:

> "I want to be there for my daughter when I pick her up from school or if she's sick or whatever, but if I was working, would I be able to do that?" (Lynne, 2007–08)

> "I mean I'd like to work but I don't want to be a slave in a factory and I don't wanna work in a job that doesn't agree with my ethics. I would never work for minimum wage…that's just bullshit." (Jennifer, 2013)

In response to increasing conditionality and governmentality, two participants interviewed in 2013 had engaged in benefit fraud. In line with previous research, many of those interviewed across both time periods justified benefit fraud through a 'discourse of justified disobedience' (Dean and Melrose, 1996, 12). Not only was fraud justified in light of socio-economic injustices, it was also considered necessary to overcome financial hardship arising from welfare reforms. While the vast majority did not state that they were engaged in benefit fraud, a number spoke positively about others engaged in this sort of behaviour and being paid for work 'under the table' to overcome financial difficulties, largely for the reasons outlined above. However, their justifications also appeared to centre on a broader resentment and frustration with regressive welfare policies, activation measures and rising inequality.

"Claiming it fraudulently? Oh, good on her. Yeah, I think so, why not?! Do you know how much tax evasion there is in this country?" (Cameron, 2013)

Overall, there was a high degree of consistency in the acts of resistance articulated by those interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013. However, there were also some observable differences in the attitudes and orientations of these two groups. Those interviewed in 2007–08 were more likely to support welfare conditionality as a matter of principle. In certain instances, these individuals emphasised the importance of financial independence, drew a distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' beneficiaries and emphasised the reciprocal relationship between rights and responsibilities.

By contrast, those interviewed in 2013 tended to reject mainstream ideas about what it means to be a 'responsible citizen'. More broadly, these individuals engaged in more frequent and intense acts of contestation. Many actively rejected and opposed the norms and institutions underpinning welfare politics. These individuals recognised the link between welfare reforms and their own material and symbolic exclusion. For example, many problematised regressive tax and welfare reforms and saw these as lacking internal and ethical coherence, within the context of structural inequality and base erosion. Such resistance appeared to underpin an activist politics that was noticeably more confrontational and dissident than that exhibited by those interviewed in 2007–08. In part, this difference may be explained by the fact that some 2007–08 interviews were undertaken in a focus group setting, perhaps making them less inclined to be vocal or explicit about the acts of resistance in which they were engaged. However, this methodological inconsistency between the two studies cannot entirely explain observable differences: there still appear to be distinctive attitudes and behaviours in the concerns and attachments exhibited by participants across both time periods. Overall, many participants across both time periods felt that their rights were being undermined and that their identity as an equal member of society was being brought into question by welfare reforms. In response, these individuals engaged in a variety of dissident 'acts of citizenship' to struggle against the institutions and discourses of citizenship.

Beyond the critical transgressions *against* social citizenship, many of those interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013 engaged in political struggle *for* their rights and status as social citizens. In many instances, individuals drew upon existing justificatory frameworks to defend their own claims-making. For example, a number of individuals advanced a contractarian, desert-based conception of welfare. These individuals felt that their prior earnings, tax and employment record justified their current claim to public social assistance and drew upon a principle of reciprocity to legitimate their own status and entitlement. While those interviewed in 2007–08 were more likely to consider mild forms of welfare conditionality appropriate and necessary, these participants were asked about this much more explicitly than their 2013 counterparts. In addition, they may have felt less harshly treated than their 2013 counterparts since the early years of the Labour–coalition government arguably attempted to balance rights and responsibilities more than their National-led successors.

On the whole, the majority of those interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013 preferred a system of welfare provision for beneficiaries that was "supportive and not punitive in helping them find what they could do" (Fay, 2007–08). Some individuals thought that the duties of citizenship could only be legitimately enforced alongside basic provisions and guarantees such as decent wages, a relatively high tax-free threshold

and free medical care. In certain instances, however, participants appeared to have internalised some of the logic of welfare reform and activation policy. In doing so, these individuals resigned themselves to the prevailing 'habitus' of citizenship and to the ideals that have come to structure their own marginality.

> "I get really involved through sports with netball, I sort of try and give a lot of time back, especially being on the benefit." (Ruth, 2007–08)

> "I don't feel like a contributing citizen…I don't feel like I have quite as much right to raise my voice and demand things because of my situation." (Charlotte, 2013)

In an attempt to defend their claim to welfare, a small number of individuals also endorsed the terms upon which social security was granted and welfare reforms were justified. Some emphasised the value of attaching obligations to social security receipt to encourage 'responsible' behaviours. These individuals moralised the lifestyle of other beneficiaries and seemed to buy into the idea that others exhibited 'feckless' behaviours and poor orientations towards work. They were keen to distinguish themselves from others that could be deemed 'undeserving' of public social assistance. For example, one older single parent felt that an underclass discourse was justified in light of the poor decision-making of some younger single parents:

> "You walk into the [income support] office and I know why we get treated the way we do, it is just staring you in the face…they've got kids galore and they're so young." (Nina, 2007–08)

One or two participants also asserted the rightfulness of their claim to welfare over other groups such as migrants or refugees.

> "They can come off the plane, they can get our benefit, they can get a house, they can get a car and what do our people have after waiting 12 years for a house? Nothing." (Miriama, 2007–08)

> "What annoys me is these people coming over here and they can't even speak English. I see them applying for a benefit and they get it straight away." (Cameron, 2013)

While 'othering' typifies the 'discursive devices deployed to protect the self from social and psychic blame' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013, 301), it also demonstrates the complex ways in which individuals attempt to justify or defend their own welfare entitlements.

Many of those interviewed in 2013 who had been subjected to increasingly governmental welfare measures challenged the idea that their circumstance, lifestyle or behaviour precluded them from an entitlement to benefits. Following the withdrawal or refusal of welfare, some individuals were embroiled in procedural struggles to secure their basic wellbeing. Other individuals spontaneously asserted their right to certain benefits during interviews. While discussing their respective strategies to protect or advance their claim to welfare, participants often gave the impression

and gave expression to the idea that they were 'fighting', 'battling' and 'struggling' for welfare. Given the parsimonious amounts of money that were at stake, some of these individuals felt that their struggles for social rights were particularly degrading and dehumanising:

> "I'm battling to get the scraps only to be humiliated and belittled by the people at Work and Income." (Jessica, 2013)

At least four participants had or were appealing decisions made by WINZ. While these appeals, if successful, would prove crucial to meeting their basic material needs, these struggles were also motivated by a range of post-material concerns (Manning and Holmes, 2013). The process of appealing a decision made by WINZ appeared to be an affirmation of an individual's status as a social citizen, as someone with the right to have rights. Such claims-making proved fundamental to the identification and political subjectivity of participants. Despite attempts to exercise their political agency, many felt powerless in the face of bureaucratic structures and constraints. Nonetheless, these individuals appeared to value the process of appeal and emphasised the importance of their procedural entitlement to challenge decisions made by welfare institutions.

> "I'm not going to be treated like shit. I know my rights. I know the laws. I will fight for what I deserve." (Jack, 2013)

Some individuals expressed concern that they would be punished for their behaviour or attitudes towards case managers if they sought a fuller explanation for welfare withdrawal or decisions made by WINZ. These individuals felt that case managers often interpreted their behaviour as adversarial and 'unappreciative'. While these participants were highly critical and vividly described the injustices they felt they had endured, a number also *avoided* confrontation and conflict with case managers. In this respect, case managers exerted a significant degree of control over beneficiaries. Some moderated or self-regulated their behaviour for fear of a reprisal. Due to the significant financial, social and emotional costs associated with challenging decisions, some participants tempered their frustration, anger or 'exasperation'. In order to get what they ultimately wanted and needed, some individuals adopted a disposition of subservience and passive forbearance. They resented having to resort to such strategies but felt this the most effective means for securing claims to housing, social security, healthcare or supplementary assistance.

Reconfiguration?

Thus far, we have principally focused on those deeds and discourses that were either critical of or sought to attain social citizenship in its current form. While many participants repudiated the welfare system, a smaller number of those interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013 articulated a desire to reconfigure the material and symbolic potential of social citizenship. The alternative approaches and ideals articulated by participants tended to challenge the terms of citizenship status and the rights and responsibilities inhered in collective membership. The specific policies and broader principles underpinning the 'ideal' welfare arrangements of individuals tended to promote a system that validated and valued their own identity, position and

contribution to society. As such, a number of participants articulated a counter-hegemonic discourse and citizenship model.

> "If you've got someone like a doctor who's paid a shit load of money and then you've got someone that's not that intelligent so they can only get a job sweeping roads and the difference in salary is huge and I've often wondered whether that is right or not because both are doing a job – they're street sweepers – it's not their fault they didn't have the brains to be a doctor so I'm not too sure about that one – I'm leaning towards socialism, I think – yeah, they should be paid relatively the same." (Joe, 2013)

Beyond appeals to social or redistributive justice, some participants affirmed the social and economic cogency of their alternative approach and vision for welfare politics. One 2013 participant was particularly critical of the meritocratic principle advanced within a liberal citizenship framework and critiqued fatalistic factors contributing towards earnings inequality and suggested an alternative means by which this could be addressed through state intervention. Other individuals articulated a structural analysis of inequality or felt little need to conform to societal expectations regarding consumption practices, work and welfare.

> "Well, capitalism can only survive with a reasonably high unemployment level." (Raewyn, 2007–08)

> "I don't actually feel like I should work because I actually feel like I am working. A single mother with no parents, with no family who has fought her way through life. And making the best life she can for her daughter. I feel like that is work and that is my contribution to society…I don't like the idea of people telling me that I'm not serving society because I am. I think they need to change their definition of what being a social citizen is." (Jennifer, 2013)

Drawing on their own experience, a number of the 2013 participants emphasised the precarity and mutual vulnerability characteristic of socio-economic and political life. These individuals recognised the inherent interdependencies faced in the private and public sphere. As a result, they advanced a thick, solidaristic conception of social rights that focused on the collective social responsibilities citizens had for one another. Irrespective of other factors, they recognised that there were common life risks that should be buffered against through common associational links and provisions.

> "All people should be helped out until they can psychologically, physically and emotionally and materially get back on their feet." (Olivia, 2013)

> "I think we have a collective responsibility to each other." (Felicity, 2013)

Advancement of this ideal challenged the government's narrow work-centric focus on citizenship status and responsibilities. For example, several participants across both time periods asserted the social and economic value of care and domestic work,

volunteering and community work and problematised the lack of recognition given to other forms of civic contribution made by welfare claimants:

> "What I would like to see is more support from the government in terms of if you do voluntary work that you do get an additional top-up." (Mere, 2007–08)

> "I think looking after your children is definitely work." (Chloe, 2013)

Overall, participants interviewed in 2007–08 and 2013 drew upon similar strategies to defend or extend their rights and status as social citizens. However, faced with increasing conditions, sanctions and cuts to welfare, those interviewed in 2013 appeared less likely to draw upon prevailing justificatory frameworks to validate their own claims-making. By virtue of the welfare landscape, they were also more likely to be engaged in adversarial and procedural struggles for public social assistance. In seeking an emancipatory alternative, a smaller number across both time periods articulated heterodox conceptions of social citizenship.

Conclusion

This article has explored how low-income social security claimants, through their everyday attitudes and engagements, participate in political struggles *for* and *against* social citizenship. In doing so, this article demonstrates that, in spite of increasingly governmental measures, welfare claimants continue to be active political agents in the citizenship-making process. Participants in both studies drew upon a range of strategies to defend and protect their rights, recognition and belonging as social citizens.

In certain instances, the activist politics of welfare claimants manifested itself in a resignation to the terms upon which citizenship status and rights are granted, but a resistance to their own positioning within such a system. While this may result in remedial concessions, struggles for social rights 'through the existing narratives of citizenship' (Turner, 2016, 142) entails a recourse to established modes of thought and conduct that give legitimation to existing material and status inequalities. Such an approach serves to reproduce the prevailing 'habitus' of citizenship and leads to a further degradation of its distributional and emancipatory potential. With this in mind, the activist politics *for* social citizenship that challenge the practice, if not the principles of welfare entitlement, are likely to prove counter-productive to the enrichment and extension of social citizenship.

By contrast, those acts of claims-making that seek to resist or reconfigure the prevailing welfare settlement have the capacity to generate creative ruptures that push and pull on the tethered boundaries of citizenship. Methodological differences between the qualitative data collected in 2007–08 and 2013 make a direct comparison difficult. However, some differences in the discourses articulated by participants across the two time periods suggest that successive welfare reforms have instigated an increasingly insurgent politics among welfare claimants that opens up 'new spaces for (re)shaping and (re)conceptualising citizenship' (Turner, 2016, 143).

On the whole, the 'acts of citizenship' exhibited by participants tended to centre on struggles *against* social citizenship in its current form. This entailed dissident acts to critique, challenge and repudiate the existing citizenship configuration. Ellison (2000,

1.3) suggests these strategies can be understood as protective forms of engagement where citizens 'increasingly have to defend themselves against the erosion of their social rights'. Crucially, such engagements tend to centre on matters of survival and protection rather than questions of systemic progress and transformation. While many participants criticised aspects of the current socio-political settlement, the political action and procedural struggles of welfare claimants tended to focus on their respective disentitlements. These individuals did not always connect their own injustices with that of others similarly affected by welfare reform. Interest in the counter-hegemonic politics of social citizenship appears to be increasing among those most perniciously affected by welfare reform. However, without recognition of how their individual troubles are shared and commonly connected to broader regimes of welfare, inequality and citizenship, low-income welfare claimants lack the means of collective identification to engage in sustained and collective political struggle for their citizenship status and entitlements.

A smaller number of welfare claimants more readily connected their own biographies to the injustices experienced by others and situated these within a broader context of welfare reform. These individuals articulated a heterodox conception of citizenship that sought to reconfigure the values and practices underpinning the prevailing welfare landscape. In many ways, this entailed the advancement of an alternative political imaginary that could give authentication to the civic contribution, capabilities and identity of low-income social security claimants. These 'new demands, or the introduction of new ideas and practices, which herald new forms of political action and reshape public agendas' (Ellison, 2000, 1.2) may prove the most effective avenue for a progressive movement towards emancipatory citizenship. While there is some evidence to suggest this activist politics *for* an alternative social citizenship has witnessed some minor escalation, it remains unclear how this might translate into a coherent movement around increasingly complex socio-political categories.

Overall, this article has demonstrated how individuals affected by welfare reform are engaged in distinct acts of claims-making that have the capacity to endorse or contest the current ideals underpinning social citizenship, inequality and welfare reform. For advanced capitalist economies pursuing a similar strategy of welfare reform, these findings have broad significance for the development of welfare politics at the domestic and international level. To fully establish what prospects the increasingly insurgent politics among low-income welfare claimants engenders for the progression or regression of welfare politics, further theoretical and empirical attention is needed to explore the political subjectivity of welfare claimants, their collective (dis)identification across socio-political categories and the nature of their engagement with state apparatus over time.

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